

## Women and Horses in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*

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Mikhail Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* consists of five stories ("Bela," "Maksim Maksimovich," "Taman," "Princess Mary," and "The Fatalist"), among which the first ("Bela") and the fourth ("Princess Mary") deal at some length with the amorous entanglements of the enigmatic protagonist, Grigori Pechorin. Early in "Princess Mary" we find Pechorin taking one of the French *boutades* ("Je hais les hommes pour ne pas les mépriser, car autrement la vie serait une farce trop dégoûtante") of Grushnitski, who is his competitor for the attentions of the title heroine, and adapting it to his own requirements: "Je méprise les femmes pour ne pas les aimer, car autrement la vie serait un mélodrame trop ridicule." This occurs immediately after his remarks on Princess Mary's physical appearance and Grushnitski's observation that he speaks of a beautiful woman as if he were describing an English horse.<sup>1</sup> The hero's oft-expressed contempt for women and his rival's reference to horses are the component parts of one of the principal themes of *A Hero of Our Time*, viz., the connection between women and horses and the frequent comparisons of the two, usually to the decided advantage of the latter. The theme first appears in "Bela" (where it plays a central role in the story of Kazbich and Karagyozy) and is further developed in "Princess Mary." Along the way there is an apparent evolution in Pechorin's attitude resulting in his pathetic breakdown after the duel with Grushnitski and the subsequent loss of Vera, the only woman in whom he seems to be seriously interested.<sup>2</sup> This article will explore the horse-woman theme, especially as it occurs in the thoughts and actions of Pechorin and in the behavior of his crude thematic double Kazbich, the chief horse lover and woman hater in the novel.

From the very beginning of *A Hero of Our Time*, i.e., on the first pages of "Bela," horses appear or are referred to indirectly on numerous occasions. The first sentence of the novel, for example, is "I was traveling post from Tiflis" (365). When the traveler-narrator finally reaches the summit of the mountain with the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mikhail Yurevich Lermontov, *Geroi nashogo vremeni* in *Izbrannyye proizvedeniia*, ed. S.S. Chulkov, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967) 2: 423. Subsequent references to the novel will be given parenthetically in the text. All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> One German commentator suggests that Pechorin's affection for Vera is genuine. See Eberhard Reissner, "Lermontov: Ein Held unserer Zeit," in *Der russische Roman*, ed. Bodo Zelinsky (Düsseldorf: August Bagel, 1979) 81. The majority of critics, however, seem to agree with John Mersereau, who believes that "Pechorin thirsts incessantly to be loved, but he will sacrifice nothing of himself for this love." See his *Mikhail Lermontov* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962) 128. A similar opinion can be found in William Edward Brown, *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1986) 4: 247. Dmitriy Tschizewskij also denies the sincerity of Pechorin's sentiments. See his *Russische Literaturgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Munich: Eidos, 1964-1967) 1: 127. The Russian formalist Boris Eikhenbaum thinks that Vera is introduced merely to motivate the duel and has no other significance. See his *Lermontov: Opyt istoriko-literaturnoi otsenki* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1924; rpt. Letchworth-Herts, England: Prideaux Press, 1977) 155.

aid of six slow-moving oxen, the cumbersome beasts are replaced by a fresh team of horses. As he continues his journey he reflects on the joy of hearing "amid this dead sleep of nature, the snorting of the three tired post horses ["ustaloi pochtovoi troiki"] and the uneven jangling of the Russian bell" (368).

In the course of his travels he makes the acquaintance of an old soldier named Maksim Maksimovich, who fancies himself a friend of Pechorin. An avid storyteller, Maksim Maksimovich recalls a Circassian wedding to which he and Pechorin had once been invited. Ever suspicious of highland morality and therefore solicitous about the safety of his possessions, he relates how carefully he noted where their hosts had put their horses. During the wedding celebration, as at other special events, there is a display of *dzhigitovka*, or fancy horseback riding, for which the peoples of the region are famous. As soon as Bela, the youngest daughter of the chieftain, is introduced and we are told of Pechorin's reaction to her, we meet Kazbich, a young scamp who is also glancing at her with longing eyes. To Maksim Maksimovich, who has no romantic interest in Bela at all, Kazbich is important only as the owner of Karagyozy, the most remarkable and coveted horse for miles around. Maksim Maksimovich's description of him makes the equine motif more explicit than it has been until now, and his reference to Bela in the same breath is the first mention of the dual theme of horses and women, the subject of the present study: "his horse was famous all over Kabarda—in fact it was impossible to think of anything finer than that horse. No wonder all the riders envied him. More than once they tried to steal it, but they didn't succeed. I can see that horse now: black as pitch, its legs like taut strings, and eyes as nice as Bela's. And what strength! You could ride it for fifty *verst*s. And how well trained it was: it ran after its owner like a dog, even knew his voice! He never even used to tie it up. That's a robber's horse for you" (373).

It is while checking to see whether his own horse has been properly fed and to make sure that it has not been stolen that Maksim Maksimovich overhears a fateful conversation between Kazbich and Azamat, Bela's brother. Since they are talking about a horse, his suspicions are further aroused. But gradually it becomes clear to him that the subject of their discussion is not his horse but the celebrated and coveted Karagyozy. From this point on horses in general and Karagyozy in particular assume a paramount importance in the story. Kazbich relates to Azamat, who is just as eager to acquire the remarkable horse as everyone else, how he and Karagyozy once escaped a band of pursuing Cossacks. The tale is so gloriously heroic and of such epic grandeur that it serves only to fire young Azamat's imagination still more, even as it utterly charms Lermontov's readers.

A few days later, after Pechorin makes his secret pact with Azamat (according to the terms of the deal, the boy is to get the horse in exchange for his sister Bela), Kazbich comes to the fort where Pechorin is posted with the intention of selling some rams. Contrary to his usual habit he tethers Karagyozy to a fence, almost as if prompted by instinct to keep up his guard against the mysterious foreign officer with whom he is about to do business. While talking with Maksim Maksimovich, he rushes over to the window, which, unfortunately for him, faces the back yard, and cries out "My horse . . . my horse" (379). It is only then that Maksim Maksimovich hears the hooves that Kazbich's highly sensitive hearing has already perceived. He is convinced it is just some Cossack riding up to the fort,

but Kazbich knows that it is "Urus-yaman" ("a bad, bad Russian," 379). Once the horse is stolen and there is nothing Kazbich can do, he falls facedown on the ground and breaks into sobs. He spends the whole night in mourning but gets up the next day to explicate the strange affair and wreak the vengeance he believes is his. He begins by killing Bela's father and stealing his horse, two acts for which Pechorin expresses a sympathetic understanding if not a wholehearted approval. When at length he comes to the fort to consummate his vendetta by abducting Bela, she recognizes him from a distance; to be more exact, she recognizes the horse he is riding as her father's. Kazbich's scheme is at first successful, but Pechorin and Maksim Maksimovich are quick to mount their horses in hot pursuit. Pechorin fires his pistol and wounds Kazbich's horse in the leg, forcing Kazbich to abandon it. Maksim Maksimovich fires at Kazbich, who is about to stab Bela. When the smoke clears, a fatally wounded Bela is found lying on the ground beside Kazbich's crippled horse.

The physical juxtaposition of the heroine and the horse in the penultimate moments of "Bela" is just one of several examples of how Lermontov interweaves the feminine and the equine themes. We have already seen that Maksim Maksimovich compares Karagyozy's beautiful eyes with Bela's. His comparison might be extended still further since in his initial description of her he makes special note of the blackness of her eyes. Significantly, "black eyes" is the literal translation of Karagyozy's name. Furthermore, Bela's eyes are said to resemble those of a mountain gazelle (372), and later she herself is described as "shy as a wild gazelle" (380). The importance of these remarks becomes clear when Pechorin, praising Karagyozy to Azamat in order to encourage his desire for the horse, speaks of the longed-for steed as "a regular gazelle" (377). When, in an earlier scene, Azamat discusses the horse with its owner, he sounds as if he were describing a beloved woman: "The first time I saw your horse . . . something incomprehensible happened in my soul, and since then I've been disgusted with everything. . . . I would sit on a cliff for hours at a time, pining away. And every minute your black steed would come into my thoughts with its graceful gait and its smooth spine straight as an arrow. His lively eyes looked into mine as if he wanted to say something. Kazbich, I'll die if you don't sell him to me" (375). Later, Maksim Maksimovich will comment on Azamat's infatuation: "About three weeks later, I began to notice that Azamat was getting pale and weak, as happens in novels on account of love" (377).

In "Princess Mary," immediately after his first meeting with Vera, Pechorin's thoughts turn, not unexpectedly, to horses—specifically, to the joy of riding them: "When I returned home, I got on my horse and galloped off into the steppe. I love to gallop through the tall grass on a lively horse, against the wind of the wilderness. . . . There is no feminine glance that I would not forget at the sight of mountains covered with curly foliage and lit up by the southern sun . . ." (436). One final comparison between horses and women occurs in "Taman," when we are told (by Pechorin) that a certain young girl "had a lot of breeding . . . and breeding in women, as in horses, is a great thing" (414). What makes this remark so odd is that it echoes Maksim Maksimovich's description of Pechorin himself in the brief story that bares the old campaigner's name. Noting first the "feminine tenderness" of the hero's skin, he observes that "in spite of his light hair color, his moustache and eyebrows were black—a sign of breeding in man ["cheloveke"—the generic word for man in the sense of "human being"], just like a black mane and a black tail on a

white horse" (403). It is hardly surprising that Pechorin, who is the singular focus of the novel and who is bound by many threads to all the other characters, is also involved in the nexus of feminine-equine imagery.<sup>3</sup> Just how he is involved or, to be more precise, what it is that women and horses tell us about the psychology of our enigmatic hero is revealed in the thematic relationship between him and his double, Kazbich.

Quite early in *A Hero of Our Time*, the mere juxtaposition of women and horses turns into a kind of contest in which the horses nearly always win. This is especially true in "Bela," where Pechorin is shown to have certain characteristics in common with Azamat and especially with the ruthless Kazbich. It has already been pointed out that at the Circassian wedding Bela's irresistible beauty has attracted the attention of more than one of the guests: "Pechorin was not the only one to admire the lovely princess: from a corner of the room, two other eyes, motionless and fiery, were looking at her. I began to look carefully and recognized my old acquaintance, Kazbich" (373). Kazbich's "fiery" eyes are matched by Pechorin's, which, as we are told in "Maksim Maksimovich," "gleamed with a kind of phosphorescent glitter" (403). Pechorin's desire for Bela is implicitly compared with Azamat's amorous longing for Karagyozy. When Azamat tries to persuade Kazbich to sell the stallion to him, his offer of 150 and then 1,000 mares in exchange suggests the value of "females" relative to the value of a fine horse. When he finally offers his own sister, Bela, for Karagyozy, Kazbich responds with an explicit statement of comparison. He does this by reciting "an old song" containing the following words: "There are many beauties in our villages,/The stars gleam in the dark of their eyes./To love them is sweet, an enviable lot;/But a young man's freedom is more fun./Gold will buy four wives,/But a fiery steed is beyond price./He will even keep up with the whirlwind in the steppe,/He will not betray, he will not deceive" (376).

In the Russian version of this song the fifth line ("Zoloto kupit chetyre zheny") is flagrantly ungrammatical. According to standard syntactical rules, applicable to Lermontov's time as they are to ours, an animate direct object in the plural should have the same form as the genitive plural—thus *chetyrex zhen*. An *inanimate* direct object in the plural takes the form of the nominative plural. That is the form [*chetyre zheny*] that appears in the text of Kazbich's song. In other words, the "mistake" in the lyrics suggests that the complement of the verb "will buy" is inanimate. It is difficult to avoid this conclusion especially in the light of a parallel passage in "Princess Mary," in which Pechorin says: "I keep four horses [*chetyrekh loshadei*]: one for myself and three for pals so I won't be bored roaming through the field alone; they're happy to take my horses, and they never ride with me" (437). Both Kazbich in his song and Pechorin in his uncharacteristically pathetic remark use the number "four." What is even more noteworthy, however, is the fact that Pechorin's grammar is significantly better than Kazbich's since he correctly puts his animate direct object in the form of the genitive plural. In short, his horses are animate while Kazbich's women are not.

In addition, Pechorin's plaint follows immediately after some words about the joy of riding: "I have long studied the highlanders' way of riding: there is no better

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<sup>3</sup> Reissner (75) argues that all the characters are connected to Pechorin and exist only for his sake.

way to flatter my pride than recognizing my skill in horseback riding Caucasian style" (437). These sentiments echo the "young man's freedom" in the first half of Kazbich's song, a freedom that is "more fun" than loving a beautiful girl. Even after his first encounter with Vera, whose love, it seems, will force him to reevaluate his attitude toward women, Pechorin's thoughts turn, as we have seen, to the joy of riding a horse in the steppes. This is a poor tribute to Vera's charms. Still more outrageous is Pechorin's use of a horse in his attempt to offend and humiliate Princess Mary, the other woman in his life. Aware that Mary is keen on owning a certain Persian rug, he buys it himself, drapes his horse with it, and then rides past her window so that she might see the humble purpose to which it has been put. Pechorin has not, of course, abandoned his conviction that horses are better than women, but in playing his prank he makes use of the conventional view (*viz.*, that women are more important than horses) in order to display his contempt for a woman with whose affections he is playing a cruel and cynical game.

Pechorin's relationship with Vera is considerably more complex. On the one hand, his numerous *gaucheries* seem calculated to drive her away from him, while on the other her definitive departure toward the end of "Princess Mary" effects in him an extraordinary change. The once self-consciously superior bully is reduced to frantic desperation. With all his energy he tries to overtake the woman who has left him, eager to regain her love. In his failure to do so he reminds us once again of his unfortunate double in "Bela," Kazbich.

It will be recalled that Kazbich kidnaps Bela and rides off with her while Pechorin and Maksim Maksimovich attempt to overtake them. His horse, however, the one he had stolen from Bela's father as an act of vengeance, disappoints him: "Whether Kazbich's horse was worn out [*izmuchena*] or inferior to ours, despite all his efforts, it didn't advance very much. I think that at that moment he recalled his Karagyozy" (394). When Pechorin arrives in Kislovodsk after the duel with Grushnitski, he is "worn out, on a worn out horse" ("*izmuchenny, na izmuchennoi loshadi*," 483). After reading Vera's letter, his thoughts are for her alone just as Kazbich had suddenly "recalled his Karagyozy": "With the possibility of losing her forever, Vera became dearer to me than anything else in the world—dearer than life, honor, and happiness!" (485). He immediately jumps on his horse and rides in the direction of Pyatigorsk as fast as the poor mount can take him: "Mercilessly I drove my worn out steed [*izmuchennogo konya*]", which, snorting and covered with foam, carried me off along the rocky road" (485). He plans to change horses in a nearby Cossack village, but suddenly his overworked horse falls to the ground while trying to rise up out of a small gully. Pechorin jumps off but the animal dies a few moments later. In Kazbich's account of his dramatic escape from a band of pursuing Cossacks, Karagyozy attempts to jump across a ravine but does not quite succeed. His front legs hang from the opposite edge, and Kazbich saves him by dismounting and letting him run freely without a rider. On this happier occasion Karagyozy survives the danger and is later reclaimed by his owner.

It will take all the heartless cynicism and cunning of a Pechorin to separate Kazbich from his beloved horse. When the separation does occur, Kazbich reacts in a manner that is far from typical for him: "He squealed, struck his rifle against a rock, smashed it to pieces, threw himself on the ground, and began sobbing like a child" (379). When Pechorin's horse dies and he realizes that he has lost Vera for-

ever, his diary entry records a very similar reaction: "I found myself alone in the steppe, having lost my last hope. I tried to walk, but my legs buckled. Exhausted by the day's anxieties and by insomnia, I fell on the wet grass and started crying like a child" (485). Kazbich loses his horse and cries the whole night through. Pechorin loses Vera and bursts into tears. Apparently the hero has at last transcended the narrow-mindedness of his double: he realizes that a woman is a noble being after all, worthy even of *his* anxiety and sorrow. Later that impression is underscored when he finds the corpse of the horse he has ridden to death and sees two ravens perched on it. This desolate scene appears to represent the sad finale of the equine theme in *A Hero of Our Time*.

Despite the several details which suggest that Pechorin has at last "learned his lesson" it would be premature to make such a deduction. In the first place, there is a real and significant difference between his reaction to Vera's departure and Kazbich's response to the theft of Karagyozy. Kazbich's mourning is sincere, and, one suspects, his sense of loss is deep and permanent. When he gets up from the ground the next morning, he is unshakably resolved to reclaim what has been taken from him, to punish the thieves, and to avenge his honor. Pechorin, by contrast, recovers rather quickly from his moment of desolation, blames his nerves and his sleepless condition for his unseemly outburst, declares that all is "for the better," returns to Kislovodsk, and sleeps "the sleep of Napoleon after Waterloo" (486). That Vera has left him in favor of her husband is merely a defeat for him; his emotional reaction is largely an expression of the pain resulting from his wounded pride. It is impossible to imagine him surrendering himself in disinterested love to any creature—woman or horse.

That Pechorin remains Pechorin to the end is suggested even more forcefully by the chronology of the events described in *A Hero of Our Time*.<sup>4</sup> If "Princess Mary" were the second-to-last story of the cycle in a temporal as well as a spatial sense, the reader might very well conclude that Pechorin now understands the value of women and consequently no longer ranks them lower than horses. After all, the final story, "The Fatalist," has nothing at all to add to this theme, which reaches its climax in "Princess Mary" and is apparently fully resolved there. Yet the love affairs in "Princess Mary" precede in time the action of "Bela," a story which features the feminine-equine theme most prominently. Judging from the spatial arrangement of the stories, Kazbich is an anticipation of Pechorin; but from a chronological (and therefore truer) perspective, he objectifies Pechorin, especially in his attitude toward women and his preference for horses. Moreover, Pechorin's treatment of Bela is every bit as callous as his behavior with Mary and as unfathomable as his relationship with Vera. His romantic interludes at Kislovodsk have meant little and taught him nothing. Nevertheless, despite his contempt for the fair sex, he never ceases to be drawn to it, whether to crush the woman or to destroy himself or possibly to accomplish both.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arranged in chronological order, the stories constituting *A Hero of Our Time* are as follows: (1) "Taman"; (2) "Princess Mary"; (3) "Bela"; (4) "The Fatalist"; and (5) "Maksim Maksimovich." See John Garrard, *Mikhail Lermontov* (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 131.

<sup>5</sup> Pechorin's suicidal tendencies can also be seen in his relationship with Grushnitski, his vulgarized double. Garrard (141) notes that "in crushing Grushnitski, Pechorin is attacking himself by proxy."

As for his final fate, we know from the preface to his diary that he dies while returning to Russia from Persia. The exact cause of death is never disclosed, though it may well be surmised that a woman is involved. Pechorin himself speaks of this possibility in a diary for June 14 (found in "Princess Mary") in which he recalls a disturbing episode from his childhood: "Shall I confess? When I was still a child, an old woman told my fortune to my mother. She predicted that I would die 'from an evil woman.' At the time this deeply affected me. An overwhelming loathing of marriage [*zhenitby*, from *zhena*, "wife," "woman"] was born in my heart . . . Yet something tells me that her prediction will come true. I will try at any rate to see to it that it comes true as late as possible" (467). The last sentence implies that Pechorin is inclined to believe that the fulfillment of the prophecy is inevitable. Whether in fact he does perish "from an evil woman" is left unstated. Still, the bent of his personality and the logic of events—in short, the profoundly Romantic ethos of *A Hero of Our Time*—suggest that he does indeed meet his tragic end at the hands of a creature he both fears and scorns.