

# The (Un)making of a Man: Aleksandr Aleksandrov/Nadezhda Durova

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Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov (1783–1866), known better by his birth name, Nadezhda Durova, is one of Russian literature’s most remarkable figures. Born female, he wore men’s clothing, used male linguistic forms, served in the Russian military during the Napoleonic wars, and was given legal recognition of his male name and identity by Tsar Alexander I. This paper seeks to re-examine the dominant scholarly narrative of “Durova”—that *she* was a woman who *disguised herself* as a man to serve Russia or escape a woman’s lot—by investigating the production and reception of his memoirs, *The Cavalry Maiden* (1836), from a trans perspective.

“Memoirs, autobiographies, and confessions,” writes Lidia Ginzburg, “are almost always literature presupposing readers in the future or in the present; they are a kind of plotted structuring of an image of reality and a human being.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Aleksandrov wrote his memoirs to set the public record straight about his service and himself: that he became a man, fought as a man, and lived as a man.<sup>2</sup> Yet the author’s intent was subverted by his editors and publishers at every turn: Aleksandr Pushkin, who first published an excerpt detailing the campaign of 1812, altered the title from *Notes of Alexandrov* to the *Notes of Durova*, and Ivan Butovskii, editor and publisher of the first book edition, changed the title to the now-famous and decidedly feminine *Cavalry Maiden*. These changes sought to sensationalize the author’s femininity at the expense of his masculinity, despite the author’s writings on his transition and exclusively masculine self-presentation in society after being publicly outed. Editors and, subsequently, scholars have worked to deconstruct “Aleksandrov” in favor of “Durova,” arguing that the author’s masculinity was mere artifice.

There is a rich tradition of feminist literary scholarship within Russian literary studies, a body of work that has inspired my own research and academic career. Indeed, this study is deeply indebted to Jehanne Gheith, Barbara Heldt, Ann Marsh-Flores, Ona Renner-Fahey, and Mary Zirin, whose

1. Lidia Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 9

2. For this reason, I use “Aleksandrov” and male language throughout this article.

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works have influenced my own, as well as the general study and celebration of women's contributions to Russian literature. Each of these scholars, however, pose Aleksandrov's masculinity as instrumental, a means to escape the difficult social position of women, not a sincere expression of masculine identity and thus exclude the possibility of trans interpretations: Heldt writes that "Durova" was "not a transvestite but rather a woman who preferred uhlan jacket and uhlan life to satin and feathers"; Zirin speculates on "the emotional dislocation she must have suffered in adopting a transsexual disguise"; Marsh-Flores argues that "Durova's inversion of gender hierarchies [was] temporary"; and Renner-Fahey claims "she" could not be a transvestite because of the "glaring lack of sexuality of any orientation in Durova's narrative."<sup>3</sup>

As a scholar who is both feminist and trans, I believe these interpretations are flawed. Firstly, they conflate sexual orientation (who one is attracted to) with gender identity (who one knows themselves to be), reproducing a system in which individuals must be categorized neatly between binaries of female and male, heterosexual and homosexual. Secondly, Aleksandrov does not desire the liberation of women as much as he does his own personal liberation from womanhood. These need not be exclusive positions, but it is fundamentally different to want to "masquerade" as a man than it is to become and be a man. Susan Stryker famously termed transgender studies as the "evil twin" of queer theory, as it shares a common origin in the intersection of feminist and sexuality studies while disrupting established categories of sexuality and gender identity.<sup>4</sup> While I am sensitive to the optics of "removing" a female writer from the canon and claiming him for men, I believe that Aleksandrov and his work requires a new critical approach, a trans reading that reconciles his initial position as a female and his conscious decision to become male. After all, in describing his transition, Aleksandrov wrote he wanted not only to "part company forever from the sex whose sad lot and eternal dependence had begun to terrify me," a position easily legible to second and third-wave feminists, but also "become a warrior and son to my father," a sentiment less legible from these perspectives and requiring a trans reading that respects the author's masculinity.<sup>5</sup> If we assume Aleksandrov to be female, we must not only dispense with the nuance of his story, but indeed the majority of it. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, this interpretation is not ahistorical, but indeed rooted in Aleksandrov's own writing and contemporary critical responses.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler famously argues that all gender is performative, meaning that no single "true" identity underlies acts expressing

3. Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (Bloomington, IN, 1987), 86; Mary Fleming Zirin, "Introduction," in Nadezhda Durova, *The Calvary Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars*, trans. Mary Fleming Zirin (Bloomington, IN, 1988), xvi; Ann Marsh-Flores, "Coming Out of His Closet: Female Friendship, Amazonki and the Masquerade in the Prose of Nadezhda Durova," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 47, no. 4 (2003): 614; Ona Renner-Fahey, "Diary of a Devoted Child: Nadezhda Durova's Self-Presentation in *The Cavalry Maiden*," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 53, no. 2 (2009): 198.

4. Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (2004): 212.

5. Nadezhda Durova, *The Calvary Maiden*, 15.

gender, rather than the acts themselves form the likeness of stable gender. Trans and gender non-conforming individuals, then, embody the contradictions between socially constructed concepts of gender and sex, representing the “gender trouble” that haunts all subjects. Marsh-Flores and Renner-Fahey, as well as virtually every work on “Durova,” emphasize this aspect of gender “play” in *The Calvary Maiden*. Readings of Butler, however, often mistake gender play as a form of artifice that masks some stable, core identity or position rather than recognizing that this “play” constitutes gender itself. As Jay Prosser notes, many trans individuals “seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to be.”<sup>6</sup> “They actually aspire,” Judith Halberstam elaborates, “to the real, the natural, to the very condition that has been rejected by the queer theory of gender performance.”<sup>7</sup> For Prosser, the solution to this problem resides in the right to narrate one’s story and identity.

The privileging of “Durova” over “Aleksandrov” has informed nearly all scholarship on the author, including attempts to deploy feminist and queer perspectives, posing his transition as not a sincere expression of masculine identity, but rather as a woman “pretending” to be male. As trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher writes, “the rhetoric of deception appears deeply connected to deployments of gender attributions that run contrary to a transperson’s own self-identifications” and assumes an “appearance-reality contrast [where] genitalia are the essential determinants of sex.”<sup>8</sup> While there is always distance between autobiographical and biographical works, transgender biography, as Halberstam writes, is a “sometimes violent, often imprecise project, one which seeks to brutally erase the carefully managed details of the life of a passing person, and recasts the act of passing as deception, dishonesty, and fraud.”<sup>9</sup> Searching for a subject’s “true identity,” their sex over their gender, inaugurates an *epistemic transphobia*, in which the biographer or scholar’s perceptions become more authoritative than the subject’s self-conception, self-presentation, lived practices, and reception in society.

This approach dominates feminist scholarship on Aleksandrov: translator Mary Fleming Zirin dismissed the author’s identification with masculinity and characterized his masculine presentation as “a lack of candor”; Barbara Heldt suggests the author’s masculinity is sincere but asserts “she was not a transvestite”; and even recent attempts to approach the author from a feminist and queer studies-informed perspective by Ann Marsh-Flores and Ona Renner-Fahey rely on the language of masquerade, positing that Aleksandrov was “really” a cis woman posing as a man.<sup>10</sup> These interpretations reflect the underlying logic of *trans-exclusionary radical feminist* (TERF) ideology, which maintains that biological sex is immutable and supersedes gender identity

6. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, 1998), 32.

7. Judith Halberstam, “Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography,” in Maria Carla Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York, 2001), 16.

8. Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 47–48.

9. Halberstam, “Telling Tales,” 13.

10. Zirin, “Introduction,” in *The Cavalry Maiden*, xii; Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*, 86; Renner-Fahey, “Diary of a Devoted Child,” 190; Marsh-Flores, “Coming out of His Closet,” 610.

and, furthermore, that transness opposes the political values of feminism. Per this conception, a female-to-male individual is “really” female, and, at best, identifies with masculinity out of a misguided envy for the privileges of men. I do not deploy this term to chastise these scholars for writing from a different historical moment, but rather to highlight their blunt refusal to consider Aleksandrov as anything but female. In dismissing Aleksandrov’s identification with men and masculinity as merely a form of status envy for male privilege, they must dispense with the author’s persistent claims that he is a man.

In recent years, interest in transness and gender non-conformity in literary and cultural studies has increased, a project with which I align myself.<sup>11</sup> Although I am aware of the potential issues with terming a historical figure as “transgender” a century before it existed as a social, psychological, medical, or political category, I argue that Aleksandrov fits historian Susan Stryker’s definition of the term to mean “people who move away from their birth-assigned gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender through which it would be better for them to live.”<sup>12</sup> While the methods one uses to seek and occupy this new position vary, ranging from hormone therapy and surgery to self-fashioning through adopting the dress and mannerisms one prefers, there is ample evidence that the practice of “transitioning” from one identity to another is attested in a wide variety of historical and cultural settings.

In accordance with the methodological traditions of Russian literary studies, I have constructed this article as a philological study focusing on the publication and reception of Aleksandrov’s *A Year of My Life in Petersburg*. Whereas *The Calvary Maiden* focuses on the emotional experiences of transition, detailing his identification with masculinity from birth, decision to begin living as a man, and years of service in the military, *A Year of My Life* focuses on Aleksandrov’s experiences navigating Petersburg society as a man and foiled attempts to tell his own story in writing. I will demonstrate two major points citing textual and historical evidence: that Aleksandrov’s desire to convey his masculinity to his audience was subverted in the editing and publication process and, despite that, major critics of his own time nonetheless attempted to understand this aspect of the author’s personal transformation and his writing, often in ways that resonate with contemporary trans discourse. These facts challenge existing readings that pose Durova as a woman disguising herself as man. I have chosen this approach deliberately, as I believe that it demonstrates that this is not a projection of twenty-first-century theory onto a nineteenth century subject, but rather a mode of eliciting the central truth from the author’s text: Aleksandr Aleksandrov was a man.

11. For recent pieces within Slavic studies, see: Yana Kirey-Sitnikova’s “The Emergence of Transfeminism in Russia: Opposition from Cisnormative Feminists and Trans\* People,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (May 2016): 165–74; Nick Mayhew’s “Xenia the Servant of God, or Andrey Fyodorovich the Holy Fool,” in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2020): 114–20; and Christine D. Worobec’s “Cross-Dressing in a Russian Orthodox Monastery: The Case of Mariia Zakharova,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 2 (May 2011): 336–57.

12. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (New York, 2017), 1.

## Grammatical Gender in Aleksandrov's Memoirs

In recent years, English-speaking linguistic activists have focused on one element of language in particular: the pronoun. Pronoun usage is the only situation in which grammatical gender is marked in Modern English. Old English (c. 450–1150) maintained an extensive system of gender declension reminiscent of Germanic languages, the system of grammatical gender, in which nouns may be a grammatical “he,” “she,” “it,” or “they” independently of their natural (biological, cultural) gender. For example, although the Old English words *wif* (woman, wife) is grammatically neuter and *wifmann* (woman, handmaid) is grammatically masculine, their natural feminine gender is clear. As English shed this system of grammatical gender, speakers were left to rely solely on their perceptions and assumptions of others' natural gender when speaking about them. There have been many attempts to introduce gender neutral language since the eleventh century, including the first emergence of the singular they in the fourteenth century,<sup>13</sup> as well as twentieth/twenty-first century feminist challenges to the “male-as-norm” linguistic ideology.<sup>14</sup> The recent practice of declaring one's pronouns reflects the belief that speakers and interlocutors should be addressed in congruity with their identity and preferred language, and arose from trans and queer critiques of gender-essentialist language.<sup>15</sup> This resolves grammatical and social ambiguity by creating a consistency of gendered language, preserving the autonomy of an individual's identity when speaking themselves or when they are the object of another's speech.

Unlike English, Russian features a more inflected morphology that requires agreement of gender across multiple parts of speech. While grammatical gender in Russian, too, may be wholly unrelated to any notion of natural gender—a speaker does not, for example, deduce from a noun's grammatical gender that *karandash* (pencil) is somehow biologically male or an object used exclusively by men—the natural gender of a noun may surpass the typical rules of grammatical gender, such as in the word *dedushka* (grandfather) which takes masculine pronouns despite having an ostensibly feminine ending. Trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals in Russian-speaking settings face similar issues as in English-speaking ones, where interlocutors are often forced to use gendered pronouns when speaking to or about them that may not align with their preferred language, a situation that occurs more frequently in Russian.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the largest difference, however, is the existence of gendered-verb forms in the past tense, which mark the natural gender of the speaker or subject. While on the one hand this is an additional linguistic feature that opens the door to misgendering, on the

13. “A Brief History of Singular ‘they,’” March 29, 2019 at <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they> (accessed September 5, 2021).

14. Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, “Prospects and Challenges of Gender Neutralization in Russian,” *Russian Linguistics: International Journal for the Study of Russian and Other Slavic Languages* 45, no. 2 (July 2021): 143–44

15. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 22; Kirey-Sitnikova, “Gender Neutralization in Russian,” 144.

16. Kirey-Sitnikova, “Gender Neutralization in Russian,” 145.

other hand it also allows the speaking subject to articulate their own identity in narrations of self and past experiences.

Aleksandrov's literary idiolect is distinguished by its unique and grammatically atypical use of gendered verbs. As Jehanne Gheith notes, Aleksandrov's language "alternates use of masculine and feminine forms, in narrative passages referring to herself in feminine forms and switching to masculine in conversation with others."<sup>17</sup> In principle, this usage is grammatically incorrect and potentially dissonant, yet it unifies Aleksandrov's three major autobiographical works, *The Cavalry Maiden* (1836), *A Year of My Life in Petersburg* (1838), and *Notes of Alexandrov* (1839). Zirin takes Aleksandrov's use of feminine language for his narrative voice and interior monologue at face value, concluding respectively that "she continued to identify with her own sex," whereas Marsh-Flores ascribes primacy to the narrative grammatical gender, reducing the author's embrace of masculine name, clothes, and language in society as "semiotic shorthand" and "vehicle for female liberation," not authentic modes of self-expression or identification.<sup>18</sup> The category of "female masculinity" as proposed by Halberstam, in which a "biological female who presents as butch, passes as male in some circumstances. . . and considers herself not to be a woman but maintains distance from the category of man" offers another explanation for this cleavage of language and self-presentation.<sup>19</sup>

I believe, however, that there is reason to be cautious in assuming Aleksandrov's feminine narrative voice signifies an identification with womanhood, or even Halberstam's intermediate category of female masculinity. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this may itself be an editorial intervention into the text, as it is dissonant with the author's speech and writing in non-literary settings. Aleksandrov is thoroughly documented as using his male name and masculine verb forms, frequently insisting that others use his preferred pronouns in spoken language, even asking his son to address him as *roditel'* (parent, father) instead of "mother," and surviving documents and letters attest that he did so in written language as well. It is curious, then, that there is such a sharp divergence between Aleksandrov's use of language in his private and public life and his language in his published memoirs.<sup>20</sup>

Aleksandrov's literary career was a byproduct of his prior encounters with fame. He enjoyed a moment of public interest and celebrity after being granted an audience with Tsar Alexander I and being awarded the St. George Cross in 1807, as well in the aftermath of the campaign of 1812. By the time he retired from the military in 1816, however, Aleksandrov was largely forgotten; in a piece written toward then end of his life, he even recalls how one man at the theater, not recognizing the war hero, said that the *amazonka* could

17. Jehanne M. Gheith, "Nadezhda Andreevna Durova (September 1783–21 or 23 March 1866)," in Christine A. Rydel, ed., *Russian Literature in the Age of Pushkin and Gogol: Prose*. Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 198. (Detroit, 1999): Gale Literature: Dictionary of Literary Biography (accessed September 5, 2021), 121.

18. Zirin, *The Cavalry Maiden*, xiv; Marsh-Flores, "Coming out of His Closet," 611.

19. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, 2018), 21.

20. Aleksei Saks, *Kavelerist-devitsa: Shtabs-rotmistr Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Andreevna Durova)* (St. Petersburg, 1912), 55.

not handle the demands of military service and perished in combat. During his retirement years in Elabuga, Aleksandrov began piecing together various pieces of writing from his diaries, though it is unclear exactly when this process began. Little is known about his writing process, and the author would later remark that much of this content was re-written from partially destroyed or lost journals, not contemporaneously to the events described, explaining a handful of small factual errors and erroneous dates.<sup>21</sup>

Initially, it appears that Aleksandrov had no concrete plans to publish his memoirs, but rather took them up as a hobby. His literary career owes itself to a chance encounter between his younger brother, Vasilii Durov, and Aleksandr Pushkin in 1829. The pair shared a carriage in the Caucasus, during which Durov entertained the poet with an idea for a get-rich-quick scheme and tales from Aleksandrov's military career. Though the poet was keenly interested in Aleksandrov's story, nothing immediately came of the encounter. Six years later, in 1835, Pushkin began laying the groundwork for his new journal *The Contemporary*. Durov contacted the poet, asking if he would be interested in publishing his brother's memoirs. Pushkin responded positively, writing "I should think their success can be vouched for. The author's fate is so curious, so well-known and so mysterious, that the solution of the riddle cannot help producing a powerful general impression."<sup>22</sup>

Aleksandrov reflects on the publication process of *The Cavalry Maiden* (1836) and *A Year of My Life in Petersburg, or: The Disadvantages of my Third Visit* (1838), the follow-up to his most famous work. Even before he departs for the capital, Aleksandrov records his discomfort with his brother Vasilii's pitch to sell his memoirs:

"Imagine," [Vasilii] said, "that for some reason I wore women's clothing in childhood and continued wearing them for several years, living among women, and that everyone took me as a woman. Isn't it true that an account of such extraordinary circumstances would entice everyone and that they would all eagerly read it? Everyone would be curious to know how I lived, what happened to me in this alien world, and how I learned to imitate this sex which I chose for myself? In a single word, the account of such antics or of a forced transformation would be sold out in a month, no matter how many copies I printed. . . and the story of your life is incomprehensibly more captivating."<sup>23</sup>

Durov's characterization of Aleksandrov's military service and masculine presentation as a "prank" or "antics" (*shalost'*) embodied the author's worst fears about the intentions of Pushkin, his brother, and the reading public at large. Despite this, Aleksandrov was also excited to tell his story in his own words and agreed to send his manuscript to Pushkin. There was, however, a serious miscommunication between the three players at this juncture: the

21. Elena Prikazchikova, "Divnyi fenomen npravstvennogo mira": Zhizn' i tvorchestvo kamskoi amazonki Nadezhdy Durovoi (Ekaterinburg, 2018), 26; Alla Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova. Russkaia amazonka* (Moscow, 2013), 12.

22. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. (Moscow, 1997), 16:35.

23. N. A. Durova, *God zhizni v Peterburge; Ili, Nevygody Tret'ego Poseshcheniia* (St. Petersburg, 1838), 3–4.

manuscript was sent to Gatchina instead of Petersburg and one of Pushkin's servants misplaced or scrapped a large portion of it so that the poet only received and read the second half of Aleksandrov's memoirs, which detail the campaign of 1812 with fewer insights into the author's motivations for identifying as a man.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless the poet liked what he read and agreed to publish it in his journal, seeing the excerpt as a surefire hit. Aleksandrov was awestruck, comparing the intoxication of the poet's praise with that of his first moments of masculine freedom.<sup>25</sup> He decided to deliver a complete copy of the manuscript to Petersburg himself, and set off in Spring 1836.

Aleksandrov's fears are realized in his first meeting with Pushkin, which he describes as follows:

I will not repeat the praise which the genteel writer and poet expounded upon the literariness of my notes, believing that he was speaking to me in the language educated people use to address ladies. He took my manuscript. . . and, after finishing his obliging speech, kissed my hand. I hastily snatched [*vykhvatila*] it away, blushed, and said, I don't in the least know why, "Oh, my God! I got out of that habit long ago! [*Ya tak davno otvyk ot ego!*]. Not even the shadow of an ironic smile appeared on Aleksandr Sergeevich's face, but I dare say at home he did not restrain himself and, as he related the circumstances of our first meeting to his family, undoubtedly laughed wholeheartedly over this exclamation."<sup>26</sup>

Though this passage demonstrates Aleksandrov's idiosyncratic mixing of gender across spoken and written language, this interaction does not indicate to me, as Zirin, Marsh-Flores, and Renner-Fahey argue, a core feminine identity underneath a masculine artifice. Instead, this exchange is a textbook example of "misgendering": using labels and language in conflict with another's gender identity and self-presentation. As any trans individual can attest, it is deeply uncomfortable when another person disregards one's preferred language in direct conversation. If Aleksandrov was really "Durova," being addressed by the poet as a woman would not be an issue; that it suggests his masculinity was sincere and not a masquerade. Even Gheith's more nuanced observation that such linguistic disjuncture reminds readers of the author's "double-gender identity" slightly misses the point here: while a transperson may acknowledge their sex or previous identity in some way, that does not exclude wanting and expecting that others respect their present identity.<sup>27</sup> Pushkin's language is grammatically dissonant with Aleksandrov's speech and embarrasses him by making his masculinity the butt of a joke.

There is further evidence of conflicts of gendered language and self-presentation between author and publisher that complicate the narratives of masquerade or double-gender identity. The first major disagreement occurred in June 1836 and is preserved in a letter from Pushkin. In a prior letter, Pushkin informed Aleksandrov that he would be changing the title of his work for publication. The author expected that this portion of his work would

24. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 16:87.

25. Durova, *God zhizni v Peterburge*, 6.

26. *Ibid.*, 30.

27. Gheith, "Nadezhda Durova," 121.

be published under his male name, Aleksandrov. Pushkin, however, disagreed, and unilaterally decided on *Notes of N.A. Durova*, allowing the poet to present the story as an account of a woman fighting like a man, despite this being incongruous with Aleksandrov's personal history in the first part of the manuscript. Aleksandrov offered a compromise title, *Memoirs of an Amazon*, to be used with his masculine name. Though that title would also invariably out him, it was more in line with the author's self-image and willingness to explore his masculine present and feminine past on his own terms. By the time Pushkin replied to Aleksandrov's letter, however, it was too late to alter the typesetting and he informed him that it would appear in the July edition of *The Contemporary* as *The Notes of N.A. Durova, published by A. Pushkin*. One cannot help but link this with the modern concept of "deadnaming,"<sup>28</sup> using a trans individual's former name against their will. Aleksandrov was irate, writing to Pushkin "the name which you called me, dear sir Aleksandr Sergeevich, in the preface haunts me! Is there no remedy for my grief? You called me by that name that makes me shudder, and soon 20,000 people will read it and call me by it too!"<sup>28</sup>—words that are unimaginable if Aleksandrov was "masquerading" as a male rather than identifying as a man.

The situation was further inflamed by Pushkin's editorial introduction, which went even further in sealing the author's reputation as a woman. He writes:

In 1808, a young boy by the name of Aleksandrov enlisted in the Polish Uhlan Calvary and distinguished himself, received the Cross of St. George, and in the same year was initiated as an officer in the Mariupol Hussar regiment. Subsequently, he transferred to the Lithuanian Uhlans and continued his service as fervently as when he began.

Upon first glance, everything was as it should be and sufficiently ordinary; and yet, this caused a great stir, generating many rumors and strong impressions after an unusual circumstance was unwittingly revealed: Cornet Aleksandrov was really the maiden Nadezhda Durova.

What caused a young girl, possessing an honorable noble surname, to leave her father's house, to renounce her sex, to assume the duties and responsibilities which frighten even men, and to fight on the battlefields of the Napoleonic wars? What motivated her? Secret family hardships? A feverish imagination? An inborn, untamable inclination to heroism? Love? . . . These are the questions, now forgotten, that strongly preoccupied society then.

Now, N.A. Durova herself reveals her secret. Honored with her permission, we will publish her curious notes. With ineffable fascination, we read the confessions of such an unusual woman; we were amazed to see how her delicate fingers, which once gripped the bloody hilt of an Uhlan saber, also wielded a quick, vivid, and fiery quill. Nadezhda Andreevna allowed us to print these pages she wrote in 1812–13. With our deepest gratitude, we hasten to take advantage of her permission.<sup>29</sup>

28. N.A. Durova, *Izbrannye sochineneniia kavalerist-devitsy N. A. Durovoi*, (Moscow, 1988), 555.

29. N. A. Durova, "Zapiski N. A. Durovoi, izdavaemye A. Pushkinym," *Sovremennik. Literaturnyi Zhurnal, izdavaemyi Aleksandrom Pushkinym* 2 (July 1836): 53–54.

Though it is unclear when, exactly, Pushkin composed his introduction, it is extremely likely that it was after Aleksandrov's arrival with the first half of the manuscript; the poet would have definitively known the answers to these questions concerning the author's identity and motivation. The inclusion of love as a potential motivating factor is completely dissonant with either half of Aleksandrov's account. Pushkin's introduction reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Aleksandrov's person and work at best, and at worst shows vicious disrespect to the author in a ploy to sell more issues of *The Contemporary*.

Importantly, Pushkin's decision to retitle *Notes* and use feminine language is incongruous with his prior letters to Aleksandrov and Durov, suggesting that he altered the title and author's name to sensationalize the material. Throughout their correspondence, Pushkin addresses the author as "Aleksandrov," uses masculine pronouns and verbiage though, as Irina Savkina notes, he does use atypical vocabulary and constructions at times to minimize gender markers.<sup>30</sup> This context explains the shock and discomfort with which Aleksandrov reacted to Pushkin's unexpected language and behavior in *A Year of My Life in Petersburg*—a discomfort which only makes sense if we consider the author trans, as genuinely understanding himself as a man and wishing to preserve that image with others in social settings and in print. I believe that these changes are reason to question whether "Durova's language," signified by the feminine narrative I and masculine I of reported speech, is a creation of the author himself or of his editors. Although there is less documentation about the publication process of the book edition, published with the assistance of Aleksandrov's cousin, publisher Ivan Butovskii, once again the title—*The Cavalry Maiden*—was chosen against the author's wishes.<sup>31</sup> While this question is ultimately unanswerable without Aleksandrov's manuscripts, it is worthy of consideration given the author's documented conflicts with his editors over titling, naming, presentation, and marketing of his works compared with the author's exclusive use of masculine verb forms in his documents and letters. Though Aleksandrov recorded his masculine identity and dismay at being misgendered and deadnamed in *A Year of My Life*, the framing of the author as a woman masquerading as male took root in the popular and scholarly imagination.

### **Он или она: Critical Responses to Aleksandrov's Gender**

Aleksandrov's literary career was brief albeit productive. Between 1836 and 1840, he published three major works of autobiographical writing, four novels, and several short stories. Aleksandrov was visible as an author and object of society's interest, and garnered significant critical attention on the pages of newspapers and thick journals. Critics tended to favor his autobiographical writings over his fiction, though one story, a gothic tale entitled "Pavilion" (1839), was well received. My purpose in this section, however,

30. Irina Savkina, "Zhenstvennoe i Muzhestvennoe v proze Nadezhdy Durovoi," *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 12 (1995): 126

31. Durova, *God Zhizni v Peterburge*, 114–15.

is not to survey or generalize criticism of Aleksandrov's works, but rather to focus on two influential critics in particular—Faddei Bulgarin and Vissarion Belinskii—to examine how they approach and understand the author's biography, gender identity, and gendered language in their reviews. Marsh-Flores writes "that Durova's behavior was disturbing—and that her contemporaries felt a need to explain it" while Gheith observes that Aleksandrov's "usage of the double identity clearly confused readers of her day, who, when referring to Durova, randomly alternated feminine and masculine forms, sometimes calling her both Durova and Aleksandrov in a single paragraph."<sup>32</sup> In the cases of Bulgarin and Belinskii, however, I contend that the decision to use one name or set of pronouns over the other in fact represents a conscious decision on the part of these critics who, importantly, shift their approach and language over time, eventually coming to the decision to respond to the author with masculine language and treat him as a male writer.

In November 1836, copies of *The Cavalry Maiden* returned from the printers. Aleksandrov was anxious about the book's publication: he was still upset with his cousin's decision to follow Pushkin's lead in changing the book's title and using the author's former name to emphasize the "Durova" narrative. Despite the indignities of editorial intervention, Aleksandrov's worst fears were somewhat allayed by the generally positive reception of the extended text.

The first review of Aleksandrov's memoirs appeared in the January 1837 issue of the thick journal *Son of the Fatherland*.<sup>33</sup> The journal was founded in 1812 by Nikolai Grech (1787–1867), who was personally close with many Decembrists and Pushkin's circle. Initially oriented towards Russian liberals, the journal shifted towards conservatism with the failure of the Decembrist revolt and the arrival of Faddei Bulgarin (1789–1859) as co-editor and publisher in 1829. The publication date of Aleksandrov's book coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of 1812, a milestone that served as inspiration for the author to publish his memoirs and intersected with other works printed and reviewed in the January 1837 issue of *Son of the Fatherland*.<sup>34</sup> The tone of the issue was decidedly patriotic. Despite lacking formal attribution, the review was almost certainly written by Bulgarin. Though the review is more negative towards the 1836 edition than his signed review of the 1839 edition, it bears hallmarks of his criticism, including an aversion to Gallicisms, sharp barbs directed at authors he was known to dislike, praise of Walter Scott, and references to a work reviewed in the French books section of the same issue of *Son of the Fatherland*, a section of the journal for which Bulgarin was responsible.<sup>35</sup>

Bulgarin commends Aleksandrov's bravery in forsaking women's life for military service yet argues that his memoirs detail relatively minor military contributions to the Patriotic War of 1812 that would not be interesting at all

32. Marsh-Flores, "Coming Out of His Closet," 614; Gheith, "Nadezhda Durova," 121

33. Faddei Bulgarin, "Bibliografiia," *Syn Otechestva* no. 183 (1837): 208–14.

34. Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, 308.

35. N.L. Stepanov, "Severnaia Pchela F.B. Bulgarin" in *Ocherki po istorii russkoi zhurnalistiki i kritiki*, 2 vols. (Leningrad, 1950), 1:317–18; Aleksandrov read this review himself, remarking in *A Year of My Life in Petersburg* that he had no idea what "Gallicisms" were. See: Durova, *God zhizni v Peterburge*, 163.

if they had been written by a man instead.<sup>36</sup> He is dismissive of the sections that detail Aleksandrov's journeys between battles, and asserts that the portions about eating potatoes alongside peasants, chatting with Polish noblewomen, haggling with Jewish merchants, or tending to his horse are not of historical or literary interest, and wishes the sections on meeting Kutuzov and Miloradovich were longer. Bulgarin does, however, praise Aleksandrov's meeting with Emperor Alexander I, writing that "it is written with such passion and so captivatingly that we cannot do it justice to our readers" before excerpting the scene in its entirety, placing this portion on the same footing as the best Russian war memoirs.<sup>37</sup>

The most interesting aspect concerning gender is found in the author's comparison of Aleksandrov to the Chevalier d'Éon (1728–1810). D'Éon, who used many names throughout their<sup>38</sup> lifetime, was born into a poor noble family, rose through the French bureaucracy, and published writings on political and financial administration until they were recruited in 1756 at the age of 28 for the *Secret du Roi*, a secret diplomatic/espionage unit personally overseen by Louis XV independently of the French government. D'Éon held several important official positions in addition to their clandestine responsibilities, including terms as the secretary of the French embassy in Russia from 1756–60, as the chargé d'affaires to England, and a captain in the dragoons during the Seven Years' War. In October 1763, however, d'Éon declined an official order to return to France and threatened to publish secret documents in protest. This caused a major scandal, and they were not able to return to France until 1777 under the conditions of banishment in Tonnerre and to observe modest female dress.

In addition to their proximity to power and role in major European political developments of the mid-eighteenth century, the Chevalier d'Éon's government service was intertwined with their varying gender expression: during their time in Russia, they infiltrated Catherine the Great's court while presenting as female, and it was supposedly their ability to pass as female that allowed them to escape an English blockade. Though they largely presented as male during their public service through official channels, they frequently presented as female during covert operations or in their personal time. Interestingly, their masculinity was questioned in England, where the Chevalier d'Éon typically dressed in male military garb. This led to a betting pool on the London Stock Exchange, collecting bets on which set of genitals they possessed. The Chevalier d'Éon reported different facts and narratives about their life as well, claiming to be a biological female raised as male so that his father could collect additional inheritance from his wife's family. They eventually received official documentation of this fact as part of their negotiations with Louis XVI on the condition that they live a static gender expression, as a proper lady. Upon their death, doctors discovered that the

36. Bulgarin, "Bibliografija," *Syn Otechestva* no. 183 (1837): 209.

37. *Ibid.*

38. The Chevalier d'Éon used masculine and feminine pronouns at various points, though often it was dictated by their current social position. I err to "they" to best reflect this variability.

Chevalier d'Éon possessed a penis and testicles, though lacked many typical masculine secondary characteristics, suggesting that they could have been intersex.<sup>39</sup>

The reviews of both the *Memoirs of the Chevalier d'Éon* and *The Cavalry Maiden in Son of the Fatherland* contain similar language and demonstrate thematic unity, suggesting they were both written by the same author. Characteristic of Bulgarin's literary and critical interests, the reviewer praises the sense of adventure that pervades *Memoirs*. Whereas he criticizes Aleksandrov for dwelling on minor events and personages, he praises the Chevalier d'Éon's *Memoirs* for including numerous descriptions of Ludwig XV, Catherine I, and others, arguing that these scenes add historical value and build dramatic interest in these figures and the intricacies of eighteenth century diplomacy.<sup>40</sup> Though both figures' gender expression interests Bulgarin, he does not examine it further in these reviews beyond acknowledging the "surprise" that the Chevalier d'Éon was a man and "Durova" a woman. While Bulgarin finds this dynamic alluring in *Memoirs*, he praises Aleksandrov's more intimate and subjective narrative contained in the book's introductory chapter entitled "My Childhood Years" as well, characterizing the section as "a complete novel in itself" that convincingly explains the author's unusual provenance.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Aleksandrov's memoirs, where he repeatedly articulates his masculine identification, the Chevalier d'Éon's *Memoirs* offer relatively little insight into the author's gender identity. Although these figures have some obvious similarities, there is one significant difference: d'Éon's gender expression varied over time, often adapting dress and language situationally, whereas Aleksandrov spent approximately sixty of his eighty-three years living and speaking exclusively as a man. Notably, Bulgarin identifies both authors' proximity to political power as their greatest literary feat, and does not pose their gender expression as subversive, focusing on how they enable both to serve the patriotic causes of their nations.<sup>42</sup>

Bulgarin wrote further on Aleksandrov's gender in his subsequent review of *A Year of My Life in Petersburg*, printed in *Northern Bee*.<sup>43</sup> The book details Aleksandrov's frustrations with resistance to his masculine presentation and the fickleness of high society, but also contains many positive depictions of well-known figures. Aleksandrov's sour tone and willingness to air grievances with celebrities in this book divided critics, but Bulgarin's review is largely positive. Though he alludes to potentially objectionable material in *Notes*, presumably speaking of the violation of gender norms, as this comment is accompanied by an assurance of the author's modest personal life, Bulgarin praises Aleksandrov's "spiritual simplicity and a soldier's frankness," signaling a heightened capacity for truth-telling and honesty and aversion to

39. Frédéric Gaillardot, *Memoirs of the Chevalier D'Éon* (London, 1972), 260–61.

40. Bulgarin, "Bibliografiiia," *Syn Otechestva* no. 183 (1837): 116.

41. *Ibid.*, 213

42. For a contemporary example of how drag is used to nationalist ends, see: Julie Anne Cassiday, "Glamazons En Travesti," in Julie A. Buckler, Julie Anne Cassiday, and Boris Wolfson, eds., *Russian Performances: Word, Object, Action* (Madison, 2018), 272–81.

43. Faddei Bulgarin, "Russkaia Literatura," *Severnaya Pchela: Gazeta politicheskaiia i literaturnaia*, November 10, 1838: 1019.

social pretense. On the one hand, these comments reflect the general hostility to women's writing and creativity in Russian romanticism, yet they clearly categorize Aleksandrov, at minimum, as a stylistically masculine writer.<sup>44</sup> Bulgarin laments that such a talented writer was unprepared for Petersburg society, literary scene, and the complexities of fame. Indeed, he summarizes, *A Year of My Life in Petersburg* effectively documents how a naïve, well-intentioned, and talented author was chewed up and spat out by high society.<sup>45</sup>

The most interesting part of this review, however, is Bulgarin's sudden and deliberate shift to the author's preferred masculine name, pronouns, and verbiage approximately halfway through, at the conclusion of the paragraph introducing the author. Unfortunately, Bulgarin does not explain his logic for doing so, simply declaring that he will now refer to the author not as "the Cavalry Maiden (*devitsa-kavalerist*)," as previously introduced to the reader, but as "Mr. Aleksandrov" (*gospod Aleksandrov*). Though several critics use the name "Aleksandrov" in reviews—particularly after the 1839 edition, retitled *Notes of Alexandrov*—none of them make an intentional and pronounced shift to masculine language in the space of a single review.<sup>46</sup> The only other review that avoids feminine language entirely is a short piece by Pletnev, so short that it does not use any gendered verbs or pronouns, though it does use "author" (*avtor*) instead of "authoress" (*pisatel'nitsa*). Bulgarin's shift to masculine language, on the one hand, appears to be inconsistent with the earlier review of *The Cavalry Maiden* as well as the Chevalier d'Éon's memoirs, which emphatically define their author's sexes as female and male respectively. Yet, whereas those reviews reflect the distance between critic and author, Bulgarin's review of *A Year of Life* is much more intimate, owing both to the book's subject—interpersonal relationships—and to the critic's sense that Aleksandrov is a real person, of his time, his place, and his social milieu. Critically, this review does not pose Aleksandrov's masculinity or his worth as dependent on his military service or proximity to the tsar. Indeed, his second review is deeply sympathetic to Aleksandrov's difficult position as a trans author and celebrity, and consciously features a shift to the author's preferred name and language in the review.

I cannot declare Bulgarin a supporter of trans rights in any modern sense, but I do believe this deference signals that nineteenth century society, at least the ones Aleksandrov passed through or inhabited, was perhaps more understanding than we expect. While Zirin, Renner-Fahey, and Marsh-Flores all express surprise or discomfort that Aleksandrov encounters so many people who "play along" with his masculine gender identity, Bulgarin's shift to masculine language symbolizes a form of politeness at the very least, and perhaps even a form of acceptance in line with the reception Aleksandrov often describes in his autobiographies. This review also challenges Gheith's passing

44. Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina from State to Stage* (Oxford, 2012), 11.

45. Bulgarin, "Russkaia literatura," *Severnaya Pchela*, November 10, 1838: 1019.

46. Several contemporary bibliographies use the name "Aleksandrov" as well. See: Margarita Vaysman, "The Trouble with Queer Celebrity: Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)'s *A Year of Life in St Petersburg* (1838)," *Modern Language Review*, no. 118, part 1 (January 2023): 97–113.

observation of “random” alternation between masculine and feminine language. Indeed, such a shift signals knowledge of Aleksandrov’s situation and identity—not ignorance of it. Though it is unclear whether Aleksandrov and Bulgarin ever crossed paths face-to-face, the pair definitively had many mutual friends and acquaintances. Whether or not they were acquainted, we see Bulgarin the critic behaving much like the figures the author describes in *A Year of Life*, treating Aleksandrov not as playing a role but as an actual man. These facts are irreconcilable with interpretations that dismiss the author’s transness out of hand.

Vissarion Belinskii (1811–48), much like Aleksandrov, was an outsider trying to break into the Petersburg literary establishment in the late 1830s. He arrived at St. Petersburg in 1839 to work as an editor at Andrei Kraevskii’s *Fatherland Notes* and Piotr Pletn’ov’s *The Contemporary*. Although the two shared many colleagues and friends, there is no evidence that Belinskii and Aleksandrov did so.<sup>47</sup> What is documented, however, is that Belinskii wrote more on Aleksandrov and his fiction than any other contemporary critic, producing reviews of the account of 1812 published in *The Contemporary*, the expanded 1839 edition of *Notes of Alexandrov*, the short story “Pavilion,” as well as the novels *Treasure Trove* (1840), *The Corner* (1840), and *Yarchuk* (1840). These articles demonstrate Belinskii’s attempts to understand Aleksandrov’s gender identity through his own writing.

Belinskii first wrote about Aleksandrov in *Rumor* amid an overview of the major articles featured in the second issue of Pushkin’s *The Contemporary*.<sup>48</sup> Owing to the format of the review, the critic’s comments are brief. Belinskii, born in 1811, is too young to remember the author’s first brushes with notoriety, and begins the review by speculating whether Aleksandrov’s story could be a hoax or embellishment. He remarks that the facticity is not important, as the text is written masterfully and the events, if true, are so spectacular that one can hardly believe them. Belinskii then raises the issue of style, maintaining that the work’s engaging prose suggested rewriting after the fact and/or a flourish of grace from a feminine pen, commenting: “It’s strange that one could write in such wonderful language in 1812. Who else could it be but a woman?”<sup>49</sup> Though Belinskii was often hostile to women’s creativity, he means this as praise here. While such comments pervade works on Aleksandrov to the present day, the aside foreshadows Belinskii’s continued engagement with the question of gender and style in his reviews of Aleksandrov’s works. He concludes by encouraging the author to publish more of his memoirs.

Belinskii’s subsequent double review of “Pavilion” and *Notes of Alexandrov* builds upon his previous remarks about literary style and gender identity. Belinskii still uses feminine verbs, pronouns, and “Durova” throughout this review but demonstrates more interest in the author’s masculinity. Belinskii begins by alluding to the popular impression that the memoirs may have been a fabrication produced by Pushkin, although he does not count

47. Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, 338.

48. Vissarion Grigor’evich Belinskii, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii (hereafter PSS)*, 13 vols. (Moscow, 1953), 2:236.

49. *Ibid.*

himself among those that believe this. He does, however, link Aleksandrov's literary style to the poet himself. Belinskii praises the author's command of language and turn of phrase, keying in on the simplicity and directness of Aleksandrov's style. Whereas several other critics dismiss the author's simple style as a product of being a self-taught writer, Belinskii writes that "it seems that Pushkin himself gave her, and to him she owes this courageous (*muzhestvennyi*) resoluteness and strength, this striking expressivity of her style, the vividness of her fascinating story, always full of and imbued with some kind of hidden thought."<sup>50</sup>

Belinskii's comments are unique in that they are directed not so much at the author's military heroism as his childhood experiences and break with femininity. He summarizes two major additions to the 1836 version published in *The Contemporary*, the chapters entitled "My Childhood Years" and "Several Aspects of my Childhood Years." While the former chapter is commonly included in current editions and translations, the latter one is not; both deal with the conflict between mother and daughter, and the author's resistance to all things feminine. Belinskii praises the author's "youthful mischief, chivalric spirit, aversion to women's clothing and pursuits, deep poetic sensibility, and somber, wistful yearning for the freedom of military life suppressed by a mother who did not understand [her]."<sup>51</sup> The critic plays with the terms "courageous" (*muzhestvennyi*), sharing a linguistic root with "man" (*muzh*), and "feminine" (*zhenstvennyi*), suggesting that the young author's rejection of femininity is as much—if not much more so—a statement of poetic and moral talent as one of sincere identification.<sup>52</sup> Although Belinskii sympathizes with Aleksandrov's frustrated masculinity, recognizing these chapters as worthy and enlightening additions to *Notes* that make more sense of the author's broader experience, he still does not take him as a "real" man as much as an artist expressing a position of moral strength and insight. He concludes the section by reframing the texts as being a "rich source for poetry and complex riddle for psychologists," suggesting—although I believe with less prejudice than such a statement would be taken today—that something unusual and implicitly unhealthy is at play.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, Belinskii's assertions about Aleksandrov's stylistic masculinity continue when the critic moves from Aleksandrov's autobiographical writings to his fiction. Though Belinskii is nominally reviewing *The Notes of Alexandrov*, he dedicates the bulk of the review to Aleksandrov's story "Pavilion." The story was based on a story Aleksandrov heard in the service and exists in several published versions. The main plot concerns Valerian, an intelligent young man forced into the cloth by his father Venedikt, a parish priest. After spending five years at monastery, Venedikt recalls his son to be his vicar. Valerian rents a room from a noble family but is disinterested in his hosts and surroundings until he overhears a woman's beautiful singing

50. Gheith, "Nadezhda Durova," 120; Belinskii, *PSS*, 3:149

51. Belinskii, *PSS*, 3:149

52. Maks Fasmer and O.N. Trubachev, *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1987), 2:670–71.

53. Belinskii, *PSS*, 3:149

voice. The voice belongs to Luitgard, a distant relative who is locked away and treated as a servant. Valerian covertly provides her with an education, but soon falls in love with her. Luitgard does not reciprocate his feelings and Valerian kills her in a fit of rage. The story ends with Venedikt disowning and cursing his son before burying him.

Following several long excerpts from the work, Belinskii asserts that “Pavilion” is “captivating and intense. . . revealing the [authorship of] a firm, masculine hand.”<sup>54</sup> The critic appears to mean several things by this comment, specifically noting the detail-oriented, impactful prose, the serious—and even graphic—subject matter of the work, and the role of the father-son relationship in the text. He writes that Venedikt, by forcing his son into the priesthood, violated Valerian’s “sacred moral freedom” to choose his own course in life, and that this pattern repeats itself in Valerian’s relationship with Luitgard. One cannot help but notice that Belinskii’s comments on the parent-child dynamic here closely resemble his earlier comments about Aleksandrov and his mother, though the critic does not state this similarity explicitly. He contrasts the desire to control and define the other, termed here as “passion,” with “love,” which assumes the free, equal, and consensual participation of all parties. Belinskii declares that Luitgard, the only character who understands this principle, does not die in vain as her life and fate convey this poetic message of love. I think we can infer that Belinskii feels similarly about Aleksandrov himself, a figure who “escapes” womanhood and bravely represents these values in life and literature as well.

Much like Bulgarin, Belinskii makes a sudden and distinct shift to using masculine titles and languages in his later reviews of *Treasure Trove*, *The Corner*, and *Yarchuk*. Unfortunately, he does not explain his logic or substantially build upon the themes of masculinity and masculine writing as he does in earlier pieces. Belinskii likens Aleksandrov to several other writers, including E.T.A. Hoffman, Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and Ann Radcliffe. Like Bulgarin, it is not possible to say whether Belinskii and Aleksandrov ever met each other, although they shared many mutual friends and colleagues during their time in Petersburg. Regardless, as with Bulgarin, we see Belinskii shift to the same masculine conventions in addressing and responding to Aleksandrov as a masculine, male author.

While critics of this period, including Belinskii and Bulgarin themselves, were often negative about women writers and their works along gender lines, I do not see their characterization of Aleksandrov and his prose evolving along a simple dichotomy of good/male versus bad/female.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the typical dismissals of women’s writing, here both critics work inward from the text toward understanding the author’s gender identity, concluding that the author’s literary and public persona is masculine. In the case of Belinskii, furthermore, this does not even hinge upon literary quality, as he defers to Aleksandrov’s preferred language and name even when he is less impressed by later works. While both instances speak to the relative privilege of being an author and not an authoress, it is remarkable—and runs contrary to the

54. *Ibid.*, 155

55. Held, *Terrible Perfection*, 2

dominant scholarly narratives—that Aleksandrov’s contemporaries were confused and unaccepting of his masculine identity.

In the introduction to *A History of Russian Women’s Writing*, Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne Gheith write that their scholarship is guided by “the question of whether women’s writing comprises a separate tradition or not.”<sup>56</sup> In this article, I have posed a similar question to the literary and critical canon of Russian women’s writing: is Aleksandr Aleksandrov trans and if so, does transmasculine writing comprise a distinct tradition from women’s writing?

As I have demonstrated in this essay, Aleksandrov’s right to self-narration was repeatedly challenged, both through the editorial process in his own time and by later scholarly attempts to characterize him as a woman advocating for female liberation. I cannot help but notice the similarity between Prosser’s observation that trans individuals frequently yearn not to perform but to simply be their gender with Heldt’s observations about the “terrible perfection” that male Russian authors burdened their heroines with: representing something beyond their own experience, becoming an abstracted symbol of the future or of another’s liberation. In *A Year of My Life in Petersburg*, Aleksandrov is clear is about his masculine identity and his frustrations with being misgendered as female in social situations and deadnamed in print. I argue that dispensing with Aleksandrov’s masculinity is not only inconsistent with his texts, critical reception, and the historical record, but indeed unnecessary for producing a feminist understanding of the author and his work. Aleksandrov did not hide his transition—he documented it, insisted upon it, and celebrated it in his memoirs—and, drawing upon his pre-transition experiences, remained sympathetic to the condition of women even after he transitioned to male. While his experiences and texts often resonate with the categories of “woman writer” and “women’s writing,” these labels neglect the core of Aleksandrov’s identity and lived experiences. A *trans-inclusive feminist* reading, however, offers a coherent synthesis of the author’s past and present. Let us finally say goodbye to “Durova” and welcome Aleksandrov.

56. Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, “Introduction,” in Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, eds., *A History of Women’s Writing in Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 2.