

Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929, by Eliot Borenstein. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. 368 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

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The first decade after the communist revolution was a very interesting time for Russia. The struggle between classes was reflected in a big shift in gender relations: a new concept of Soviet man was created and implanted in the society's consciousness. Gender as a political category became a cornerstone of a totally new politics of the body promulgated by the Soviet regime. This period in Russian history represents an excellent context for analyzing the social and political construction of multiple masculinities.

Men Without Women, by Eliot Borenstein, is an attempt to explore the attitudes toward sexuality and family within the turmoil of nascent Soviet society. In the prose of prominent Soviet writers such as Isaak Babel, Yuri Olesha, and Andrei Platonov, Borenstein reveals a masculine world of frustrations, fears, and struggles. Through precise examples and insightful analysis of Soviet society represented in these authors' works, Borenstein portrays early Soviet society as a new era in which the image of the male depicted in the imagery of war and the comradeship of communism was transformed "from a conditional, ephemeral phenomenon into an enduring social structure" (p. 116). This structure—a new type of family—shaped by ideological pressures, political demands, and the traumatic experiences of the communist revolution and civil war, was born out of the ruins of the old concept of family as a result of the struggle between affiliation and filiation. If blood ties cemented the model of the traditional Russian family, the new family unit was strictly based on ideological preferences. The roots of communist family explain its nature. According to the author, the main characteristic of this new entity was that it did not have a place for women. This fraternal family, argues Borenstein, not only excluded women from its eternal structures but also posited them as a threat to the established bonds between members of this homosocial unity. While women were seen as liars, traitors, and enemies of proletarian society, men were represented as lost sons and orphans trying to establish horizontal bonds of fraternal communism within their new all-male family. *Men Without Women* explores the internal relationship of this new family, which is not the original creation of its members but rather a reflection of the totalitarian system of power. By studying these dynamic processes, the author exposes the results of the masculinization of Soviet society.

While Borenstein's knowledge of Soviet literature allows the reader to enjoy his thoroughly insightful analyses of communist imagery in the early Soviet prose, one very important question has to be raised: what methodological framework is the author using when he talks about masculinity? The book's subtitle promises to tell us something about a specific Soviet masculinity. But what is the author's definition of this term? Considering a

historical perspective and the fact that today we have multiple and often polemical concepts of masculinity (essentialist, semiotic, positivist, etc.), this becomes a very important question. Unfortunately, the book gives no answers. Thus, it proceeds as if *masculine* and *feminine* were just synonymous terms for *man* and *woman*.

This impression becomes even more problematic with Borenstein's usage of singular terms *masculinity* and *femininity*. As mentioned previously, Russia in the 1920s was a battlefield of bloody conflict not only between classes but also between old and new concepts of masculinity. It was a time of multiple masculinities, the discursive struggle between which was mirrored in the prose selections used by Borenstein for his study. In the short note at the end of the book, the author explains that although he applauds the usage of the plural term *masculinities*, he prefers to use "the more standard singular forms for purely stylistic reasons" (p. 279). However, gender theory professionals cannot be satisfied with this answer.

More than that, Borenstein ignores the historical framework in which communist masculinity (or any historical masculinities) should be studied. Using phrases such as "traditional masculinity" and "traditional femininity," he leaves us without any explanation of which tradition he is talking about. Are they traditional to Russian history, communist imagination, or the author's own vision?

This lack of clarity in the methodology used sets a dangerous ideological trap for Borenstein. It creates the strong impression that the author's concept of masculinity is the same as the dominant, eternal, and monolithic entity he attempts to criticize in his study. Thus, *Men Without Women* is a vivid example of a failure to recognize the importance of using a precise and explicit methodology for gender-based analyses.

Andrei Sinelnikov
Association No To Violence, Moscow, Russia

Questioning the Father: From Darwin to Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg and Hardy, by Ross Shideler. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999. 226 pp. \$46.00 (cloth).
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In the field of literary analysis, *gender* has always been a central term, and a huge amount of books have been published on the question of women and gender in literature. Moreover, in the past decade the development within literary theory has had a huge impact on the theoretical debates in both humanities and social science. The lack of critical studies on masculinities and literature is therefore striking. Ross Shideler's book is one in a very little family of books.