



Male Intellect vs. Female Imagination in Volkonskaya's *The Dream*

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In 19th century Russia, Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya wrote poems and short stories, composed music, owned a renowned literary salon, and served as patroness of the arts. Even as a woman with a superior education for her time, though, Volkonskaya was undoubtedly well familiar in not being taken seriously because of her gender. One of her short stories, *The Dream*, takes the form of Volkonskaya writing a letter to a man named Gulyanov. She recounts to him her magical encounters with the artifacts in her father's living room, especially the collection of hieroglyphs, which Gulyanov specializes in. Though Gulyanov is an expert and Volkonskaya is more of an admirator, both peoples' fascination with the hieroglyphs are valued. In her short story *The Dream*, Princess Volkonskaya employs fantastical language, sarcasm, and inclusion of powerful female figures to prove that male intellect and female imagination are equally valuable. The male (Gulyanov) perspective is classified as more professional and structured, while the female (Volkonskaya) perspective is portrayed as more free-ranging and dreamy.

The story opens with Volkonskaya addressing Gulyanov, informing him that she has read his letter and his studies of the hieroglyphs. She describes the location: her father's house, which is filled with artifacts from all over the world. She is particularly enamored, though, with the hieroglyphs. Here, Volkonskaya employs fantastical language to articulate how much the art of the hieroglyphs speak to her, even though she can not read them: "For long I gazed in incomprehension, with the same rapt attention and blind admiration with which an unlettered, but pious, villager will drink in the eloquency of the Eastern prophets," (Volkonskaya 14). With word choices such as "gazed in incomprehension," "rapt attention and blind admiration," and comparing herself to an illiterate yet awe-filled villager, she makes her fascination with the

artifacts almost child-like. Because women were understood to be more infantile in their understanding of the world (compared to men, who were understood to be much more serious and academic), Volkonskaya makes clear that her fascination is purely out of aesthetic and curiosity, not in specialization (like Gulyanov).

Yet, her understanding is still prized: her capacity to imagine a mysterious woman entering the room and conversing with her exemplifies just how far-reaching Volkonskaya's imagination can go (something that Gulyanov, a man, likely can not do). In the midst of Volkonskaya's rapture from the artifacts, a "majestic woman, dark of complexion and strange," (Volkonskaya 15) suddenly appears. She informs that she has noticed Princess Volkonskaya "pondering the secret meaning" of the "many coloured signs" which figure her mysterious covering, and proceeds to unveil them to her (Volkonskaya 15). The daughter of Ancient Egypt explains the drawings of the sun, the flame, the snake, the eye, the crocodile, the human dwelling, and the lips. For each description, Volkonskaya once again uses fantastical language to illustrate just how capable she is of otherworldly imagination, despite not actually knowing what the hieroglyphs truly mean. When the mysterious woman describes the human lips, she eulogizes their abilities: "From this hot spring rush thoughts, feelings, anger, prayers, passions--all flowing in a torrent of picturesque words--making man as much a creator as the gods," (Volkonskaya 17). Lips are just another facial feature that everyone owns and uses every day, yet Volkonskaya pauses to admire what they do for us, romanticizing something so simple yet so powerful. She goes so far as to say that we humans create as much as the gods do. Volkonskaya's ability to envision a visit from a divine female figure, and even to romanticize a facial feature so poetically, are likely things that a male character would not be seen doing, due to the conventions of orderly male intellect and fantastical female imagination.

Though Volkonskaya likely respects and appreciates her addressee, she employs sarcasm at the beginning and end of her letter, which nearly dismisses Gulyanov's expertise on the ancient artifacts. First, Volkonskaya explains that she fell asleep while reading his studies: "Withdrawing to my room, I began musing; but then, I am sorry to say, I fell asleep over your friends the hieroglyphs," (Volkonskaya 15). In admitting this, Volkonskaya nearly insults Gulyanov, implying that his work is so boring that it induces sleep. Though she likely appreciates his articles nonetheless, admitting to falling asleep from reading them belittles the concept of the orderly male intellect. Though structured and factual, Volkonskaya would rather daydream about an encounter with a mummy, which raises the concept of the fantastical female imagination. Secondly, her sarcasm returns when the Princess concludes her letter with an insincere apology to Gulyanov: "Forgive me, my dear Gulyanov, for occupying you at such length with my delirious fantasies; forgive me, if my dream should contradict your opinions of the Hieroglyph in some manner which I do not suspect," (Volkonskaya 18). Though these phrases take the form of an apology, Volkonskaya uses sarcasm to show that she is not really sorry. She calls her fantasies delirious, but in fact they are romantic and beautiful, and just as valuable as Gulyanov's studies. Following her apology, she recognizes Gulyanov's expertise: "I am always in agreement with you, recognizing that you are my one true guide to the labyrinth of signs; I resign all my own suppositions about the Hieroglyph before the power of your genius," (Volkonskaya 18). At the end of the day, these artifacts are what Gulyanov spends his time studying. However, Volkonskaya is not genuinely sorry for her fantasies, otherwise she probably would not have written a whole story about them. Her insincere apology in her letter to him is a technique for her to put their qualifications, the male intellect and the female imagination, on the same playing field.

Though this strategy may not be as important as sarcasm and fantastical language, Volkonskaya intentionally chose to comprise her imaginative story with magical female figures. During the dream, many extraordinary figures appear, and all (except for one) are female. This occurs when she describes her father's wonderful collection of artifacts to Gulyanov: the Ephesian Diana, the Medici Venus, Medusa, and of course, the mysterious woman, a mummy resurrected to speak to the Princess (Volkonskaya 15). The one exception is the Faun. When Volkonskaya wrote this list of sculptures, she made intentional choices, since these are specific works of art. She chose to include these female figures, likely to promote the beauty of the female imagination. She describes them in detail, admiring their features. Furthermore, the mummy that Volkonskaya speaks to is a woman. For once (especially in this time period), a story consists predominantly of women. To add to the impact, the Egyptian mummy and Volkonskaya even relate to something: receiving education from men. During her story, the mummy recounts: "Surrounded by old men from my earliest days, I grew like a pink lily in the shade of sycamores," (Volkonskaya 15). The mummy and the princess relate to being the only women in circles of men, especially when it comes to their education. Not many women received education at this time, let alone the same kind that men received. Volkonskaya fills her story with women to show that predominantly female stories are just as valuable as the (more common) predominantly male ones.

Though the female, dreamlike imagination may be seen as infantile and unnecessary, Volkonskaya uses strategies in her short story *The Dream* to make the female imagination as valuable as the male intellect. Her use of fantastical language romanticizes not only the artifacts, but everything around her; her use of sarcasm lets the reader know that the factual is as important as the imaginary; her use of predominantly female characters goes against the more popular

literary choice to use predominantly male characters. Together, Volkonskaya constructed a story that prizes her female, imaginative capabilities.

Works Cited

Kelly, Catriona. *An Anthology of Russian Women's Writing, 1777-1992*. Oxford University Press, 1994.