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## The Celebrated Case of Pushkin's Nanny

The most famous Russian nanny of all is a peasant woman named Arina Rodionovna (1758-1828), renowned as the nanny of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837).<sup>1</sup> She has become legendary – even mythic – for many reasons. The seeds of the legend were planted during Pushkin's own lifetime, aided by the writer himself (though unconsciously). He “immortalized” Arina – and her counterparts – in various works, in particular his masterpiece, the novel in verse *Evgenii Onegin*.<sup>2</sup> But the legend grew to mythical proportions in the years following his death, thanks largely to the efforts of Pushkin friends and biographers. The myth continued to grow in later years, aided and abetted by romanticizing memoirists as well as by peasant-sympathetic Slavophile, *narodnik* and especially Soviet writers. It has become so ingrained in the public's imagination as to be a force in Russian life and culture.<sup>3</sup>

Pushkin was not the first Russian nobleman to have a peasant nanny; his was not the first literary depiction of a Russian nanny. Why begin our story *in medias res*? First, because everything about Pushkin and his nanny is a cautionary tale, one that sets the proper tone for the rest of my study. Too many have been led astray about this poet by “facts” that turn out to be illusionary.<sup>4</sup> Second, because Pushkin marks a watershed for the Russian nanny in both fiction and history. Few images in Russian literature have had the incredible afterlife of the devoted nanny of Pushkin's *Onegin*. In giving us this portrayal he was just a part of a much larger peasant-



Bas-relief, allegedly of Arina Rodionovna by Iakov Seriakov (1840s?)

sympathetic movement that would shortly encompass not only literature but much of society. He would change, perhaps forever, the image of the nanny for most Russian readers and writers. Third, Pushkin's *oeuvre* and biography raise most of the fundamental issues examined in this book. Was Arina a typical Russian nanny? What was her life like? Did Pushkin portray her accurately – *or at all* – in *Onegin* or other works? Can we say anything more about the relationship between Pushkin's having had a nanny and his *oeuvre*? Was she an inspiration for him?

For some time, in thinking about this one nanny, I felt her legend-myth to be a kind of aberration. But it happens that there are broader contexts for this seemingly unique phenomenon. In the first place, similar legendary nannies exist in other cultures, most

notably in the British Isles, though none reached the cult status of Arina. In the second place, nanny figures elsewhere played about the same symbolic role as Arina. However, in one sense it seems that Russians in the nineteenth century managed to anticipate – one of the rare times this has happened culturally – a development that came somewhat later in Western Europe. They took the magic of childhood, a rather unoriginal idea by Pushkin's time, and for the first time that I'm aware associated it with one figure of childhood, a caretaker. The analogy is far from perfect, but it is not a huge stretch to see in the almost preternatural qualities invested in Arina a harbinger of later magical nannies like J.M. Barrie's anthropomorphized Nana, P.L. Travers's Mary Poppins, and Christianna Brand's Nurse[maid] Matilda (Nanny McPhee).

#### **Elements of the Arina Myth Are Many and Varied**

What I am describing here as a myth goes something like this: Aleksandr Pushkin, arguably the greatest of Russian writers, grew up speaking and writing mostly French. Largely under the influence of his illiterate, kindhearted and loving Russian nanny, Arina, and the vivid fairy tales she spun for him, he began to pay closer attention to his native tongue and its potential as a literary language. She sang him folk songs and introduced him to peasant folkways, which – along with the tales – further inflamed his imagination and inspired him in his writings. She was the primary early Muse of the poet. As with most myths, the real story of Arina is not without some basis in fact; her cult was not fashioned entirely out of whole cloth.

All Pushkin specialists in Russia and abroad are aware of the Arina phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Not all, however, will agree with my interpretation of the facts of the matter. Debate over the merits of one or another part of this myth is ongoing, and this chapter will hardly settle all arguments once and for all.<sup>6</sup> To some, my retelling of the story will seem like beating a dead horse. But the exercise is not futile, for several reasons. First, even though the broad outlines of this story are fairly well known, I introduce source-based evidence not previously cited. Second, no matter how many times some elements of the story are disproved, they remain in popular consciousness in Russia and even in otherwise solid works

of scholarship in the West and in Russia. I hope to dispel forever a few of these dubious elements. Third, the story of the nanny in Russian history and culture cannot be understood properly without a thorough rehearsal of the story of Arina Rodionovna, including her myth.<sup>7</sup>

The following passage from a standard earlier biography of the poet conveys the flavor and essence of the Arina myth quite well:

Arina occupied a special position in the household - a familiar type of house serf whose earthy wisdom, severe virtues, and unfailing loyalty were a bulwark against a variety of disintegrating influences common among Russian noble families of the time. She performed the most menial tasks with a simple dignity. And in her sturdy nature she united goodness with querulousness and infinite patience with a pretended severity. She was the guiding genius of the children, but clumsy little Sasha [Pushkin] was her favorite, perhaps for the obvious reason that he was nobody else's. Like many old peasant women, Arina's strong memory was stocked with fascinating tales drawn from the rich storehouse of Russian folklore.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ernest J. Simmons, Pushkin cherished his memories of nights spent with his nanny. "Arina Rodionovna awoke and fostered in him a love for the folklore of his native land which was to inspire some of his greatest poems."<sup>9</sup> Not only was his nanny Pushkin's childhood guide and practically his only "friend" in those early years, assert Tatiana Wolff and countless others, but she was also pivotal in the later, crucial years of his development as a poet. In his exile at Mikhailovskoe in 1824-26, according to this view, Arina was Pushkin's Muse, audience, and supplier of essential source material.<sup>10</sup> The poet Vladislav Khodasevich, in his otherwise discerning study of Pushkin, fully embraces the legend-myth of Arina's being Pushkin's Muse.<sup>11</sup> And for virtually all Russians schooled in Soviet times, the "fact" of Arina's role in Pushkin's life is a given: "Pushkin's nanny[s] influence on the formation of the poet's character was enormous."<sup>12</sup>

These are the basic lines of the Arina myth. Over past decades, several skeptics have pointed out numerous flaws in the myth,<sup>13</sup>

yet it lingers on in works of contemporary writers and the Russian popular imagination.<sup>14</sup> We must now look more closely at the woman herself to see whether the legend, much less the myth, can stand up to closer scrutiny.

### **What Is Known About Pushkin's Nanny in His Childhood and up to 1824**

Hard, indisputable facts about Pushkin's nanny are few. There are official written records that help us learn about her. Much of what is said or written by individuals, however, depends on the unreliable memories of people recalling events of decades earlier. The following exposition contains what I feel comfortable presenting as factual.

Arina Rodionovna was the serf of Pushkin's maternal grandmother, Mariia Alekseevna Gannibal (née Pushkina; 1745-1818). Born about 1758, the daughter of Rodion Iakovlev and Luker'ia Kirillovna, she married a fellow villager named Fëdor Matveev in 1781.<sup>15</sup> The couple had four children; the family lived at the Gannibal estate of Kobrino until at least the death of Fëdor Matveev in the mid- to late 1790s. In about 1799, Mariia Alekseevna sold Kobrino and acquired another estate called Zakharovo, where the young Pushkin spent his early summers. At that time Mariia Alekseevna offered her serf Arina and at least one of the children their freedom, but Arina declined to accept the offer. Instead, she left her own children and moved in with the Pushkins in Moscow, as nanny primarily for Ol'ga Sergeevna (1797-1868) but soon also for her younger brothers, Sasha (the future poet) and Lev Sergeevich (1805-1852).<sup>16</sup> In the Pushkin household, as in many well-off gentry families, there was more than one nanny to look after children.

That is pretty much what we know of "Pushkin's nanny," Arina Rodionovna, until he left for school. Arina stayed on with the poet's parents after he had left for the Lyceum at Tsarskoe Selo in 1812, the year of Napoleon's invasion. We learn nothing more about her until Pushkin's return to Mikhailovskoe in 1824. Whether he gave any thought at all to Arina in the pre-Mikhailovskoe-exile period (from 1812 to 1824) is unknown. By the evidence of his letters to his family, of which a few survive, and of his literary output, he probably did not.<sup>17</sup>