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UNREADABLE POEMS OF A NON-EXISTENT POETESS: AN IMAGE OF A FEMALE POET IN ONE 19TH-CENTURY HOAX

In many cases quantitative approaches to women's writings aim to rediscover female authors in "the great unread". The archive, however, can also hold the other side of the coin: literary mystifications and sexist parodies on women's literary style. This article discusses one such hoax, a poetry collection published in 1837 in Russia in the name of a 15-year-old girl. On the one hand, the book's preface reflects typical 19th-century prejudices about women authors, mocking both the images of a child prodigy and an emancipated professional poetess. On the other hand, the poems themselves were intentionally made meaningless and almost unreadable by human readers. Tracing the historical reasons behind the fake-poetess image, this article uses computational methods to analyse the disrupted content of the book, revealing the possible source of the hoax's parodic style in Sentimentalism writings.

Keywords: women's writings, 19th-century poetry, parody, stylometry, quantitative methods.

Introduction¹

The 1830s in Russian literature can be seen as the period of the rise of women's poetry with major poetesses such as Evdokiya Rostopchina and Karolina Pavlova stepping into the literary field (Vowles 2004; Greene 2004: 4–9; Савкина 1998). Similarly to any professional women writers of this time, poetesses were not warmly welcomed by male poets and critics since women could not become the "true" poets in the frame of Romantic aesthetics. The cultural image of a female poet seems to be less discussed than satiric depictions of 19th century women writing prose. This article aims to bring light to an exaggeration of this image as it was exposed in a little-known hoax *Various Poems by Anna*

¹ This research paper at its initial stage was presented at the Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries 6th Conference (Uppsala 15–18 March 2022).

Smirnova (1st ed.) [Собрание различных стихотворений. Сочинение Анны Смирновой (Первое издание)] printed in 1837.

The 145-page long book included 55 poems, a preface and footnotes written in the name of a poetess Anna Smirnova, who addressed the public from the very first pages in the following manner:

Пятнадцатилетний возраст мой достоин того, чтоб потребовать от публики ее благосклонности. Труды мои, столь вредные для моего здоровья, ужели не увенчаются желанным успехом? <...> и я склонюсь на ложе смерти с утомленным сердцем от несчастий и горестей, оплакана будучи нежными слезами Муз и Нимф. Но этою книгою еще не кончились труды мои: при обращении на себя внимания публики, я обещаюсь, во время крепости сил моих, неутомимо заниматься Науками и буду издавать свои сочинения, как поэтические, так и прозаические, одни за другими. (Смирнова 1837: 5)

[Being a fifteen-year-old is being of the age worth asking the public for its benevolence. My works, so harmful to my health, won't they be crowned with success? <...> and I will lie on my deathbed with my heart weary from misfortunes and woes being mourned by Muses and Nymphs. Yet with this book my labour will not end: should the public kindly give its attention, I promise, whilst being strong enough, to tirelessly pursue sciences and print my works, in poetry as well as in prose, one by one.]

The image of the fifteen-year-old poetess appears as well in several poems of the book, providing a telling example of the poetess' poetic style:

Смущенный Сен-Готгард давно ли ты уныл,
Не с этих ли времен, как сделался мне мил?
Быть может, что ты скрыл последний луч Боннета;
Но я не Физикат, я именем Аннета. (Ibid: 61)

[Embarrassed Saint-Gothard for how long you've been sad
Is not it since the days when you've made me so glad?
It might be that you've hidden the last beam of Bonnette;
But I'm no Physicus, my name is just Annette.]

<...> Дорогу осветив, мне путь в луга назначил,
Извилины стремнин, где смерть лежит, означил.
Прямая линия, но трудно к ней идти,
В пятнадцать лет я не могу прийти.
На каждом шаге страх трепещет подо мною,
Который отстаёт уж действовать весною. (Ibid: 38–39)

[Lighting my way, it showed me the path through meadows,
Highlighting twisted rapids that cover death in shadows.
It is a straight line, but it is hard to retain,
A fifteen-year-old, I cannot it obtain.
In every step, the fear below me trembled,
That should, in fact, in spring just disassembled.]

Smirnova's poems best can be described as randomly shuffled poetic clichés where the same object is discussed only within the limits of a rhyme pair (e.g.,

“sad — glad” and “Bonnette — Annette”). This versification technique seems similar to the bouts-rimés game, where a poem is written according to a list of pre-selected rhymes that sometimes results in the poem’s absurdity.²

It should be noted that, besides the poems’ unintelligibility, the poetic form of all Smirnova’s poems (iambic hexameter with paired rhymes)³ and poetic language in general are very archaic and rarely used by poets of the 1830s.

Together with the overly ambitious tone and publication plans given in the preface, utterly obscure poems make one think that the whole book was a hoax and no fifteen-year-old poetess existed — as it was immediately suggested in one of the reviews on the book in 1837:

Еще одна пятнадцатилетняя, невинная стихотворица! Но нам сдается, что это плохая шутка <...> Эта пятнадцатилетняя невинная стихотворица очевидно бреет себе бороду. Во время Пирона кто-то во Франции вздумал мистифицировать публику точно таким же образом <...> и как стихи были прекрасны, то множество пылких голов влюбилось в юную и даровитую незнакомку. <...> не думаем, чтобы кто-нибудь мог влюбиться в автора или авторов пьес, которые теперь являются под именем небывалой пятнадцатилетней Смирновой <...> мистификация их решительно не удалась. (“Литературная летопись” 1837: 48–50)

[Yet another fifteen-year-old, innocent poetess! But we believe that it is a very bad joke <...> This fifteen-year-old poetess evidently shaves her beard. At the time of Piron, someone in France decided to stage a hoax in the very same manner <...> but as the poems were beautiful, many passionate heads fell in love with the young and talented unknown lady. <...> we do not think that somebody is able to fall in love with the author or authors who appeared under the name of unheard-of Smirnova <...> their hoax is definitely a failure.]

The Reader’s Library’s critic aside, some reviews noted ironically that Smirnova’s style is obscure because it is a *woman’s* writing style:

² Little can be said about the content of Smirnova’s poems. As the narrative and topic usually change every two lines, there are no particular ideas discussed consistently in any of the poems. The book itself also appears to have no plot. One could describe Smirnova’s versification style as an extremely spontaneous form of poetry generation, similar to the stream of consciousness in verse, although such a style did not exist in the poetry tradition of the 19th century. On the level of individual words frequently occurring in Smirnova’s poems, an abundance of geographical locations draws attention: a list of places and cities in Europe found among the titles of the poems, such as Mont Blanc, Col du Saint Gothard, Adersbach, Lützen, Genève, Kunersdorf. Most of the poems use pastoral clichés and particularly “poetic” words and motives (e. g., “a dream”, “a rose”, “a tear”, etc.), although they are rarely meaningfully connected to each other. Two poems incorporate Romantic imagery, with one focusing on a dream (“Madrigal”, (Смирнова 1837: 12)) and another on Nordic scenery (“Grampian Mountains” with an appeal to Lord Byron (Ibid: 28–29)). While these features might indicate the author’s intellectual background and erudition, their placement in the poems appears random and does not contribute to the expression of a specific idea. It can be concluded that these stylistic devices were used to imitate the style of “a learned woman” rather than to convey meaningful content in the poems.

³ According to Mikhail Gasparov’s data, the proportion of the iambic hexameter in Russian poetry was steadily reducing during the first decades of the 19th century, making it a rare meter in the 1820s and 1830s with share less than 1/6 out of all meters (Гаспаров 2000: 117–118). The form used in Smirnova’s poems cannot be called alexandrine as the pairs of male and female rhymes alternating inconsistently.

Сознаемся, что мы в этой поэзии ничего не понимаем, как совершенные профаны, непривычные, может быть, к женскому языку (“Русские книги” 1838: 10)

[We have to confess that we don’t understand anything in this kind of poetry as absolute laymen unfamiliar, maybe, with women’s language].

Considering the issue of “women’s language”, one can see that the hoax, even failed, aimed to mock women’s poetry of this time. Although there is no evidence that the author(s) of the hoax is someone known to literary scholars, this article aims to examine how typical preconceptions on women’s poetry are reflected in the poems and Smirnova’s image.

My claim is that the hoax presents a fundamental disconnection of the two parts of the book: the poetess’ image and her poems. As the image can be interpreted with the help of historical and literary context of the 1830s, the poems are much less understandable for a human reader. In this regard, I will suggest a computational way of “reading” the obscure poetry, in particular, comparing Smirnova’s vocabulary and word usage with those of other Russian poets of the first half of the 19th century.

As the main object of the study is the image of the female poet of the early 19th century, the hoax analysis contributes mainly to gender studies. However, the part discussing poems’ texts goes beyond the field, exploring the ways of studying parodic and disrupted texts with the help of statistical methods.

I. Children’s poetry in the early 19th-century Russian periodicals

In 1837 Smirnova was called “*yet another* fifteen-year-old, innocent poetess”⁴. It implies that there were other examples of young girls who debuted with their poems in this period. The most well-known case was specified in a short note by Nikolai Smirnov-Sokol’skii, who assumed that the author(s) of the hoax “had good knowledge of the poetic works by Elisabeth Kulmann” (Смирнов-Сокольский 1969: 432). Kulmann’s poems were printed in 1833 (and will be discussed later); but before that, we need to consider that children’s poetry was quite common in Russian periodicals already in the 1810s and 1820s.⁵

For instance, in the early 1810s, a special journal for young readers and writers, *Friend of Young and All People* [Друг юношества и всяких лет], published several poems by boys of nine, eleven and twelve years old⁶. In each case the age

⁴ Emphasis added.

⁵ This paper focuses on the printed sources of the early 19th century; for the cases of the young female translators publishing their works in the end of the 18th century, see, for example: (O’Malley 2007); for the sentimentalist women poetry of the turn of the 19th century, see (Stohler 2016).

⁶ See poems by: 9-year-old Nikandr Dudyshkin (Дудышкин Никандр. “Моя молитва о грехах”. *Друг юношества* 2 (1813): 147; Дудышкин Никандр. “Сердечное признание моему Благодетелю Максиму Ивановичу Невзорову”. *Друг юношества* 3 (1813): 155–156); 11-year-old Sergei Vikulin (Викулин Сергей. “Пение младенцев”. *Друг юношества* 2 (1813):

of the author was a subject of a special footnote — the feature characteristic for an educational journal.

There were also young female authors who had published their poetry and prose in the journal⁷, although their writings were framed slightly differently than boys' ones. While the latter could have been discussed in terms of language or style⁸, the former was often declared to be solely a spontaneous, “natural” piece of art:

Здесь не умничание и не наученность говорит, а живые чувства нежного сердца милой Сочинительницы <...> сию образцовую для Юношества пьеску с слезами радости сообщаю в Журнал <...> для доброго примера молодым. (“Размышление” 1814: 71)

[Here it is not the intelligence and education who are speaking, but the vivid feelings of a tender heart <...> this piece, exemplary for the youth, we contribute to the journal <...> as a fine example for the young people.]

This kind of attitude to women's writings as something opposite to the outcome of education or rational thinking formed in Russian literature at the turn of the 19th century (Stohler 2016). As a young woman was presumed to be *tabula rasa*, her closeness to nature rather than culture explains that her writings — regardless the age — were perceived as an outcome of a “natural” and non-rational creative process. Hence, it limited a woman's ability to act as an independent author because her feelings and experiences, including literary work, were assumed to be immature and should have been hidden from the public, shared only with a mentor (in most cases, a father or a husband) (Лотман 1994: 310–311; Stohler 2016: 42–43). The notion of the natural and spontaneous as opposed to the “true” art, together with the mentor figure make children's and women's poetry of this time quite similar in their lack of autonomy.

In the 1810s publishing writings of boys and girls did serve educational goals: on the one hand, the journal aimed to praise children for their literary efforts and, on the other hand, it demonstrated examples of the right way of writing texts to other children. This “educational” practice of publishing children's poetry, which was quite similar to other European literary markets of the turn of the 19th century (cf. Kittredge 2011), had not, however, lasted long. Already in the 1820s even young male poets were not referring to their age while debuting. This was not the case for the poems written by girls.

For many female poets' publications in the periodicals of the 1820s and 1830s one can find footnotes mentioning the author's age. These are, for instance, five

139–140; Викулин Сергей. “Чувствие отечественного счастья”. *Друг юношества* 5 (1813): 75–77); 12-year-old unknown author (А. К. “Рондо Суворову”. *Друг юношества* 7 (1810): 48).

⁷ See, for example (“Размышление” 1814) as well as one poem signed by unknown female poet (М.л.н.ва Ал... “К дружбе”. *Друг юношества* 4 (1814): 98–99).

⁸ For instance, see the editor's footnote to Dudyshkin's poem specifying that the boy's poems include some grammar mistakes (Дудышкин Никандр. “Чувства отрока на победы, одержанные Августейшим Императором Александром I”. *Друг юношества* 10 (1814): 103–105).

poems by thirteen-year-old girls, including the first publication of Nadezhda Teplova⁹. One can also find number of poems — as it was especially emphasised in the footnotes by editors — by girls of ten¹⁰, eleven¹¹, fourteen¹² and fifteen years old¹³. Since there is no evidence of male poets referencing their age at this extent in the 1820s and 1830s, this feature seems to not only draw readers' interest, but also legitimise female poets' literary debut. Being neither children nor adult women (Лотман 1994: 63; Giannarelli 1977–1978), female poets between 10 and 15 were somewhat allowed to print their poems in journals, while the age referencing implies these to be some kind of exceptional cases, similar to child prodigies or “natural” poets (cf. Kord 2003; Шеля 2018).

Nevertheless, the mention of the age below a publication did not entail any other biographical details to be attached. A journal publication might be limited in typographical space, but even a poetry collection *Essays in verse by fifteen-year-old maiden Elizaveta Shakhova* (1837) had not been supplied by any type of preface or information about the poetess. Thus, the age referencing in these cases functioned on its own, without constructing a detailed biography around a girl.

By an odd coincidence, Elizaveta Shakhova, a real fifteen-year-old poetess, who become quite visible in the literary field later (Vowles 2004), had printed her first book in the same year as allegedly fifteen-year-old Smirnova¹⁴. The coincidence provides even more evidence of featuring young girls' poetry during this time and highlights the contrast between the real female poet and the imaginary one.

Shakhova's book is similar to most women's poetry collections of the time in terms of its small size (only eight poems, 23 pages), lack of preface or any commentary in the name of the author. The poems' content can be as well described as modest and quite religious¹⁵. As it is now evident, Smirnova's book appears to be the opposite. Although it draws attention using the common mention of the poetess's age (“Being a fifteen-year-old...”), Smirnova's overly ambi-

⁹ See: “Сердечная благодарность”. *Невский зритель* ч. 2, № 5 (1820): 165; “Мысли при кладбище”. *Благонамеренный* ч. 19, № 19 (1822): 221–223 (signed: «Варвара Т...ва»); Головлева Е. “От Дочери к Отцу”. *Благонамеренный* ч. 31, № 31–32 (1825): 174; Теплова Надежда. “К родной стороне”. *Московский Телеграф* ч. 15, № 12, отд. 2: 136–137; Витковская Елисавета. “Содержательнице благородного пансиона в Харькове, Е. Ф. Фон-Бирих, от ее воспитанниц”. *Дамский журнал* ч. 25, № 3 (1829): 38.

¹⁰ See: Верховская Марья. “Содержательнице благородного пансиона в Харькове, Е.Ф. Фон-Бирих, от ее воспитанниц”. *Дамский журнал* ч. 25, № 3 (1829): 38.

¹¹ See: Глинка Анна. “На кончину Благодетельной Государыни Императрицы Марии Феодоровны”. *Дамский журнал* ч. 24, № 24 (1828): 195–196.

¹² See: Корсакова Лидия. “Буря и пожар”. *Литературные прибавления к “Русскому инвалиду”* т. 2, № 1 (1839): 5–6.

¹³ See: Косогувская Надежда. “Дяде и благодетелю И. А. К.”. *Благонамеренный* ч. 21, № 5 (1823): 354–355.

¹⁴ Here and below, I use the name “Smirnova” without quotation marks referring to the author(s) who stood behind the hoax.

¹⁵ Compare, for instance, Shakhova's poetry collections with those by Elizaveta Alad'ina (Сочинения Е. В. А...й, 1838) or V. Molchanova (Стихотворения, сочиненные девицею В. М..., 1838).

tious appeal to the public should have made a total contrast with any known young female poet. So, firstly, Smirnova was used to reverse the humble image of a semiautonomous poetess debuting at a young age, the phenomenon quite widespread in the 1820s and 1830s. The hoax's preface should have had a comical effect or at least caused dissonance for the readers, who were not expecting a fifteen-year-old girl to strive for fame, scientific achievements, and numerous publications.

II. A young poetess on her deathbed

The mention of the young age of a female poet appeared quite often in the Russian periodicals of the 1820s. Nevertheless, an early debut might not become a part of a poetess's later biography, as it was, for instance, in the cases of quite renowned female poets Nadezhda Teplova or Elisaveta Shakhova (cf.: Вацуро 2000, Vowels 2004). In fact, debuting at a young age turned into one's biography's feature only in the case of this person's early death.

By the 1820s, a woman's early death was interpreted in the frame of pre-romantic aesthetics, in Russia largely influenced by Vasili Zhukovskii's poetry (Лютман 1994: 65). In this perspective, a dead young woman embodied the angelic image, innocent and close to nature.

An example of this constructed biography is the article written by a journalist Boris Fedorov¹⁶ about Mariya Posvelova (between 1780 and 1784 — 1805). Opening the biography with an epigraph from Zhukovskii, Fedorov emphasised young Pospelova's "natural" self-grown talent for writing in verse accompanied by her complete indifference to literary fame. These virtues allow her to become the personification of an angel:

Воспитанница природы не старалась приобрести себе имя ученое. Малое число напечатанных экземпляров ее Стихотворений назначено было для распределения не Литераторам <...>, не Журналистам <...>, не знатым <...>, но для распределения друзьям ее семейства <...> нельзя без удивления читать Оды <...> и другие произведения пера ее, и представить, что сии прелестные цветы Поэзии и Философии возвращены семнадцатилетнею Музой, которой дар, еще в неразвитии изумляющий, смертию похищен <...> и гроб сокрыл навеки от земли черты Ангела <...> Пospelова представляет редкий пример природных способностей. (Федоров 1824: 185–186, 187–188)

[A pupil of Nature, she has not been trying to earn her name as a learned woman. Printed in few numbers of copies, her poetry collection was given not to writers <...> or journalists <...> or nobles <...> but to friends of her family <...> one cannot read the odes <...> and her other writings and imagine that these flowers of poetry and philosophy were grown by a seventeen-year-old Muse, whose immature gift, which was already astonishing, was seized by death <...> and the tomb has forever hidden the signs of the Angel. <...> Pospelova was a rare example of natural talents].

¹⁶ Fedorov was also Pospelova's nephew.

It should be noted that the biography of Pospelova's fellow, Anna Volkova (1781–1834), who debuted at the earlier age of 13 (in 1794) and was still alive in the 1820s, had not been focused on any of these features. In the articles about Volkova that appeared in the 1820s and 1830s, neither her early debut nor the “natural” gift was discussed¹⁷. Moreover, Volkova's and Pospelova's publications in the 1790s did not mention the girls' age or the “naturalness” of their writings at all. This brings to a conclusion that the whole “angelic” image of an early deceased poetess was applied to Pospelova's biography post-factum in the 1820s. At the same time, Pospelova was a relatively unknown historical figure for the readers of the 1820s and 1830s.

Nevertheless, the very same image applied to the biography of a contemporary poetess created a sensation. The poems by Elisabeth Kulmann (1808–1825) printed in 1833, eight years after the poetess's death, were widely discussed in the press, predictably focusing more on Kulmann's personality than on her poems.

One of Kulmann's early biographers, Aleksandr Nikitenko, took the “angelic” image to the extreme, justifying Kulmann's early death with the aim of preserving the innocent genius of the poetess:

Чистая, девственная душа ее еще не знакома была с прельщениями хвалы <...> Особенно никто не мог предполагать в ней сочинительницы <...> Нет! это была не ученая женщина: может быть, она должна была и умереть, чтобы не сделаться ею. (Никитенко 1835: 77)

[Her pure, innocent soul had not been yet acquainted with the temptations of fame <...> Nobody could suggest that she is an author <...> No! she was not a learned woman: probably, she ought to have died to not to become one.]

This explanation contradicts the fact that Kulmann was a child prodigy who achieved fluency in 11 languages, including Greek and Latin. Most of the details about her short life evidence that she was nothing but a passionate learner and ambitious author (Ганзбург 1990). “Not a learned woman”, she was writing poetry in four modern languages and left about a thousand original and translated works. Her poems in Russian, in most cases drawing on classic antiquity, were written in a very unusual for Russian poetry blank iambic trimeter, the form that Kulmann consciously chose for herself.

Nevertheless, Kulmann's biography was immediately open for reconceptualisation in terms of an “angelic” image of a poetess, inspired by Nature itself and not even influenced by (male) culture. It is most visible in her biography in the fragment dedicated to Kulmann's teacher, Karl Großheinrich, who had, allegedly, “instead of teaching, <...> learned himself the mysteries of Nature from its anointed one <Kulmann>” (Никитенко 1835: 52).

Such an emphasis on the inspiration from nature and lack of formal education or contact with any literary field manifested in Kulmann's (as well as Pos-

¹⁷ See: Шаликов Петр. “О стихотворениях девицы Волковой”. *Дамский журнал* ч. 20, № 19 (1827): 3–9; Макаров М. “Анна Алексеевна Волкова”. *Дамский журнал* ч. 44, № 51–52 (1833): 145–146.

velova's) biography is essential for the opposition to the “demonic” woman image, that of an emancipated female writer.

Unlike the image of a natural genius hidden from public eyes and taken by an early death, the women striving to get an education and to participate in literature on equal terms with men had an exceptionally negative reputation in the 1830s. Although the satiric image of women writers goes back to a much earlier, 18th-century literary tradition (Бодрова 2018), the 1830s reveal a new wave of discussions on the woman's role and her possibility to make art. A well-known example of this time in Russian is Nikolai Verevkin's novel *A Woman Writer* (1837), where the main character was presented as a deeply graphomaniac writer and her very intention to be an author and wish for literary fame were depicted as very “unnatural” and destructive for women in general (Савкина 1998). Even less acceptable was writing poetry, as Romantic aesthetics widespread in Russian literature by the 1830s rejected the possibility for women to be a personification of the natural genius, thus to have any claims to be a poet (Kord 2003: 25–39; Ambühl 2003).

It is now visible that the image of Smirnova is a mixture of a female writer's “angelic” and “demonic” faces. On the one hand, the core of the image is a young poetess commonly perceived in the framework of an innocent child prodigy. On the other hand, Smirnova's attempt to communicate with the reader and seek recognition in *many* printed books reveals the traditional negative image of a graphomaniac woman writer.

The latter is manifested not only in overly long obscure poems but also in the footnotes. For instance, in one of the poems Smirnova used the word “Rousseaus” (a surname “Rousseau” in plural form) and explained it as follows:

Под именем Руссов, я разумею не двух поэтов: Жан-Жака и Жан-Батиста Руссо, но всех вообще людей, которые во время революций имели характер Жан-Жака. (174)

[Under the name of Rousseaus I do not understand the two poets, Jean-Jacques and Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, but all people in general, who have a character of Jean-Jacques during the revolutions]

In between the two female images, one can suspect that this kind of meaningless reasoning should have shown the style of a *learned* woman: the one that Elizabeth Kulmann has escaped by dying early.

The image of a young poetess on her deathbed is also an object of mockery in the hoax. Despite that many parts of Smirnova's biography are common for imagery of female poets in general, the portrait of a young poetess lying on the deathbed while finishing her writings is highly probable to be a direct parody of the following fragment from Kulmann's biography:

Дух ее, среди тяжких страданий, касаясь уже последнего предела земного существования, не мог оставаться в бездействии. В тлеющей груди ее билось еще свежее, юношеское сердце, и чувствования его живыми струями изливались на бумагу. Несколько стихотворений были плодом сего предсмертного, меланхолического вдохновения. Она диктовала свои мысли, когда не могла

уже писать сама; поправляла свои прежние сочинения, переводила некоторые из них. (Никитенко 1835: 84)

[Her soul, in severe suffering, being on its last limit of earthly life, could not remain idle. In her smouldering breast, a verdant, young heart was still beating and its feelings were pouring out on paper. Few poems were the fruit of the near-death, melancholic inspiration. She was dictating her thoughts when she became unable to write; she corrected her previous works, translated some of them.]

Unlike Kulmann, imaginary poetess Smirnova is writing her last poems not for its own sake but to gain public recognition. The latter alone motivates her overly ambitious plan to print a *collection* of works in prose and poetry, that was conventional for no one except for the most renowned (male) authors of this time. So, the imaginary poetess not only exploits the image of young girl poets but also plays with the images of “angelic” and “mad” women writers, in part focusing on the most-known child prodigy of this time.

Historical context thus allows us to interpret the poetess’s image given in the preface as a combination of two stereotypical views on women writing poetry: the young natural “angelic” poet spoiled by a corrupted mind of an emancipated female writer. While the latter could imply graphomaniac behaviour, it only partly explains the bizarreness of Smirnova’s poems. Is it possible to read the poems intentionally made unreadable and uncover their sources similarly to the sources of Smirnova’s image?

III. Anna Smirnova vs Russian poetry of the early 19th century

Although there is evidence that Elisabeth Kulmann was one of the objects of the parody, the poems in the hoax are not resembling her original verse form. Moreover, Smirnova’s versification technique — namely, the use of exclusively iambic hexameters with paired rhymes — is quite different from any known female poets of the 1830s. At the level of form, Smirnova is more akin to a poetry of much earlier period of the 1790s and 1800s and, in particular, Maria Pospelova.

However, a direct comparison of Smirnova and Pospelova’s poems seems not very promising, as the texts in the hoax express little sense for a human reader. At the same time, the hoax includes quite many poems, making it possible to collect these texts into a corpus for statistical analysis. In this part of the paper, I use stylometry and multivariate text analysis to compare Smirnova’s individual style with 22 Russian poets active between 1790 and 1840.

The comparative corpus represents different groups of poets. First, there are 17 canonical male poets whose texts were selected from the Poetic subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus. Second, it includes texts written by 5 female poets: two of the turn of the 19th century (Anna Bunina, Maria Pospelova) and three of the 1830s (Elisaveta Shakhova, Elisabeth Kulmann, Evdokiya Rostopchina)¹⁸. For each author the corpus was divided into 10-year chunks

¹⁸ Female poets’ texts, except for the cases of Bunina and Rostopchina, were digitised for the first time for this study.

(according to the texts' creation or publication dates) that resulted in the list of 36 samples¹⁹ from 22 authors as well as one sample of more than 18 thousand words by Smirnova²⁰.

During preprocessing, the corpus was cleaned from punctuation marks, lines and stanza divisions. Texts in each 10-year sample were gathered as one bag-of-words, transformed to modern Russian orthography and lemmatised²¹, after the occurrence of each lemma was counted. Although these steps drop much information about poetic forms (meter, rhythm, rhyme, etc.) and meaning (the use of the dictionary forms of the words (lemmas) without their syntactic relations to each other), I argue that this methodology is valid for the case of Smirnova. While there is no possibility of close reading for these texts, traditional for stylometry bag-of-words representation will allow us to make Smirnova's texts approachable and comparable with the texts of other authors.

Word counts for each author's samples aim to give an overview of the vocabulary use and reflect some thematic features of the texts²². As the corpus includes different generations of poets, we assume that the poets of the same generation would be closer to each other (obviously, with the largest similarity between the samples of the same author). So, the main hypothesis is that Smirnova's word usage is expected to be closer to the poets of the 1790s and 1800s than any female poets of the 1830s.

To test the assumptions on lexical closeness, the word counts need to be transformed into a measure that allows us to summarise and compare the differences in vocabulary use between each pair of authors. In stylometry, this measure is called distance. In simple terms, having two ordered lists of word counts (frequencies) and using distance measures one can calculate how similar these lists are. Though such calculation can seem too simplistic for the analysis of complex literary texts, recent studies show that distance-based methods applied to fiction can detect text groupings similar to the ones existing in literary scholarship, e. g., genres and literary movements (see: Underwood & So 2021; Calvo Tello 2021).

In our case, we wish to test if the hoax's style is closer to the poetry of the turn of the 19th century than the contemporary women's poetry of the 1830s. For these rather general, not individual stylistic markers, a set of 250 most frequent words (MFW) will be selected, however, starting from the 50th most frequent word (i. e., these are words with ranks from 50 to 300 MFW). This selection al-

¹⁹ The minimum size for the 10-year sample was set to 8 thousand words; in most cases these are chunks with more than 12 thousand of words. The corpus size requirement makes it impossible to include many female poets of the 1830s who published only a few poems.

²⁰ The data and the code used for experiment are published at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7702517>

²¹ Python modules *rus spelling* (by I. Boerner, D.J. Birnbaum) and *pymystem3* (Segalovich 2003) were used for the orthography normalisation and lemmatisation respectively.

²² There can be some association between vocabulary and meter, though small samples prevent us from selecting poems of only one meter (e. g., iambic hexameter). Nevertheless, some level of corpus homogeneity is provided by the fact that most of the poems in the corpus are written in iambic forms.

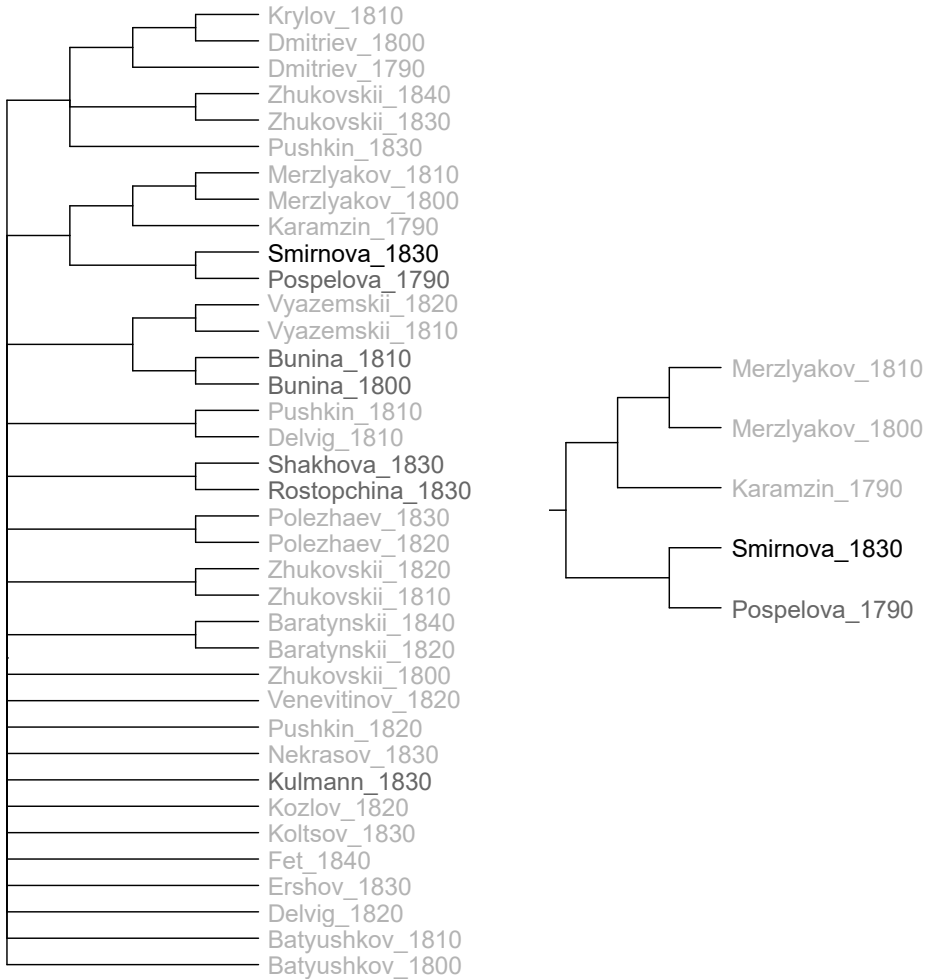


Fig. 1. Closeness of poetic styles for poets active between 1790 and 1840 with Smirnova's cluster closer view on the right.

lows us to omit functional words (conjunctions, prepositions, etc.) that are information-rich for authorship attribution, but not useful in case of detecting larger groupings such as genres. Between each pair of samples, the distance was calculated with cosine delta distance. Then the distances are summarised by clustering technique (Ward's method) in the tree visualisation (*Fig. 1*). For clusterisation the data was iterated 100 times with a set of 8 thousand words taken randomly each time from each sample. The resulting tree displays relations between all samples where a cluster is built only in cases if it appeared in at least 50% of iterations (majority-rule consensus tree).

As the resulting tree shows many leaves not grouped in clusters, many poetic styles of the 1830s, including women's ones, are quite distinct and by any

means not close to the style of the hoax. The basic assumption about intra-generational similarity is confirmed by the fact that samples by the same author as well as same-generation authors (e.g. Vyazemskii and Bunina, Del'vig and Pushkin) are grouped together. In particular, it is curious that two female poets, Shakhova and Rostopchina, appear to be lexically close to each other, while Kulmann presents a very unique style.

The most interest lies in the largest cluster of authors of the 1790s and 1800s that includes Smirnova's sample. The hypothesis that of all female poets Smirnova should be closer to Maria Pospelova is confirmed by their samples united in one cluster. However, as the tree shows, Smirnova's style is also similar to the male poets of this period, namely to the style of the very renowned poet and writer Nikolai Karamzin who personified the whole sentimental poetry movement. Thus, the hoax was embedded in the sentimental language, which is not surprising, given the fact that in the 1790s sentimentalism became the mainstream style for women's poetry (Stohler 2016: 94–95). These results allow us to suspect that the author(s) of the hoax, deliberately or not, used an outdated poetic style as the material for the parody that neglected contemporary women's poetry. The gap between the conventional poetess' image and her texts once again reveals that the object of criticism, interest and mockery was an imaginary figure of a female poet, not the actual women's writings.

Conclusion

The hoax *Various Poems by Anna Smirnova* presents a curious example of public mockery of female poets or female writers in general. On the one hand, Smirnova's image in the preface is a product of its time as her figure is a mixture of a child prodigy and an emancipated female writer, both being specific for the 1830s. On the other hand, the content of the book reveals that the authors either had little knowledge of contemporary women's poetry itself or had put little effort in parodying any real female poet of this time, given that the hoax's style is rooted in a much earlier sentimental tradition of the 1790s. Although the image itself could draw critics' attention, the content of the book probably serves for little enthusiasm from the readers because the poems were both very outdated and obscure.

In this article, I tried to approach this ill-written text with the belief that computational methods could enrich traditional literary scholarship. One can make suggestions regarding Smirnova's style, but no actual reading of these poems is possible. I used both robust and simple techniques to assess the similarity of Smirnova's texts to known poetic styles of this time. In a broader context, this example raises the question on how to use statistical methods in order to enhance the discovery of the relationships between gender and literary style, and, in particular, reveal literary sources that drive the construction of imaginary Others in parody. At the same time, this case suggests that lexical features can be useful when working with deliberately distorted texts whose authors, their

intentions and reasons for a group's misrepresentation remain unknown. However, it becomes possible to examine how such texts were constructed and suggest the reasons for doing that.

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НЕПРОЧИТАНЕ ПЕСМЕ НЕПОСТОЈЕЋЕ ПЕСНИКИЊЕ: СЛИКА ПЕСНИКИЊЕ
У ЈЕДНОЈ У МИСТИФИКАЦИЈИ XIX ВЕКА

Резиме

У многим случајевима квантитативни приступи проучавању књижевних дела имају за циљ да поново открију ауторке у „великом непрочитаном“. Архив, међутим, има и другу страну медаље: чува књижевне мистификације и сексистичке пародије на женски стил писања. Овај чланак говори о једној таквој мистификацији, збирци поезије објављеној 1837. године у Русији, која је написана под именом петнаестогодишње девојчице. С једне стране, предговор књиге одражава типичне предрасуде XIX века о ауторкама, исмевајући и слике вундеркинда и еманциповане професионалне песникиње. С друге стране, саме песме су лишене смисла и готово су нечитљиве читаоцу. Пратећи историјски контекст иза слике лажне песникиње, овај чланак користи квантитативну методу за анализу измењеног садржаја књиге, откривајући могући извор пародијског стила фалсификовања у делима сентиментализма.

Кључне речи: женски списи, поезија XIX века, пародија, стилometriја, квантитативне методе.