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# Introduction

*Memoirs of a Muse* is Russian-Jewish-American author Lara Vapnyar's first novel. As in her other work – the short story collections *There Are Jews in My House* (2007) and *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food* (2008) and *The Scent of Pine: A Novel* (2015) and *Still Here: A Novel* (2016) – *Memoirs* explores issues of identity and cultural displacement in the lives of Russian-Jewish immigrants in America. The novel revolves around Tatiana Rumer, Tanya for short, a young Jewish woman born and raised in the Soviet Union. After graduating from college, Tanya moves to New York, where her uncle and his family live. There she befriends and starts a relationship with an older American-Jewish writer, Mark Schneider.<sup>1</sup>

On a narrative level, the novel is deceptively simple and straightforward. However, as the novel proceeds, numerous complexities emerge. First, the story is multilayered. Although it is narrated by Tanya from a first-person point of view in past tense, there are also excerpts of Tanya's diary, the titular memoirs, inserted into the story. These insertions of her diary are both cited and alluded to by Tanya throughout her story, both as a form of simultaneous record of events as they unfold and as a contrast to her older self's contemplation of the past. Second, the younger Tanya imagines and aligns her own story, her coming of age, with Polina Suslova's, Dostoevsky's mistress in the early 1860s. Suslova's story is clearly marked as Tanya's own construction, rooted as much in biographical sources as in her imagination. For Tanya, Suslova serves as a model for developing her own identity, with Mark serving as her Dostoevsky. As the novel progresses, Tanya grows gradually more disillusioned with her relationship with Mark, who fails parodically in his own enactment of the male genius writer. She comes to see how her gender role within their relationship renders her passive, confines her to the home, and makes her lonely and isolated.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the narrative structure of Vapnyar's novel, with its dual female perspective, one grounded in Suslova's life and the other expressed through a fully fictional character, is similar to Russian-Jewish-American novelist Irina Reyn's biographical novel *The Imperial Wife* (2016). The two protagonists are Tanya Kagan, a New York art specialist, and Catherine the Great, the Russian eighteenth-century empress. While *Memoirs* addresses issues of female identity-making in relation to ideas of male genius, *The Imperial Wife* centers on female experiences in relation to marriage.

In the following analysis I will argue that Vapnyar aims her critique in *Memoirs* toward a specific discourse that involve gender production, representation, distribution, and control. Tanya forms her identity in relation to prior discursive models that outline and demarcate what she, as a woman, can and ought to be. Vapnyar, too, as a woman writing against a male literary canon, writes herself into a Russian literary tradition that has remained for the longest time in control of female representation, be it in biography, fiction writing or criticism. Concomitantly, this tradition has relegated female self-expression to the periphery of the discourse. By constructing parts of *Memoirs* as Tanya's autobiography and Tanya's and Suslova's diary writing, Vapnyar brings these questions of female writing and self-representation to the fore, highlighting their importance as literary genres for women writers from the nineteenth century up until today, as well as their persuasive marginalization within literary discourse.

In juxtaposing Tanya's search for an identity with Suslova's, Vapnyar illustrates the persuasiveness and continuities of these models. In fact, how Tanya does gender, how she plays gender as a form of performance and masquerade which through parody points to the constructedness and instability of gender identities, highlights central tenets of a gendered discourse that came into being at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. One part of this discourse was the gendering of the modern public sphere, which was coded as exclusively masculine; education, civil service, creative activity, citizenry became privileged male spaces. Women, on the other hand, were discursively – through legislation, religious orthodox dogma, public opinion, literary criticism, fiction writing, journalism – relegated to their purportedly natural domains of domesticity, conjugality, childbearing and child-rearing. In *Memoirs*, Tanya's ambivalence toward and potential personal unsuitability for these roles of domesticity are parodied throughout the novel. Likewise, in its portrayal of Suslova, the novel also considers the ramifications of positioning oneself outside of the private sphere as Suslova did, the consequences and cost for a woman for doing so. In a time when there existed no other viable option for women, no true access to full citizenship, the radicality of Suslova's life choices stands out even clearer. Her narrative, as construed foremost in Dostoevsky biographies, is reduced to a series of gender roles – mistress, muse, writer, feminist, and wife – in which, it is argued, she only ever succeeded as a muse. In wresting discursive control of Suslova from the hands of literary critics and placing it firmly in Suslova's and Tanya's, Vapnyar suggests a reevaluation of Suslova from a feminist standpoint. By following Suslova's path, Tanya also exposes the cultural logic of the muse role, its coming-into-being in discourse. At the same time, the novel questions the ways in which discursive practices have shaped and delimited Suslova's life and life choices, both in her own lifetime, but also posthumous.

This fixing of the gendered public-private divide, buttressed as it were with Enlightenment arguments from writers such as Jean-Jacques Rosseau, had

detrimental effects on another important late-eighteenth century development in Russia – the emergence of the woman writer. Similar arguments were now redeployed in a complex manner that aimed, simultaneously, to affirm new emerging women writers such as Anna Bunina, the first woman to make a living from writing, and to deter and bar them from the literary sphere. Sentimentalist and romantic writers such as Nikolai Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin vacillated between approval and ridicule, using their profound influence on the modern Russian literature that took shape at the turn of the nineteenth century. The sentimentalist school, with Karamzin as its forerunner, illustrate this profound ambivalence among the Russian intelligentsia toward women's writing. On the one hand, they argued that literary language itself ought to be feminine, graced with the perceived elegance and refinement of female language. On the other hand, while women were encouraged to write, they were to do so in lesser genres which demanded little serious thought or depth. With both the public sphere, literature, and creativity itself considered inherent masculine prerogatives, women were found wanting, lacking in their natural dispositions the prerequisites for aesthetic activity. In her capacity as a writer, debuting in the early 1860s, this, too, was Suslova's fate. Regardless of their literary merits, Suslova's stories, considered in general by Dostoevsky scholars to have little to no literary merit, are exemplary of most other Russian women writer of her times. Writing on topics considered non-literary and irrelevant (women's rights, domestic issues, gender identity) from a discursively peripheral point of view, women writers were, from the outset, disparaged and depreciated.

The advent of the modern public sphere in Russia, which shared both similarities and disparities with its Western counterparts, brought with it the requisite conditions for the creation of a new class of men – the *raznochintsy* (“people of various ranks”). Although the term had been employed already in the previous century, it now came to denote the branch of the intelligentsia that hailed from non-noble families. If the intelligentsia in the 1840s had been made up of idealistic and romantic representatives from the aristocracy, by the 1860s the new generation *raznochintsy*, born into the lower strata of society, became an integral part of it. These “new men,” distinctly more radical in comparison to the previous generation, gained access to the public sphere – literary activity, publishing, journalism, public opinion – to a degree which had hitherto been impossible for the non-landed classes. Among the *raznochintsy* who came to wield a huge influence on Russian literature during the nineteenth century were such writers and critics as Vissarion Belinskii, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, and Nikolai Dobroliubov. The *raznochintsy* became proponents of liberal and democratic reform, which, initially was extended to the so-called woman question. This discourse, however, was fraught with tension and ambivalence, which was evident in their stance toward women's rights. Gradually, voices in favor of expanding and granting to women rights that had up until now been male privileges grew more ambivalent and hesitant.

And while women were as vocal as they could be in their demands for rights pertaining to, for instance, education, the woman question came to be dominated by the voices of men, who remained in control of the most powerful discursive practices, such as printing and publication.

Another strand of this discourse was the construction and delimitation of the female gender role in literary representation. As women writers were marginalized within the larger discourse, male writers seized primary control over the discursive construction, representation, and distribution of gender roles. Whereas men, in general, portrayed female characters as passive redeemers who augmented, completed, and redeemed male protagonists, women writers infused their characters with a complexity that reflected the real-life conditions of nineteenth-century Russian women. This shift, visible primarily in women's writing, from female characters as narrative devices and objects to protagonists and subjects, however, was always bound to be highly problematic. As the discourse concerning women's roles as private, passive, and complacent, representations to the contrary were pushed to the fringes of the discourse, as were the works of Russian women writers up until the last few decades.

The following analysis of *Memoirs* consists of essentially three main parts: a theoretical overview, a historical survey of the gendered discourse discussed briefly above, and an analysis of the novel. The first part comprises an initial discursive framework, which will be outlined with focus on the nature of discourse, how discourse is engendered and for what purposes, which voices are legitimized and delegitimized, the various ways in which discourse is maintained, contested, and safeguarded, the function of statements, and the role of practices. Then, this discursive framework will be furthered to include theories regarding gender as distinctly discursive constructions. The main theories that will be taken into consideration are performativity and masquerade, two important but also challenged concepts within feminist studies. Thereafter, the gendered discourse already outlined will be expanded in more detail in order to elucidate its relation to and bearing on *Memoirs*. Last, in the second main part, these discursive concepts will be utilized in the analysis proper of the novel.

## Discourse

Discourse is a concept that has been bandied ad infinitum in academia, often without attempts at defining it. It has become a key element in postmodernist, poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial studies, which all are engaged in various ways of analyzing, deconstructing, and denaturalizing the universality, objectivity, truth claims, intrinsicity, and transcendency of various political, ideological, economic, and scientific systems of value and knowledge. Discourse, as theorized by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Edward Said, to

mention but a few, can be used as a tool for showing how statements are never neutral; rather, they are always entangled in complex power dynamics that express certain, never disinterested points of view. In this section, what follows is a consideration of certain features of discourse theory that underscore the constructedness of statements, how they are constructed, circulated, and contested through numerous practices, each acting in accordance with its own interests, its own will to power and will to knowledge.

In “Orders of Discourse” (“L'ordre du discours,” 1971), Foucault makes a basic distinction between what can be called mundane or everyday discourse and discourse which has a lingering, perpetuating, and effecting quality. The former is discourse that is “uttered” only to dissolve afterward. The latter, which is the form of discourse that will be addressed in this chapter, is, on the other hand, discourse that “is spoken and remains spoken, indefinitely, beyond its formulation and which remains to be spoken” (italics in the original).<sup>2</sup> This form of discourse comprises various statements which expand the discourse; they are repeated, discussed, and transformed.<sup>3</sup> Discourse, however, is not arbitrary; rather, it “is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures.”<sup>4</sup> Discourse has, for Foucault, a somewhat fleeting character. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969), he writes that he considers discourse “sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements.”<sup>5</sup> The emphasis here is on clusters, orderings, or numbers of statement. Discourse, however, is not merely a group of statements which is neatly and somewhat coherent in its structure. Rather, discourse comes into being as the result of a complex array of practices that strive to circulate certain statements in contradistinction to other statements, which these practices aim to bar from either accessing or circulating the discourse.<sup>6</sup> This leads to a central tenet of Foucauldian discourse – exclusion.

In “Orders of Discourse,” Foucault enumerates what he terms “rules of exclusion.” Their function is that of discursive mechanisms which delimit what may or may not be uttered or stated within the discourse; they designate which participants are allowed to speak; and they determine what is, within the discourse, true or false. As such, they are both generators and regulators of discourse. These mechanisms, or rules, are prohibition, the division between the sane and the insane, and the opposition of true and false.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “Orders of Discourse,” trans. Rupert Sawyer, *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 1971): 12, <https://doi.org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1177/053901847101000201>.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault 1971, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault 1971, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2003), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault 1971, 8-10.

The perhaps most important type of prohibition for the present analysis concerns “the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject.”<sup>8</sup> Whereas a theoretical perspective that either downplays or neglects the centrality of power in any given discourse, Foucault assigns it a centrality that allows for a mode of analysis in which statements are clearly hierarchized. Any statement - be it speech acts, literary texts, or scientific publications - is always charged with subjective, partial, biased conceptions of the object upon which it centers. That is, the object of any statement must be subjected to discourse through an act of discursive violence by which it is aligned with our subjective, partial, and biased preconceptions of the object.<sup>9</sup> This is where gender comes into play, as a particular discourse in which notions of femininity and masculinity are produced, distributed, and controlled. What Vapnyar parodies and critiques in *Memoirs* is a particular gendered discourse in which discriminatory practices and statements both define gender identities but also serve to code norms, behaviors, actions, opportunities, taboos, expressions in gendered terms of feminine and masculine, respectively. By juxtaposing Dostoevsky and Suslova, their nineteenth-century Russia, with Tanya and Mark, their present-day United States, Vapnyar points to the plasticity and the continuities of this discourse. As a discourse, it is closely monitored and patrolled.

The production of truth, too, is an important facet of discourse. Discourse not only identifies who may or may not speak, but it also specifies what is, in a particular discourse, true and false. In “Orders of Discourse,” Foucault notes how the very division between true and false has come into play. He argues that already in ancient Greece there occurred a shift. If once truth had resided in what discourse was and what it accomplished, now truth was located in the statement itself: “truth moved from the ritualized act - potent and just - of enunciation to settle on what was enunciated itself: its meaning, its form, its object and its relation to what it referred to.” What transpired was thus a division that marked off truth from falsity. The assertion of truth, however, can within discourse only be accomplished from a certain place of power; truth is hence always already coextensive with power and cannot be separated from it.

This our will to truth, in Foucault’s terms, is, furthermore, what drives our will to knowledge. By locating what is true and false within a discourse through a “system of exclusion (historical, modifiable, institutionally constraining),” we arrive at certain forms of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Our will to truth must then be reinforced by various institutions which augment the truths of the discourse via numerous practices. Among these practices, which are utilized in

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault 1971, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault 1971, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault 1971, 10.



order to uphold and disperse truth within the discourse, Foucault lists pedagogy, literature, publishing, and libraries, to mention but a few.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, true discourse, as Foucault terms it, is no longer capable of recognizing its own will to truth; the desire for truth and the various power dynamics at play in producing truth are, Foucault argues, thus cloaked by truth itself.<sup>12</sup> This becomes evident in, for instance, much scientific discourse which is little concerned with its own desire for truth or the power that conditions the production and delimitations of truth; rather, its central focus rests on truth itself. This, then, is one of the productive facets of power: “Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit.”<sup>13</sup> However, and this is highly important, truth in discourse circumvents our very being in the world: “we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power.”<sup>14</sup>

So far, the discussion has focused on rules of exclusion. That is, on rules that are put in place in order to regulate discourse from the outside, to bar other practices from incursions into the discourse which might disrupt and undermine the stated truths that have been established. Discourse can from the discussion thus far be seen a cluster of constructed, circulated, and controlled statements that, via numerous practices, shapes the world and forces into a certain mold. As Foucault writes:

The principle of *specificity* declares that a particular discourse cannot be resolved to a prior system of significations; that we should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face, leaving us merely to decipher it; it does not work hand in glove with what we already know; there is no pre-discursive fate disposing the word in our favour. We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them; it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity.<sup>15</sup>

The objects of discourse are therefore always molded, transformed, and modified according to the interests of certain practices.

Central to Foucault’s understanding of the discourse concept are the power dynamics which suffuse the discourse, as well as its interdependent relations.

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault 1971, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault 1971, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon and trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 93.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault 1980, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault 1971, 22.

For Foucault, power is not something that can be fixed, something that remains static. Rather, power is always in circulation and it can never be contributed to any one individual. Nor can it be secured as an asset or an economical advantage. Power in discourse must therefore be understood as something which is utilized and exerted in “a net-like organisation.” Importantly, Foucault posits individuals not as moving between the nodes of this discursive web, whereby they are both subjected to and yielding power. Individuals should therefore not be lumped into two opposing, warring factions, either the controlling subjects or the consenting objects of power. Thus, “[t]hey are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”<sup>16</sup> This is an important aspect to keep in mind. In the following analysis, in which a gendered discourse will be identified and analyzed, the aim is not to identify culprits and victims. Instead, the analysis aims at illustrate and explicate how power and knowledge is produced within this discourse, for whom it is produced and for what purposes, and why this production has been so persuasive and efficacious.

## Performativity and Masquerade

In *Memoirs*, Tanya’s identity is constructed on the basis of clear models. First, she mistakenly assumes the role of Anna Grigorevna, who she believes to be the source of Dostoevsky’s inspiration, hi muse. Upon learning her mistake, she then takes on the role of Polina Suslova whom she perceives to be Dostoevsky’s real muse. These roles are constructed in contradistinction to other female roles which Tanya discards, deeming them demeaning and confining. Roles that are imparted, taught, or imposed on her by her family, friends, teachers, and canonical writers, often by people who act as authority figures in one or another capacity. The process of constructing each identity is characterized by a complex interplay of gendered perceptions of femininity and masculinity which are circulated in discourse by both men and women. They are gendered in the sense that they stem from a discourse that has constructed and delimited female and male gender roles along political and ideological lines, which have been naturalized and essentialized.

However, by underscoring the fluidity of each adopted identity, the ways in which Tanya ironically describes the assumptions on which they are based, it becomes clear that gender as portrayed in *Memoir* is a form of performance or masquerading, a performing of roles and donning of masks. In enacting these roles and putting on these masks, women and men are locked into models, such as the roles of muse and genius. These roles are circumscribed, en-

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, 1980, 98.

forced, and contested by various discursive practices who aim, through numerous statements and utterances, to maintain a certain status quo. To analyze and illustrate how these roles are produced, gendered, performed, and, ultimately, deconstructed, I will next discuss the concepts of performativity and masquerade, and their respective relation to the more general, overarching Foucauldian discourse framework outlined above.

## Performativity

To perceive of gender in terms of performativity and masquerade assumes a non-essentialist understanding of gender as discursively produced and reproduced rather than biologically inherent. It is through discourse that gender assumes its essential features, its masculine and feminine properties, and becomes naturalized into (dual) discriminatory gender identities. This is a binary model which is already destabilized, or troubled, by gender identities which it cannot house, such as drag or transsexual identities. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender is “the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.”<sup>17</sup>

Following Foucault’s notion of discursive violence, any claim to a direct, objective, neutral relationship to an object outside of appears suspect. Indeed, what Foucault analyzes in *The History of Sexuality (Histoire de la sexualité, 1976)* is exactly the processes by which, from the seventeenth century onwards, bodies were, through an ever-increasing desire to discuss bodies and their sexual functions, bestowed with a sexuality that now had to be categorized, classified, analyzed, promoted, discouraged, and prohibited. This is connected to his argument against what he terms the repressive hypothesis, the notion that discourses on sex have become increasingly repressive from the rise of modern bourgeoisie society in the seventeenth century. Rather, Foucault argues, that there has not only occurred

a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities; but – and this is important – a deployment quite different from the law, even if it is dependent on procedures of prohibition, has ensured, through a network of interconnecting mechanisms, the proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities.<sup>18</sup>

And further:

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 49.

At issue, rather, is the type of power it brought to bear on the body and on sex. In point of fact, this power had neither the form of the law, nor the effects of taboo. On the contrary, it acted by multiplication of singular sexualities. It did not set boundaries for sexuality; it extended the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration. It did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals. It did not seek to avoid it; it attracted its varieties by means of spirals in which pleasure and power reinforced on another. It did not set up a barrier; it provided places of maximum saturation. It produced and determined the sexual mosaic.<sup>19</sup>

Foucault's study illustrates how not only bodies but also sexuality is created through discourse, ironically often as a side-effect when power is exercised, in the "political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex." One central goal for the bourgeoisie, according to Foucault, was hence "to provide itself with a body and a sexuality – to ensure the strength, endurance, and secular proliferation of that body through the organization of a deployment of sexuality." Although Foucault is little concerned with gender, it is easy to see how his history of the creation, implementation, and deployment of sex and sexualities pertain to gender. The role power plays in Foucault's history has traditionally, unequivocally, been a male prerogative, with which femininities and female sexualities have been constructed and controlled with discursive practices.

In Butler's theoretical work on gender, the body and its construction occupies a central place as well. It plays an integral role in the discursive production of gendered identities. Indeed, she conceives of gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being:"

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. If the

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault 1978, 47.

“cause” of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the “self” of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view. The displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological “core” precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity [italics in the original].<sup>20</sup>

Gender roles can thus be seen as a truth product of discourse. In her later study, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), the body is given further prominence within Butler’s gender framework. Performativity should not, Butler now argues, be equated with performance, that is, understood as individual, willed acts. Instead, performativity ought to be considered a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”<sup>21</sup> Discriminatory and regulatory norms, which are established and consolidated through discourse, operate performatively “to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sexual difference in the service of consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”<sup>22</sup> What Butler argues is not that our bodies as such do not exist. The argument that they are given substance and form in discourse means that that we can only perceive of them in the terms set by the discourse; our perception of objects, such as our bodies, is always “filtered through discursive structure which assign particular meanings and effects to them.”<sup>23</sup>

Butler’s conception of gender is thus formulated in opposition to an understanding of gender which presupposes that the world is viewed as, in Foucault’s terms, a “legible face” which only awaits a disinterested decoding on our part.<sup>24</sup> In this case, what is assumed in gendered discourse is a primordial, essential, stable, and objective femininity and masculinity that has been naturalized and consolidated as norm. By naturalizing sex, by infusing it with male and female essences, gendered discourse can also ascribe likewise naturalized and essentialized properties to culture, to discursive constructions of creativity and genius. Butler’s understanding of gender as produced in and through discourse, rather than as existing a priori in a pre-discursive vacuum, is the foundation upon which she constructs her theory of performativity.

Femininity and masculinity, produced in discourse and through discursive practices, therefore dissimulate essence, obfuscating the fact that they are always only discursive surface effects. The essential core of various femininities

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<sup>20</sup> Butler 2006, 185-186.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), xii.

<sup>22</sup> Butler 2011, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Mills, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault 1971, 22.

and masculinities are thus constructed “fabrications.” Our fabricated gendered selves, with their profound impact on our self-perceptions of identity in general, are constituted through “corporeal signs and other discursive means.”<sup>25</sup> Gender itself can therefore be considered a form of masquerade whose borders are defined, redefined, controlled, and dominated by patriarchal discourses. As Butler argues in the above quote, it is the displacement of the discursive foundations of gender identities that forestalls an understanding of the political ramifications of gender production. That is, the regulatory gender norms that suffuse discourse therefore “work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies, and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”<sup>26</sup> Performance, then, can be seen as the reiteration and citation of “the regulatory norms of ‘sex,’” and it is by citing these norms that sexed bodies, gender identities, and normative sexualities are instated, reified, and condoned, or stigmatized and repudiated.<sup>27</sup>

## Masquerade and Carnival

As has been noted by critics, the masquerade shares ties with the medieval carnival tradition, a phenomena that has been explored in great detail by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work on carnival and carnivalization in literature.<sup>28</sup> It can be viewed as an extended form of performance. Like the latter, it, too, purports an authentic identity, which is then turned on its head. The authenticity gleaned behind mask and performance alike turns out to dissimulations of identity. In this its performative aspect, masquerade has been theorized and employed in Bakhtinian terms of carnival, carnivalesque, and carnivalization, with their implications “of a possibility of being something other than what one is; as a dissimulation of authentic identities or a disarray of accepted roles.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin located masquerade within the larger phenomenon of carnival, noting its presence as one mode of expression in various carnival traditions, as in, for example, the medieval Feast of Fools

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<sup>25</sup> Butler 2006,

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), xii.

<sup>27</sup> Butler 2011, xii.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Catherine Craft-Fairchild, *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 2; Tseëlon, 10; and Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), ix; Colleen McQuillen, *The Modernist Masquerade: Stylizing Life, Literature, and Costumes in Russia* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 28.

<sup>29</sup> Tseëlon, 10.

(*festum fatutorum, festum stultorum*), “a parody and travesty of the official cult.”<sup>30</sup> As noted by Colleen McQuillen,<sup>31</sup> whereas Bakhtin ascribes great ritualistic import to the function of ancient and medieval carnival, he saw its modern counterparts as devoid of a truly meaningful social function. Carnival today, Bakhtin suggests in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), is today suffused with “a vulgar bohemian understanding of carnival.”<sup>32</sup> This is what Bakhtin alludes to as “the *masquerade line* of development,”<sup>33</sup> a “degradation and trivialization of the carnival sense of the world.”<sup>34</sup> With the demise of carnival in Europe, beginning already in the seventeenth century, the ties between carnival and carnivalized literature was lost, too, as carnival ceased being the source of carnivalization.<sup>35</sup>

For McQuillen, Bakhtin’s disparaging view of latter-day carnival, and therefore also masquerade, makes it unsuitable for theorizing the modern phenomenon of masquerade. In contrast to Bakhtin’s suggestion that carnival deteriorated already at the outset of the Renaissance in its communal function, McQuillen posits that masquerades did indeed fulfill an important social role in late-nineteenth and early-nineteenth century Russia.<sup>36</sup> Although I agree with her, I would widen the scope somewhat: whereas McQuillen studies actual masquerades as discursive practices, my understanding of masquerade is that it is a much more variegated practice which does not require masks and costumes. Rather, discursive masquerade must be understood as the donning of masks that can be either utterly material (clothing, jewelry, masks, gestures, body language, facial expressions) or wholly symbolic (pseudonyms, various form of gender identities, appropriation of discursive space).

Another important aspect of Bakhtin’s work on carnival revolves around the link between the carnival tradition and power. Carnival, Bakhtin argues, offered to people living in the Middle Ages “a second world and a second life outside of officialdom”:<sup>37</sup> “It is a festive life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and

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<sup>30</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii. T. 4(2), Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kultura srednevekovia i renessansa (1965g.). Rable i Gogol: (iskusstvo slova i narodnaia smekhovaiia kultura) (1940, 1970gg.). Kommentarii i prilozheni. Ukazateli* (Moskva: Iazyki i slavianskikh kultur, 2010), 86; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984b), 74.

<sup>31</sup> McQuillen, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii. T. 6, “Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo,” 1963. Raboty 1960-x – 1970-x gg.* (Moskva: Iazyki i slavianskikh kultur, 2002), 180; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 160.

<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin 2002, 147; Bakhtin 1984a, 130.

<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin 2002, 147; Bakhtin 1984a, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin 2002, 147; Bakhtin 1984a, 130.

<sup>36</sup> McQuillen, 28-29.

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin 1984b, 6.

spectacles of the Middle Ages.”<sup>38</sup> As such, carnival allowed for a ritual in which authority was, temporarily, disbanded. This could be interpreted as a genuinely empowering aspect of the carnival, a quality which Bakhtin ascribes to it. From this, it would seem that masquerade, as an expression of carnival, has much to offer a discussion in which masquerade is seen as a practice with the potential for destabilization of discursive authority. This is the view held by Terry Castle who finds in English novels of the eighteenth-century an upside-down-effect. She maintains that “the masquerade threatens patriarchal structures. Normative sexual relations in the fictional world may be overturned, and female characters accede here to new kinds of sexual, moral, or strategic control over male associates.”<sup>39</sup> For Castle, masquerade in the form of carnivalized literature provided for early female writers a discursive means of subversion and freedom.

This productive and subversive side of masquerade has, however, been called into question. Catherine Craft-Fairchild critiques Castle for overplaying the disruptive aspects of masquerade, which Castle models closely on Bakhtin, and comes to a more depressing conclusion: “Castle emphasizes its power to disrupt but neglects to stress that, to the extent that masquerade assemblies were tolerated, they had to conform in some ways to the dominant culture.”<sup>40</sup> As Craft-Fairchild notes, the carnival was dependent on church legitimization and acceptance. Still, she, too, notes the ambiguities that characterize the work of the English eighteenth-century women writers she analyzes. On the one hand, they “re-create and thereby promote ideologies of female subordination.” But, in doing so, they also undermine “the dominant discourse.”<sup>41</sup>

## From Performativity to Masquerade

The roots of the masquerade concept in psychoanalysis, with ties to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, can be traced back to Joan Riviere’s article “Womanliness as a Masquerade” in which she proposed:

Womanliness, therefore, could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to revert the reprisals she expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin1984b, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Castle, 125.

<sup>40</sup> Craft-Fairchild, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Craft-Fairchild, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Joan Riviere “Womanliness as Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 306.



Thus, for Riviere, masquerade was the donning of a mask of hyperbolized femininity which would cloak and conceal appropriated masculinity. In Butler's summarization of Riviere's article: "The woman takes on masquerade knowingly in order to conceal her masculinity in order to conceal her masculinity from the masculine audience she wants to castrate."<sup>43</sup> The issue with Riviere's psychoanalytical view of gender, as Mary Ann Doane has pointed out, is that femininity for Riviere "is in actuality non-existent – it serves only as a disguise to conceal the woman's appropriation of masculinity and as a deception designed to placate a potentially vengeful father figure. Masculinity is not hers; it is a form of 'theft' if she purports to speak from a position of authority."<sup>44</sup> Riviere's conceptualization of masquerade can therefore only conceive of femininity as lack or effacement. Her application of psychoanalytical concepts such as Oedipus and castration complexes are all premised on discursive constructions of femininity and masculinity in which the former is an absence and the latter is the norm. Riviere's psychoanalytic analysis is part of the very same gendered discourse that I aim here to analyze. It partakes in a practice (psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic criticism) that circulate statements purported to be true and scientific (presented in the form of a scientifically deduced division between men and women as a natural order).

Luce Irigaray, too, has written on the concept of masquerade. Like Riviere, Irigaray sets out from a psychoanalytic framework, but her approach to masquerade differs substantially from Riviere's. Whereas masquerade for Riviere is equivalent to femininity, Irigaray considers masquerade as a dissimulation of femininity. For the latter, who sees masquerade as arising from women's awareness of men's desire for them. Hence, "[i]n this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity."<sup>45</sup> Man, she argues, "only have to effect his being-a-man, whereas a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the *masquerade of femininity*."<sup>46</sup> By masquerading, women "submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' in spite of everything."<sup>47</sup>

In her attempts at wresting masquerade from its psychoanalytic moorings, Mary Ann Doane, in her analyses of female spectatorship in film, argues that Riviere's masquerade is antithetical to any notion of female subjectivity. In Doane's view, Lacan, Riviere, and Irigaray all consider masquerade as "a norm of femininity – not a way out."<sup>48</sup> For Doane, masquerade carries decidedly more positive connotations. Speaking of masquerade as represented in

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<sup>43</sup> Butler 2006, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89): 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41389107>.

<sup>45</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 84.

<sup>46</sup> Irigaray, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Irigaray, 133.

<sup>48</sup> Doane 1988-89, 42.

the trope of the *femme fatale*, she maintains that “masquerade doubles representation”; “destabilising the image, the masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography.”<sup>49</sup> Butler also takes a somewhat critical stance toward the masquerade concept, noting that it may be seen “as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy.”<sup>50</sup>

As mentioned above, the concept of masquerade share affinities with performativity in that both are discursively manufactured conceptualizations of gender. Efrat Tseëlon, for example, has noted the close relation between masking and performance, viewing the former as an extended form of the latter.<sup>51</sup> At its core, masquerade can be seen “as identity construction and as identity critique through a range of styles and narrative forms.” It is thus a putting-on of a discursively constructed gender identity. In and of itself, masquerade is neither wholly subversive nor fully compliant with any existing models. But in our performances of these roles, masquerade intimates the discrepancy between mask and self, the impossibility, that is, of perfecting the role. Any statement or utterance in a discourse can therefore be a part of a masquerade, an expression of masquerade, a discursive mask, so to speak:

Masquerade unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. Masquerade replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect. The masquerade, in short, provides a paradigmatic challenge not only to dualistic differences between essence and appearance It also challenges the whole discourse of difference that emerged with modernity.<sup>52</sup>

Masquerade, then, in the following analysis should be understand as a discursive construction, formed through statements and utterances and upheld by practices, that express certain forms of femininities and masculinities. In our masquerades, however, there is, I would argue, always a slippage, in which the mask is visibly askew, or perhaps simply cracked and broken. Now, masquerade becomes parodic or tragic, or tragicomic. Masquerade thus implies the distance between mask and wearer, a slippage between gender performance and gender performer.

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<sup>49</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3-4 (September-October 1982): 82, 10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74.

<sup>50</sup> Butler 2006, 64.

<sup>51</sup> Efrat Tseëlon, “Introduction: Masquerade and Identities,” in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender Sexuality, and Marginality*, ed. Efrat Tseëlon (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Tseëlon, 3.

### Discourse, Representation and Gender

In order to understand the discourse with which Vapnyar engages and critiques in *Memoirs*, it is important to understand how that discourse came into being. It is a discourse in which statements and utterances regarding gender has been constructed, circulated, controlled, but also contested. Once this discourse and its roots in Russian culture has been reexamined, it will become clear why Vapnyar juxtaposes her fictional characters Tanya and Mark with the historical personages of Dostoevsky and Suslova. By so doing, the issues of identity, access to a public space coded along male gender lines, submission to men's desires, literature and culture as inherently male spaces of activity with which Tanya struggles can be considered as part of a gendered discourse of gender representation.

### Gender-Coding Representation

The relationship between Tanya and Mark, construed in parodic terms in *Memoirs* as the relationship between muse and artist (premised on the affair between Dostoevsky and Suslova) point to a central premise of the discourse I have been outlining so far: the coding of creativity as inherently masculine.

In their monumental *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar identified the confusion between masculinity and creativity as a central aspect of literary history. First, this takes the form of a tradition in which creativity in Western culture is tied to male (sexual) energy. The act of creativity becomes the fathering of the text. Following Edward Said, Gilbert and Gubar claims that this metaphor – pen as metaphorical penis – “is built into the very word, *author*, with which writer, deity, and *pater familias* are identified.”

Thus it is possible to trace the history of this compensatory, sometimes frankly stated and sometimes submerged imagery that elaborate what Stephen Dedalus calls ‘the mystical estate’ of paternity through the works of many literary theoreticians besides [Gerard Manley] Hopkins and Said. Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that beings with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality. Similarly, Coleridge’s romantic concept of the human ‘imagination or esemplatic power’ is a virile, generative force which echoes ‘the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,’

while Ruskin's phallic-sounding 'Penetrative imagination' is a 'possession-taking faculty' and a 'piercing... mind's tongue' that seizes, cuts down, and gets at the root of experience in order 'to throw up what new shoots it will.' In all these aesthetics the poet, like God the Father, is a paternalistic ruler of the fictive world he has created. Shelley called him a 'legislator.' Keats noted, speaking of writers, that 'the antients [*sic*] were Emperors of vast Provinces' though 'each of the moderns' is merely an 'Elector of Hanover.'

## Creating Suslova

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