

# Gender literature: How much is it underpinned by authors' private lives?

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*The study is concerned with Gender Literary Criticism and the teaching of German Literature in school and at university. The paper examines 'close reading' as one of the key methods in Gender Literary Studies and applies it to explore August von Platen's poems to come to a better understanding of one of the most important German poets of the 19th century and demonstrate the essential meaning of Gender Literary Criticism for the development of a proper interpretative skill in class. The analysis is exemplified by a close reading of Platen's homoerotic writings. The authors argue that exposing layers of public consciousness based on the assessment of an outstanding personality such as Platen can help de-stigmatise public attitudes and overcome a deep-rooted framework of public thinking. The study concludes that in analysing such poetry, it is worth addressing whether stigmatisation refers to person, way of life, style of creation, or the plot.*

**KEYWORDS:** *close reading, feminist literature, literary criticism, gender consciousness, poetics, August von Platen*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender literary criticism is an emergent phenomenon and a new issue in the practice of teaching literature and culture in Russia. While feministic linguistics and feministic literary criticisms have long since become an integral part of philological research in Europe and the USA, these topics only came to Russia in the 1990s in the form of the study of feminine literature and gender poetics. In relation to theory, these trends focused the attention on such basic categories as gender consciousness, individual characteristics of the author in question and their characters. Thus,

Savkina (1990) emphasises the need for separate consideration of issues of female literary creativity and the terminological isolation of 'male' and 'female' literatures:

*If we recognise the fundamental difference between a man and a woman, then perhaps there is a need to recognise that self-observation, self-expression of a woman in literature, her view of the world and herself in the world differs somewhat, and maybe in a significant way, from the male one' (Savkina, 1990, p. 149). The main trends of gender literary criticism include (1)*

representing female creativity; (2) eliminating gender stereotypes in the interpretation of a literary work, mainly its imagery system; (3) identifying and analysing specific formal content components of women's prose; (4) studying the peculiarities of 'female language' at the level of the text of literary works, 'female writing' in linguistic and psychoanalytical aspects; (5) identifying female sexuality in literary texts; and (6) defining originality of the 'female' vision of life in the literary genre of autobiography (memoirs).

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Gender literary criticism

The typology proposed by literary critics translates into three key types of women's prose, namely (1) *androgynous female prose*, which, while remaining feminine, carries a masculine view of the world, (2) *the annihilation type*, when both elements destroy one other, and (3) *the feminine type*.

Bolshakova (2010) characterises the status of gender literary criticism: *'The image of the author is the centre, focus in which all artistic means meet being used by a real biographic personality. But as a male author and a female author differ from each other, as, by all possible similarity (or dissimilarity) in their lexicon, artistic means and techniques, the latter bear different psychological, emotional contents, different world models (acquired at levels of the collective and individual*

*unconscious)*. In this sense, both 'male prose', and 'female prose' do exist. And the dispute on distinction between Female and Male in literature is first of all a dispute over distinction not only between gender archetypes, but also between images of the author' (Bolshakova, 2010. p. 169).

Hence, the major categories of gender poetics are the individual features of an author and characters. The differences between men and women appear on linguistic level: lexis (peculiarities of vocabulary organisation), phonetics, morphology, and syntax (Böttger, 2017).

Thus, gender poetics addresses various social and cultural configurations of sexuality in literary texts (Downing, 1992) and defines a number of tasks, such as reevaluating female literature, revising the world literary canon, researching into the gender nature of literary creativity, specifying the mental nature of literature, eliminating gender stereotypes in interpretations of literary works, researching 'female language', determining a feminine / masculine worldview on the basis of autobiographies, etc. Gender poetics appears as a hostage to gender dualism and escapes this captivity by opening its own new domains – minority discourses as the works of 'stigmatised soul' submerged in the life of the author.

This approach was applied in European literary criticism in the 1970s under the slogan 'Queering

*the Canon!*' which meant canonisation of previously ignored authors and new reading of the canonised authors. In the 1990s, the increased attention to 'queer' discourse resulted in a withdrawal from essentialism in the assessment of gender minority life. Identifying minority discourse was the most difficult step in establishing new literary criticism that prompted the method of 'close reading' of literary texts, letters and biographies of the specific author (Beers & Probst, 2013). Gender minority often acts as a camouflage, a hidden text layer as well as an incentive of literary creativity.

The minority perspectives have been studied successfully in German literature within the gender analysis of literature. Popp's (1992) analyses of androgyny and erotic discourse in Goethe's and Kleist's writings can serve as a good example. Articles concerned with this perspective are frequent in European literature in general (Bebbington, 2017; Bernsen, 2006).

Recognised classics of world literature can be found among the authors 'read closely' by literary critics, including British and American authors such as Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, Wystan Hugh Auden, James Baldwin, Truman Capote, and Edward Albee; Russian authors such as Mikhail Kuzmin and Sofia Parnok; French authors such as Arthur Rimbaud, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet,

and Michel Foucault; and German authors such as Heinrich von Kleist, August von Platen, Stefan George, Thomas Mann, Bruno Vogel, and Klaus Mann.

## 2.2 Stigmatisation of gender in literature

These poets are treated as part of a classical literary canon not only in their own language communities, but also in world literature in general, which raises a question of the relevance and extent of the emphasis of gender in their creativity as they become a subject of teaching and learning at school and university. The problem is aggravated by the fact that in Russia a researcher of such a 'marginal' subject is often associated with the subject by a professional community which frightens off young linguists and literary critics from examining current and complex problems of modern philosophy and the theory of literature. Therefore, stigmatisation accompanying the life and creativity of gender minority authors also strikes those who seek to get behind the mysteries of their creativity.

Erotic literature, and erotic poetry in particular, offer a good example of a similar stigmatisation which marked not only the 19th century poetry, but also earlier and later historical eras and other genres of literature.

Erotic discourse that emerged together with the first images of nudes in nature and the first stories

*'From the beginning of the 19th century, we can add an aspect which can be referred to as 'a gender minority perspective' to this list'*

devoted to the art of love, gradually captured all spheres of human sensuality with their case phenomena (names, texts, everyday situations, role relations, rules and standards of behaviour). This discourse is embodied in various manifestations of art, media genres, forms of communication and literary creations. The rapid blossoming of erotic discourse is hardly surprising. Sensuality is immemorial as a cultural universal that corresponds to the purely human aspiration to openly express love, desire, expectations and disappointments where, in what can probably also be seen as a cultural and spiritual universal, disappointment becomes the most generous source of masterpieces.

Of course, sensuality has never remained free from criticism within public, legal and moral standards, however the extent of stigmatisation in various eras of development of humanity has differed significantly. Suffice it to mention Sappho from Mytilene and her touching chants or Lucian of Samosata and his scenes that describe that very wide – even from the liberal point of view at the beginning of the 21st century – horizon of the

appropriate in antique erotic discourse.

### **2.3 Attitudes to sexual backgrounds in literature**

The essential aspects moulding discourse and its stigmatisation are age, the agent's and his/her object's sex, obvious and latent illocutions, emotional background, reciprocity, a certain love phase, and a degree of romanticism. Per moral standards relevant to the time, these aspects generate opposition between appropriate and forbidden emotion, norms and deviations in behaviour, reality and fantasy and platonic and physical relationships.

From the start of the 19th century, 'a gender minority perspective' was added to the list. Like other aspects of the erotic discourse, the attitude towards sexuality beyond the norm established by the society varied and still varies depending on the stage of development of a specific society, prevailing gender models and extent of influence of the institutions having sufficient authority for bringing stigmatisation to the logical end – punishment (religious, political and other institutions). And if political institutions played the main role in prosecuting minorities in the first half of the 20th century (Stalinism and Nazism with their criminal prosecution of homosexuality using retaliatory psychiatry and concentration camps), now a far more essential role is being played by religious institutions. A similar influence on public morals was also noted in Germany in the 19th

century embodying the first ever examples of stigmatised German literature.

Stigmatised literature is a flickering paradigm, it is always present and ubiquitous, often an attribute of the creativity of authors of the highest level. These authors, however, seldom utilise their own 'marginal' sexuality in their writings, interweaving it with plots and hints. The literature written by open outsiders is often stigmatised for this reason (for example, Rosa von Praunheim, born in 1942), but it is difficult to rank this literature as a creation of highest quality.

### 3. STUDY AND RESULTS

#### 3.1 August von Platen

German literature of the 19th century 'gave birth' to an unambiguously stigmatised author of the highest quality – Karl Georg Maximilian Count von Platen-Hallermuende. The status of this poet as one of the greatest was established long ago. His poetry has been republished and set to music by Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Engelbert Humperdinck and Paul Hindemith. August von Platen's creativity was a subject of research by, among others, Link (1971), Teuchert (1980), and Kluncker (1969).

Studying Platen's creativity demands a certain immersion in the hidden contexts and situations of his life, explaining the creation of various works, and the general tone of his creativity.

Augustus von Platen was born in Ansbach on October 24, 1796 into the family of a Prussian Chief Forester, Philip Count von Platen of Ansbach and Baroness Eichler von Auritz. His family moved to Brunswick from Rügen, and at the court of the Prince Elector Ernst Augustus von Hannover, Platen's father managed to build an outstanding career. It was there that the son of the Chief Forester discovered his poetic muse because in Ansbach the famous German poets Johann Peter Uts and Baron Johann Friedrich von Cronegk both lived and wrote their poems.

Studying at the cadet school in Munich in 1806-1810, Platen had an opportunity to start a military career. In 1810, he entered the Royal Page Institution, and in 1814 he was made lieutenant in the regiment of King Maximilian. During the same period, he seems to have understood his own homosexuality.

In 1815, during the campaign against Napoleon, Platen lived in France for a while, but came back in late autumn without having taken part in any fighting. In 1816, he travelled across Switzerland, and in 1818 he began studying Philology and Philosophy at the University of Würzburg for which he was granted a three-year leave from the army. While majoring in Jurisprudence, he preferred to learn languages instead – Latin, Greek and later Persian, Arab, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch and Swedish – in order

to be able to read poets in their mother tongues. In September 1819, he left Würzburg and moved to Erlangen where he lived in a lodge on Mount Burgberg. In 1820, at Friedrich Alexander University in Erlangen Nuremberg he was lucky enough to meet with Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling who had just arrived as Professor of Philosophy, and what followed were 'happy days in Erlangen' which Platen would remember frequently. Wishing to get accustomed to the university environment, Platen entered the German Fraternity (*Deutsche Burschenschaft*), appreciating its patriotic spirit, but not approving of 'the students' merry laziness'.

Platen undertook several trips across Germany. He visited Vienna where he met Major von Knebel and Johann von Goethe. During his visit to Stuttgart he became friends with Ludwig Uhland, but the most important of all his friendships happened in Nuremberg where destiny brought him together with Friedrich Rueckert, whose influence, along with Schlegel's monograph *On the Language and Wisdom of Indians* persuaded him to study Eastern poetry and write surprising verses in the style of the Persian and Arab lyrics. In 1821, he published *Gazelles* (a cool public reaction disappointed him). The following year he published *Hafiz's Mirror*, and in 1823 *New Gazelles*. This time Platen received praise from Goethe himself, his ability to master the various styles of German and to introduce them in the

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form of eastern lyrics is widely considered his greatest gift. However, he also attracted criticism, including that of Karl Immermann and Heinrich Heine.

In 1823-1824, Platen published his first dramatic work: the tragedy *Marat's Death* and the comedies *The Glass Shoe*, *The Treasure of Rampsinit* and *Berengaria*, in 1825 they were followed by the play *Fidelity for Fidelity* and the comedy *Seven Gates' Tower* and in 1826 by the comedy *A Fatal Fork*. Platen supported theatrical experimentation with his research paper on *Theatre as a National Institution*.

In 1824, new verses were published, including one on the death of Platen's friend, Ulrich Kernell. Following Kernell's death, Platen discovered and fell in love with Italy. He visited Switzerland and Venice following which he was arrested and thrown into a punishment cell in Nuremberg for the violation of military discipline. *Sonnets from*

*Venice* were the most important result of this trip. Having published a collection of sonnets with the support of F. von Fugger, Platen asked for a leave and, having received it on September of 1826, he again travelled to Italy, this time for ever. His stops on the way were blessed with literary inspiration, including an ode to Florence (1826), a collection of lyrics (Rome, 1827) and the ode *Goethe* (1827).

Having received messages from Germany regarding attacks on his person and criticism from Heine and Immermann, he responded by publishing the *Romantic Oedipus* (1828). The dispute with Heine developed into a deeply personal conflict in which both Platen and Heine resorted to low blows: Platen critically contemplated Heine's ethnic origin while Heine openly denounced Platen's sexual preferences. These attacks strengthened Platen's decision never to return to Germany. However, he had to do it twice more.

In 1832, he attended his father's funeral and spent a winter in Munich having written *The League of Cambrai* there, and in the spring of 1834 he visited his friend F. von Fugger in Augsburg to edit a new collection of verses.

In 1828, he spent a year travelling across Italy and at the end he received news of his election as a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences that brought him a small, constant income and relative

financial security. He was able to continue his constant travels, suffering only from the local climate and the search for new places to visit. In Siena, in the house of Countess Pieri, he began his historical studies, first the Abbasid dynasty and then the history of Naples. He completely supported the Polish revolt against Russia and wrote angry verses to condemn Russian policy. The play *Meleager* (1834) was one of his last creations.

### 3.2 The death of Platen

In June 1834, he left on his travels again in Tuscany, Siena, Naples, and Florence, where he spent the last winter in his life. In March 1835, in Sicily, he learned about an outbreak of cholera and returned to Naples. He told a friend, '*Cholera won't spare Sicily, but it is at least more poetical to die there, more precisely – to be buried there; because the local Protestant cemetery is situated two steps away from the brothels*' (Scherr, 1844, p. 64). In September 1835, fearful of catching cholera, he returned to Sicily, and on November 11 arrived in Syracuse, full of fear and in pain. He died on December, 5.

### 3.3 Eros and Anteros

The tragic circumstances of his private life-ending creativity are, of course, not reflected in any official biography of Platen. To identify the source of his creativity, one needs to understand the spiritual concepts that create a background to his poetry as the recognition of a suffering soul.

*Eros and Anteros* are the key to these contradictory concepts. *Eros* in Greek mythology was the god of love, sex and eroticism. His bow and arrow struck love in the hearts of those he aimed at but that love was not necessarily returned. *Eros* was also represented in Roman mythology by the love god,

*Cupid*. *Eros's* counterpart in Greek mythology was *Anteros*, *Eros's* brother and the god of requited love. In his work *Platen* embraces *Anteros*, the god of relationships and requited love but also understands the conflict between *Eros* and *Anteros*, a topic he broaches in one of his greatest poems.

*What grieves me? This is the violent demon:  
The one to whom I gave heart doesn't give heart in exchange.  
What extorts a tear? It is the pressing truth:  
Only for sneers a target. I who so gently loved.  
What, does my look grow so dark? By all efforts and will  
What I want to forget, I am not in a state to forget.  
What sends darkness of melancholic folds on my forehead?  
In the kingdom of the possible there is no place for my hopes;  
But without hopes how to live? How to forget about desires?  
Ah, I am so painfully angry, ah, love is such a cure!  
If I lose possession of you, my kind adolescent,  
Just the possession of you I will so greatly desire.  
If I gain possession of you, my artful adolescent,  
I will begin to damn you for that possession of you.  
Only that man is happy, happy, happy, spared by love,  
The one who hasn't been struck with a deadly arrow in a breast,  
That whose life is as a stream flowing like a heavenly reflection,  
Whose barrier a rough and foamy wave is not to become.  
You are happy, young man, knowing the Cupid's quick cheerfulness  
From chants of love by sad poets alone!  
But even more blessed than the one who silently, innocently  
Is enjoying his life as it is destiny's will,  
Three times blessed will be one if fallen in love, warmed by love!*

(Translated from German by Oleg Radchenko)

At first reading, all signs of an Anteros discourse are hidden. Eros is presented as a violent, painful demon offering disappointment and despair, vain hopes, the aspiration to possess and unwillingness to possess at the same time, envy to those who didn't love, and yet the glorification of love despite all odds.

Still, this first observation forces the reader to make serious efforts in order to detect any difference between 'other' love and love of the woman described in the poem and to question whether there is any difference there at all. Is the gender minority discourse is truly faintly flickering, or is it really present only for the informed reader knowledgeable of the circumstances of life and personal difficulty of Platen? The presence of

Anteros in Platen's work might be the first sign that the gender minority discourse can possess its own specific characteristics.

Perhaps, the roles and masks with which Platen's writings abound also help us draw a line between gender minority and gender majority in erotic discourse. As an example, one might consider the two roles illustrating the previously mentioned contrasts in the poet's desires – to seek for possession, but nevertheless not really to wish to possess.

In the poem *Amalfi* (1827), Platen brings 'the clean adolescent' on stage, an object of desire ('*gesitteter Jüngling*') secretly praised by the poet in his work:

*Nice like an angel of God that climbed down in the depth:  
Charmingly the brown color surrounds his black-wavy hair  
Gleaming night, purely shines the blossoming flame of the eye,  
Never clouded by desire nor by the look of questionable friendship,  
Which is common with the cooking blood in the southern sun.  
However, who is able, because the time rolls by, to hold on the beauty?*

The adolescent who has become a friend, however, isn't capable of inspiring the poet to joyful anthems, more likely it is quite the opposite, he provokes doubts and suspicions:

*Are you still mine, if you are besieging my heart?  
Are you a snake, if you escape eternally?*

*Are you a silkworm that is quietly  
Surrounding me with a severe, thin network?  
Are you a stream? The darkness is impenetrable  
Of those waves that you send at each other.  
Are you the moon, if with an immense eye  
You are overlooking the world at a transparent night?  
Are you a pious nightingale of love,  
If you are praising a mortal cup of roses?*

The frames of Anteros which comprise a mental map of the poet, unhappy and devastated by destiny, are especially eloquent in *'The sonnet in the spirit of Camoes'*.

*Was beut die Welt, um noch darnach zu spähn,  
Wo ist ein Glück, dem ich mich nicht entschwur?  
Verdruss nur kann't ich, Abgunst kann't ich nur,  
Dich, Tod, zuletzt, was konnte mehr geschehn?  
Dies Leben reizt nicht, Leben zu erflehn;  
Dass Gram nicht töte, weiß ich, der's erfuhr:  
Birgst du noch größres Missgeschick, Natur,  
Dann seh ich's noch, denn alles darf ich sehn!  
Der Unlust lange starb ich ab und Lust,  
Selbst jenen Schmerz verschmerzt ich, büßt'ich ein,  
Der längst die Furcht gebannt mir aus der Brust.  
Das Leben fühlt ich als verliebte Pein,  
Den Tod als unersetzlichen Verlust,  
Trat ich nur darum in dies kurze Sein?*

Finally, there is a need to address basic scenarios and Platen's scripts, among them – left to despair, to the treachery of the lover, to the tranquil pleasure of the darling and to the indecision of consent which has been transmitted by a secret signal.

*Oh, he whose pain means life, whose life means pain,  
 May feel again what I have felt before;  
 Who has beheld his bliss above him soar  
 And, when he sought it, fly away again;  
 Who in a labyrinth has tried in vain,  
 When he has lost his way, to find a door;  
 Whom love has singled out for nothing more  
 Than with despondency his soul to bane;  
 Who begs each lightning for a deadly stroke,  
 Each stream to drown the heart that cannot heal  
 From all the cruel stabs by which it broke;  
 Who does begrudge the dead their beds like steel  
 Where they are safe from love's beguiling yoke?  
 He knows me quite, and feels what I must feel.*

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Minority erotic poetry is a difficult but rich and fulfilling field for research. In analysing such poetry, it is worth addressing whether stigmatisation refers to person, way of life, style of creation, or the plot.

Does stigmatisation manifest through taboo subjects, language, or the degree of openness about 'other' love?

How does it influence the spirituality of the time and how is it influenced in its turn?

Is it possible to catalogue stigmatisation markers?

Does a special style of minority poetry exist?

Are there reasons to distinguish this poetry from the general outline of love lyrics and are there any factors of special emotionality capable of explaining it?

Reflections on this subject also have a hidden, but extremely important aspect: the analysis of layers of public consciousness based on the example of assessment of such an outstanding personality as Augustus von Platen can help de-stigmatise public relations and overcome an inbuilt framework of public thinking, and this is one of the most important missions of linguistics and literary criticism, proving the value of their existence as sciences dealing with the human mind, heart and spirit.

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