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The Sexual Life of Muscovites: Evidence from the Foreign Accounts

Marshall Poe

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Sex . . . is rather a sociological and cultural force than a mere bodily relation of two individuals. But the scientific treatment of this subject obviously involves also a keen interest in the biological nucleus. The researcher must therefore give a description of the direct approaches between two lovers . . . shaped by their traditions, obeying their laws, following the customs of their tribes.

Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages*¹

Unlike their Western contemporaries, Muscovites of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not associate sex with love.² Among European elites, sexual roles and rituals of sexual display were defined by the doctrine of romantic love, as we see in the Western archetypes of Tristan and Isolde, Petrarch and Laura, and Astrophile and Stella.³ European commentators, well-versed in the culture of romance, clearly registered the absence of ritual affection of the Western sort in Muscovy. The Imperial ambassador Sigismund Herberstein noted this void shortly after 1517: “Love between those that are married is for the most part lukewarm, especially among the nobles and princes.”⁴ And nearly two-hundred years later the English doctor Jodocus Crull made the same observation: “There is no such thing as Wooing here betwixt the young couple, [no] Gallantry and Courtship, [no] Preliminaries of Love.”⁵ That Muscovites were not very romantic, then, is well-established. However it must be admitted that while we know what archetypal sexual roles weren’t like in Muscovy, we do not have a clear picture of what they were like. In the West, elites in sexualized contexts “played” lords and ladies, among other things. What roles, it might reasonably be asked, did well-born Muscovites “play” when teasing, courting, wooing, and marrying were the order of the day? In what follows I would like to address this question.

The evidence upon which I base my investigation is drawn from foreign accounts of Muscovy. As Eve Levin has pointed out, “very few sources from pre-modern Slavic Orthodox states provide information on actual sexual conduct.”⁶ In Muscovy we have much in the way of official prescriptions and proscriptions, but much less that might allow us to determine whether Orthodox rules of sexual conduct were followed. The foreign observers do not directly fill this lacuna, and in many ways they are deficient as historical sources. But they do provide a wealth of data on Muscovite social mores, among which we find many suggestive comments on sexuality. When reading them, one cannot help but think of Western anthropologists studying “primitive peoples.” I will use the foreign observers in this capacity.

¹B. Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (New York: Routledge & Sons, 1929), xxiii.

²On medieval Slavic sexual mores generally, see E. Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

³S. F. Matthews Grieco, “The Body, Appearance and Sexuality,” in N. Zemon Davis and A. Farge, eds., *A History of Women in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3: 70.

⁴Herberstein (1517), 93. In the footnotes I have provided short references to the foreigners’ accounts. A complete bibliography of sources together with a guide to abbreviations can be found at the end of this essay.

⁵Crull (1698), 155.

Russian Sexuality in the Eyes of Foreigners

To foreigners observing Muscovy, perhaps the most striking aspects of Russian social life was the extreme character of domestic relations. Men such as Herberstein were of course familiar with the strict discipline of the patriarchal family.⁷ However as numerous instructional booklets (the so-called *Hausväterliteratur*) suggest, the rule of the father was stringently restricted. Typical of the Renaissance attitude toward domestic governance is the Puritan Robert Cleaver's warning that "the husband is not to command his wife in manner, as the Master his servant, but as the soul doth the body, as being conjoined in like affection and good will."⁸ When describing the state of domestic relations in Muscovy, the foreign observers reach precisely for the master-slave metaphor. The English ambassador Giles Fletcher, a contemporary of Cleaver, writes that "in living with their wives, they shewe themselves to be but of barbarous condition: using them as servants, rather than wives."⁹ The master-slave metaphor penetrated every aspect of the outlanders' perception of Muscovite domestic relations, as can be seen if we review their descriptions of courtship, the marriage ceremony, and the life of women in the private and public spheres.

The Westerners could find nothing in Muscovy analogous to what they understood as courtship. As I will point out in a moment, the accounts contain ample indication of amorous interchange, but these trysts were not identified as a step toward lawful matrimony. Foreign observers universally concur that marriages, at least among elites, were arranged by families and had little to do with the wishes of the future couple. Naturally Western nobles did not leave match-making completely to the fortunes of love. But the travelers express genuine astonishment at the lovelessness of Muscovite pairing. The Holsteinian diplomat Adam Olearius describes what he takes to be the usual practice:

Young men and women are not permitted to become acquainted on their own, much less to discuss marriage together or to become engaged. Rather, in most cases, when parents have grown children whom they wish to be married, the father of the girl approaches someone whom he considers appropriate for his child, speaks either to him personally or to his parents and friends and expresses his disposition.¹⁰

If the offer was well-received, there followed a ritual which surprised many foreigners: the bride-inspection. Samuel Collins, an English physician, sketches the rite in the following terms:

To prevent future mistakes, the Bride-grooms Friends, viz., five or six Women see the Bride stark naked, and observe whether she has any defect in her Body, if but the least Pimple appear, she must be cured of it before she marries.¹¹

⁶Levin, *Sex and Society*, 21.

⁷On early modern domestic relations, see S. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled. Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 50ff.

⁸*A godly form of householde government* (London, 1598), in Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 50.

⁹Fletcher (1591), 290. Also see Giovio (1525), 51; Petreius (1615), 597; Collins (1667), 8; Crull (1698), 162; and Korb (1700), 207.

¹⁰Olearius (1647), 164. Also see Herberstein (1517), 91; Fletcher (1591), 286; Margeret (1607), 31-32; Perry (1698), 201; and Korb (1700), 212.

¹¹Collins (1667), 36. Also see Fletcher (1591), 286; Margeret (1607), 31-32; and Olearius (1647), 164.

The foreigners indicate that the examination was primarily directed at the discovery of imperfections and disease. However potential in-laws also had other concerns: Johann-Georg Korb, an Habsburg diplomat, claimed that the parents of the bride were obliged to testify to her virginity.¹² According to the foreigners, the bride-inspection was enacted on a state-wide scale when the tsar was in search of a mate. On such occasions the court assembled the most beautiful maidens of the realm for the prince's pleasure and selection. This piece of Western folklore, and it is certainly that, was of long standing: Herberstein reported it in 1517 and Korb was pleased to relate that it was going out of fashion at the end of the seventeenth century.¹³

The foreigners found further signs of the tyrannical nature of Muscovite domestic relations in the wedding rite. Many of the Western visitors report a peculiar Muscovite addition to the other-wise strictly Christian ceremony -- the ritual of submission of wife to husband. This rite took various forms, the most common of which involved a whip -- the apparent symbol of patriarchal authority. Korb offers an excellent outline:

When the promise of marriage has been given, the father summons his daughter, who comes covered with a linen veil into his presence; and asking her whether she be still minded to marry, he takes up a new rod which has been kept ready for the purpose, and strikes his daughter lightly once or twice, saying, "Lo! my darling daughter, this is the last that shall admonish thee of thy father's authority, beneath whose rule thou hast lived until now. Now thou art free from me. Remember that thou hast not so much escaped from sway, as rather passed beneath that of another. Shouldst thou behave not as thou oughtest towards thy husband, he in my stead shall admonish thee with this rod." With this the father, concluding his speech, stretches at the same time the whip to the bridegroom, who, excusing himself briefly, according to custom, says that he, "believes he shall have no need of this whip;" but he is bound to accept it, and put it up under his belt, like a valuable present.¹⁴

Other authors testify that the groom sends the whip to the bride, or that he ritually lashes her.¹⁵ One even claims that the bride offers the whip to the groom as a token of affection, and provides an elaborate historical explanation of this curious custom.¹⁶ Whips were not the only symbols of submission used during the nuptials. Fletcher reports that at the conclusion of the ceremony, "the Bride commeth to the Bridegroom . . . and falleth downe at his feete, knocking her head upon his shooe, in token of her subjection, and obedience."¹⁷ This ritual, *biti chelom*, was the standard form of supplication toward temporal authority in Muscovy.

¹²Korb (1700), 213.

¹³Herberstein (1517), 50 and Korb (1700), 131. Also see Neuville (1689), 84.

¹⁴Korb (1700), 214.

¹⁵See Milton (1648), 340 and Collins (1667), 8-10.

¹⁶Heylyn (1621), 347.

¹⁷Fletcher (1591), 28.

The foreigners noted that the submission of wives was not merely symbolic. They were constantly confounded by the exclusion of women from the public sphere, a fact which they took as good evidence of unnaturally harsh household discipline. Crull's description of sequestration is typical:

The Women in Muscovy have an extraordinary Respect for their Husbands; they live exceedingly retir'd, and very seldom appear in Publick. Virgins, if they be of any Quality, live under as much if not more Restraint than the Women; for besides they are very seldom allowed to go abroad, when they do, they are always covered with a Veil, to prevent their being seen; so that many times they marry here before they have as much as look'd upon one another. Both their Women and Maids, if they be of any Quality, being not educated to any thing of Houswifry, and making or receiving few Visits, lead a very idle Life.¹⁸

Other accounts relate that women lived in separate quarters from their husbands, that they were never allowed to attend banquets and ceremonies, that their husbands appointed servants to watch over them, and that they had no authority over members of the household.¹⁹ An interesting result of sequestration is what might be called the wife-presentation ritual. Muscovite elites naturally entertained friends, allies, and apparently foreign visitors in their homes. Women were excluded from such events. However the foreigners report that during the course of a visit, the women of the household were sometimes ritually presented to the guests. Olearius details such an episode:

Before we left he brought his wife and one of her relatives to meet us; both had young, lovely faces and were richly dressed. They were accompanied by an ugly attendant, the better to emphasize their beauty. Each lady had to sip a cup of vodka in honor of each of the ambassadors, then hand it over and bow to him. The Russians consider it the greatest honor they can pay a guest to show him in this manner that he has been agreeable and welcome. Where friendship and intimacy are very great, the guest is permitted to kiss the wife on the mouth.²⁰

Westerners were unaccustomed to this sort of intimacy, and no doubt it was easily misunderstood as a kind of sexual display. In another place Olearius describes the presentation ritual as if it were a kind of mock wedding: the wife enters "in her wedding costume"; she bows to her husband and Olearius; and finally she insists (despite his resistance) that he kiss her on the lips.²¹

In seeming contradiction to this picture of harsh domestic control, the foreign commentators are unanimous in proclaiming the unrestrained nature of sexual play in Muscovy. While it is true that the times were becoming more prudish (the open prostitution and public bathing of the late middle ages were under attack²²), the foreign observers

¹⁸Crull (1698), 148.

¹⁹Herberstein (1517), 93; Giovio (1525), 51; Jenkinson (1557), 56; Printz (1578), 62; Margeret (1607), 31-32; Petreius (1615), 597; Olearius (1647), 168-69; Meyerberg (1661), 138-40; Perry (1698), 199; and Korb (1700), 207 and 264.

²⁰Olearius (1647), 42. Also see Margeret (1607), 31-32; Petreius (1615), 596; Crull (1698), 152; Neuville (1689), 16; Perry (1698), 199; and Korb (1700), 207.

²¹Olearius (1647), 158.

²²Matthews Grieco, "The Body, Appearance and Sexuality," 3: 64-65.

were certainly not strangers to relatively open sensuality. The doctrine of courtly love recommended public wooing, as can be seen in Shakespearean drama, and within marriage Protestant theologians encouraged couples to procreate with pleasure.²³ Yet the Westerners were scandalized by the openness of Muscovite sensuality.²⁴ This is apparent in their descriptions of quotidian social intercourse, attitudes toward the body, and conventions governing sex.

According to the foreigners, the very character of daily social life in Muscovy -- habits of greeting, dress, and meeting -- were touched by a certain lewdness. First of all, the Russians touched each other in public more than Western sensibilities would allow. The foreigners took particular umbrage at ritual kisses, which the Muscovites exchanged on numerous social occasions. The French mercenary Jacques Margeret emphasized the ubiquitousness of kissing in greetings and farewells:

Now before going further, it is necessary to know that it is not in this season [Easter] alone that they kiss one another, but rather at all times. Kissing each other is a kind of salutation used as much by the men as the women in taking leave from one another or in meeting each other after a long interval.²⁵

Yet this was not all. Other foreigners report with surprise that the Muscovites kissed one another at meals after toasts, when they met on the street, after blessings, and, of course, during the wife presentation ritual.²⁶ Certainly Westerners exchanged friendly kisses, but they used this token with due restraint. The Russians violated the rules of proper ritual engagement by kissing in an altogether indiscriminate fashion. Korb, describing the Russian celebration of Easter, was shocked by the Russians' lack of decorum:

The custom of saluting and kissing admits of no distinction of rank or lot in life, of no remembrance of quarrels. If the red egg be offered, no magnate will refuse the solicited kiss to the vilest of the populace, no matron will excuse herself through modesty, no maiden out of bashfulness; it would be held a sin either to reject the proffered egg or reject the kiss.²⁷

Worse still in the eyes of visitors were Russian attitudes toward the body. In their self-presentations, Muscovite men and women were seen as shameless. Public bathes drew particular ire, primarily because they were being banned as immoral and unhygienic in the West. Bathing nude was bad enough. But according to the foreigners, the Muscovites unshamefacedly bathed in mixed company. Olearius could hardly believe what he had heard about bathhouses, so he went undercover to investigate the strange and immoral operation of these establishments:

²³Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 3ff.

²⁴On the clash of Western socio-sexual mores and Muscovite realities, see G. Scheidegger's interesting *Perverse Abendland -- barbarisches Russland. Begegnungen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts im Schatten kulturelle Missverständnisse* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1993).

²⁵Margeret (1607), 25.

²⁶Ulfeldt (1579), 17; Fletcher (1591), 301; Olearius (1647), 100; Olearius (1647), 265; and Milton (1648), 340.

²⁷Korb (1700), 99-100.

To see personally how they bathe, I went incognito into a bath in Astrakhan. The bath was partitioned by planks, so that the men and women could sit separately; but they entered and left through the same door, and they wore no aprons. Some held a birch branch in front of them until they sat down in their places, others nothing at all. The women sometimes came out naked, with no timidity before others, to talk to their husbands.²⁸

Olearius was at pains to convince incredulous readers of the lewdness of Russian baths. Not only would Russian women appear unclothed in public before their husbands, but they would bathe with complete strangers. Olearius recounts a titillating episode in which four Russian women bathing in an inlet of the Volga were joined by a foreign soldier. No embarrassment ensued, and in fact the company began to joke and play. One of the women strayed into deep water and her friends pleaded with the soldier to save her. Olearius writes:

Easily persuaded, the soldier sped toward her, seized her around the waist and raised her up so that she could take hold of him, and swam in with her. The women showered praise on the German and said that an angel had sent him.²⁹

The foreigners were also vexed by the Russians' use of washing in religious contexts, particularly to purify couples after sexual intercourse.³⁰ Fletcher recorded a ceremony that mixed public bathing and religion: the blessing of the waters by the patriarch, tsar, and assembled high nobility. Fletcher describes the ceremony at some length, and then notes:

When the ceremonies are ended . . . you shall also see the women dippe in [holy water] their children over head and eares, and many men and women leape into it, some naked, some with their clothes on.³¹

To Fletcher and other Protestants, this sort of cleansing seemed both superstitious and indecent.

Westerners viewed the naked body as inherently sexual, and therefore they could not easily abide by the Russian habit of unclothing in public. But they were often equally censorious of Russian dress. This is particularly apparent in the Western fascination with Muscovite face painting. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Western women, especially well-born ones, used make up. However orthodox opinion had it that face painting was the art of the prostitute.³² We can see this attitude in the foreigners' attention to and condemnation of Russian face painting. Many of the travelers comment at length on the subject³³, but none so colorfully as the Englishman George Turberville:

Is not the meanest man in all the land but he,

²⁸Olearius (1647), 161.

²⁹Olearius (1647), 162.

³⁰Herberstein (1517), 97; Avity (1613), 698; Olearius (1647), 168 and 172; Collins (1667), 10-12; and Crull (1698), 151-52.

³¹Fletcher (1591), 292. Also see Ulfeldt (1579), 18 and Olearius (1647), 52-53.

³²Matthews Grieco, "The Body, Appearance and Sexuality," 3: 59ff.

³³Fletcher (1591), 302; Margeret (1607), 31; Petreius (1615), 595; Olearius (1647), 127; Meyerberg (1661), 138-40; Collins (1667), 69; Neuville (1689), 95; Crull (1698), 139-40; and Korb (1700), 206.

To buy her painted colors, doth allow his wife a fee
Wherewith she decks herself and dyes her tawny skin.
She pranks and paints her smoky face, both brow, lip, cheek, and chin.
Yea, those that honest are, if any such there be
Within the land, do use the like; a man may plainly see
Upon some women's cheeks the painting how it lies
In plaster sort; for that too thick, her face the harlot dyes.³⁴

The foreigners clearly understood face painting to be a sexual display and thus a function of the general looseness of Russian morals. The Westerners noted other sexually marked items: beards were a sign of virility; long hair was a sign of virginity; and corpulence in women was sexually attractive.³⁵

The foreigners return again and again to the licentiousness of Russians, to their proclivity for licit and especially illicit sexual relations. Daniel Printz speaks for the better part of Western opinion when he plainly states that “the Muscovites are very prone to sensual desire, [and] they often foul themselves with adultery, prostitution, and the cursed Sodomite sin.”³⁶ Sensuality was understood to be an inherent characteristic of Russianness. However a careful analysis of the foreign texts shows that this supposed trait was manifested in several distinct contexts. As Olearius reports, baths were one. He writes, as always scandalized:

In Moscow we ourselves several times saw men and women come out of public baths to cool off, and, as naked as God created them, approach us and call obscenely in broken German to our young people.³⁷

Entertainments were also places where sexual play was permitted. The Danish diplomat Jacob Ulfeldt, for example, describes being teased and ridiculed by Russians at a diplomatic banquet:

Trumpeters came to us daily to present their kind of comedies. These players in performances often bore their asses and showed the shameful part of the body, falling on their knees and raising their asses without any remorse or shame. And women sometimes do the same thing. While standing one day before our apartment on a flat place with many servants, we saw not far from us women who raised their skirts, showing us in the windows their shameful parts in front and behind, extending their naked legs, asses and other places out of the windows to the right and to the left, paying no attention to the presence of the *pristany*.³⁸

³⁴Turberville (1568), 76-77.

³⁵See Olearius (1647), 127; Collins (1667), 69; and Crull (1698), 139.

³⁶Printz (1578), 68. For other general statements, see Turberville (1568), 76; Ulfeldt (1579), 33; Fletcher (1591), 305; Petreius (1615), 595-96; Olearius (1647), 142, 164 and 172.

³⁷Olearius (1647), 142.

³⁸Ulfeldt (1579), 17. Also see Olearius (1647), 142.

Weddings were rife with various sorts of bawdy conduct, reminiscent of Western charivari. According to Olearius, the bride's attendants combed the bridegroom's hair during the ceremony, and all the while "women stand on benches and sing all sorts of obscenities."³⁹ At the banquet following the wedding we are told that "many of the women, when unguarded by their drunken husbands, are apt to permit considerable liberties to the young men and husbands of others, the men take advantage of such occasions to amuse themselves freely."⁴⁰ Holidays were scenes of sexual license. Korb describes the Russian Mardi Gras in the following term.

The Russians call the week that precedes the Lenten fast, Maslaniza, because the use of flesh is forbidden, but butter is allowed during those days. With more truth would I call them Bacchanalia, for they give themselves up to debauchery the whole time. Then they have no shame of lust, no reverence of God, and most mischievous licentiousness is the order of the day: as though crimes committed at times were not cognizable by any judge of any fair law.⁴¹

All the foreigners report the Russian love of tippling, and not a few add that in Russia drunkenness often led to sex. This made the Muscovite tavern a veritable Sodom in the foreign accounts, a place where drink stripped the Muscovites of the little restraint they natively possessed and where they coupled freely and without shame.⁴² Olearius offers us this formulation:

[Russians] are more addicted to drunkenness than any nation in the world. Hieronymus said, 'A stomach filled with wine craves immediate sexual satisfaction.' After drinking wine to excess they are like unbridled animals, following wherever their passions lead.⁴³

In support of this proposition, Olearius relates the following anecdote.

On one such day it happened that a drunken woman came out of the tavern, collapsed in the street nearby, and fell asleep. Another drunken Russian came by, and seeing the partly exposed woman lying there, was inflamed with passion, and lay down with her to quench it, caring not that it was broad daylight and on a well-peopled street. He remained lying by her and fell asleep there. Many youngsters gathered in a circle around this bestial pair and laughed and joked about them for a long time, until an old man came up and threw a robe over them to cover their shame.⁴⁴

³⁹Olearius (1647), 166.

⁴⁰Olearius (1647), 168. Also see Collins (1667), 7-8.

⁴¹Korb (1700), 258. Also see Herberstein (1517), 80; Margeret (1607), 13-14; Olearius (1647), 100-101, and 150; and Perry (1698), 228-29.

⁴²Boemus (1520), 218-19; Randolph (1568), 67; Turberville (1568), 76; Avity (1613), 691; Milton (1648), 340; Crull (1698), 149; and Perry (1698), 228.

⁴³Olearius (1647), 142.

⁴⁴Olearius (1647), 143.

According to the foreigners, neither the authorities nor public opinion heavily censured the parties involved sexual indiscretions. As Crull said, “fornication is looked upon by them as a slender trespass.”⁴⁵ Deviant sexuality (“sodomy”) was of course heavily punished, but the foreigners testify that the Muscovites were unable to resist it.⁴⁶

Quotidian Russian Sexual Roles

The foreigners present a sharply divided picture of Muscovite sexual identities. On the one hand, we find a severe regime of patriarchal domestic control. On the other hand, we are presented with a regime of license in which men and women avidly engage in public sexual play. I would like to argue, following Bakhtin, that this duality provides us with the key to understanding Muscovite sexual personae.⁴⁷ We should take the foreigners at their word: the Muscovites indeed had two distinctive sets of sexual identities, each one appropriate for certain social context and functions. Within “official”, “orthodox” times and places, Russian men and women were expected to act out the strictly hierarchical roles of man and wife. The primary metaphor around which this relation was built was master and servant. We can see these roles played out a variety of ritual contexts observed by the foreigners. Parents selected and inspected mates for their children as one would choose a servant. During the Russian wedding ceremony, symbols of secular subjection -- the lash, prostration -- were appropriated to demonstrate the submission of wife to husband. Women were separated from men and not allowed to play a part in important ceremonial occasions, both of which were true of the treatment of non-familial inferiors. In marked contrast, within certain public spaces, and particularly at carnivalesque times, Muscovite sexual roles were characterized by irreverent humor, bodily excess, and sensuality. The metaphor here was of equal lovers engaged in the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. This, too, may be seen in the accounts of the foreigners, though we must be very careful about interpreting their often skewed statements regarding sensuality. They were certainly wrong to have believed that ritual kissing was lewd, that nude bathing was inherently titillating, and that face-painting was a sign of licentiousness. However we can reasonably conclude from these practices that the Muscovites had a very different attitude toward the body than the Europeans who observed them. They were, at least in certain contexts, plainly less restrained and prudish than their Western counterparts. This relaxed attitude toward sexual display was only fully manifested in more or less rigidly defined carnivalesque times and places. As we have seen, careful analysis of the travelers’ accounts shows that when they relate stories of Muscovite licentiousness, more often than not they are describing holidays, festivals, ceremonies, baths, taverns, and so on.

Extraordinary Muscovite Sex Roles

These two sets of roles -- patriarchal and carnivalesque -- provided elite Muscovites with a symbolic language in which they could meaningfully engage in the essential business of everyday sexual display. We should expect specific

⁴⁵Crull (1698), 149. Also see Herberstein (1517), 93; Turberville (1568); Thevet (1575), 147; Fletcher (1591), 305; Petreius (1615), 623; Olearius (1647), 170; and Meyerberg (1661), 138ff.

⁴⁶Herberstein (1517), 89 and 97-98; Turberville (1568), 76; Schlichting (1571), 215-16 (Ivan IV); Staden (1578), 26 and 35 (Ivan IV); Printz (1578), 68; Horsey (1584), 271, 282 (Ivan IV), and 293; Fletcher (1591), 274; Margeret (1607), 86; Massa (1610), 112, 143, and 148 (Dmitry); Petreius (1615), 136; Petreius (1615), 637; Olearius (1647), 142; Crull (1698), 145; Neuville (1689), 93; and Perry (1698), 228.

⁴⁷M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana University Press, 1984), *passim*.

articulations of this language to vary depending on a great variety of factors, while remaining within the general bounds provided by the roles. I would like to close this discussion by exploring two of the most disturbing and characteristic articulations of the patriarchal and carnivalesque roles -- domestic and public sexualized violence.

One of the most consistent element of the foreign descriptions of Muscovy is the discussion of wife-beating. The Westerners are one in affirming with Crull that “Muscovy may well be called the Purgatory of the Women, they being kept under so rigorous a Discipline by their Husbands, that in some Places Slaves be treated with much less Severity.”⁴⁸ The accounts are brimming with tales of horrific domestic abuse. Collins provides a typical example.

Three or four years ago a Merchant beat his Wife as long as he was able, with a Whip two inches about, and then caused [her] to bit on a Smock dipt in Brandy three or four times distilled, which he set on fire, and so the poor creature perished miserably in the flames . . . And yet what is more strange, none prosecuted her death; for . . . they have no penal Law for killing of a Wife or a Slave, if it happen upon correction . . . Some of these Barbarians tye up their Wives by the hair of the head, and whip them stark naked.⁴⁹

Not infrequently the foreigners report that wives understood beatings as a signs of affection and became distressed when harsh discipline was not forth-coming.⁵⁰ The Westerners cite instances in which wives attempted to take revenge (usually equally violent) against abusive husbands.⁵¹ However the authorities did not look kindly on women who successfully ridded themselves of their mates, even in cases of abuse. Perry tells us the fate of such women.

They are set alive in the Ground, standing upright, with the Earth fill'd about them, and only their Heads left just above the Earth, and a Watch set over them, that they shall not be relieved till they starve to Death; which is a common Sight in the Countrey, and I have known them live sometimes seven or eight days in this Posture.⁵²

Husband not only beat their wives, they could easily repudiate them. The foreigners report that divorce laws were lax and that wives were easily forced into nunneries.⁵³

Violence against women was not confined to the domestic sphere. The foreigners occasionally note public brutalization of women. Open misogyny sometimes took purely symbolic, conventional forms. Herberstein tells us that

⁴⁸Crull (1698), 162. Also see Herberstein (1517), 93-95; Giovio (1525), 51; Possevino (1568), 12; Fletcher (1591), 290; Avity (1613), 690; Petreius (1615), 632-33; Heylyn (1621), 343-44; Olearius (1647), 145, 165 and 170; Heylyn II (1652), 511; Meyerberg (1661), 135; Collins (1667), 8-10; Crull (1698), 149 and 162; Perry (1698), 201; and Korb (1700), 207.

⁴⁹Collins (1667), 8-10.

⁵⁰Herberstein (1517), 93-95; Avity (1613), 690; Petreius (1615), 623-33; Heylyn (1621), 343-44; and Heylyn II (1652), 511. Olearius (1647), 170, disputes this, but claims that wife-beating is results from the woman's misdemeanors, and that beaten-wives do not protest because they realize their fault.

⁵¹Olearius (1647), 135-36; Collins (1667), 37; Crull (1698), 141; Perry (1698), 201; and Korb (1700), 213-15 and 218-19.

⁵²Perry (1698), 201.

⁵³Herberstein (1517), 50 and 93; Possevino (1568), 48 and 190; Massa (1610), 16; Petreius (1615), 635; Fletcher (1591), 290; Margeret (1607), 22; Olearius (1647), 171; Heylyn II (1652), 512; Meyerberg (1661), 98, 135-36, and 138-40; Collins (1667), 10-12; Crull (1698), 149 and 162; and Korb (1700), 131 and 211.

the most common Muscovite curse was “May a dog defile thy mother.”⁵⁴ Olearius adds “son of a whore,” “son of a bitch,” “cur,” and “I fuck your mother.”⁵⁵ The foreigners also cite instances in which women were beaten and even killed in public.⁵⁶ Much more disturbing and altogether more common, particularly in descriptions of Ivan IV’s reign, are vivid pictures of sexualized violence toward women. Here I have in mind public spectacles of barbarity involving obviously sexual elements. Such cases were of various degrees of severity. Some involved only sexual humiliation, for example Ivan IV ordering the wives of his supposed enemies stripped naked “to expose [their] private parts for all to see.”⁵⁷ A step further were public rapes: women were seized and “raped by the fusiliers in his presence and [then] sent back to their husbands.”⁵⁸ Finally, we find cases in which women were exposed, raped, executed, and their bodies were displayed. Schlichting paints one such horrendous scene:

This was the way [Ivan] treated one of his clerks a year ago. He seized the man’s wife and her maid and held them a long time. Both were raped and hanged in front of the husband’s home, where they remained until Ivan had them cut down.⁵⁹

Though the responsibility for public sexualized violence is most frequently laid at Ivan IV’s door, the Westerners also note that Russian troops sometimes used such displays to intimidate enemies. Horsey describes one such instance occurring in Livonia.

O the lamentable outcries and cruel slaughters, drowning and burning, ravaging of women and maids, stripped them naked without mercy or regard of the frozen weather, tying and binding them by three and by four at their horses’ tails, dragging them, some alive, some dead, all bloodying the ways and streets, lying full of carcasses of the aged men and women and infants.⁶⁰

A popular German pamphlet from 1561 describes Muscovite soldiers raping women, hanging them naked from trees, and then shooting arrows at their “privy parts.”⁶¹ Sexual violence of this sort was not confined to the reign of Ivan IV: travelers report it under Boris Godunov and Peter I.⁶²

⁵⁴Herberstein (1517), 80. He adds later that “A dog is regarded among them as an unclean animal, and it is a defilement to touch a dog with the naked hand.” See Herberstein (1517), 134.

⁵⁵Olearius (1647), 139. Also see Heylyn (1621), 343 and Crull (1698), 141-42.

⁵⁶Herberstein (1517), 51; Schlichting (1571), 259; Horsey (1584), 266 and 293; Olearius (1647), 231 and 246-47; Neuville (1689), 28; and Korb (1700), 192.

⁵⁷Schlichting (1571), 266. The Swedish ambassador Paul Juusten reported that members of his ill-fated embassy to Ivan IV were stripped by Muscovite officials in Novgorod and “forced to display [their] buttocks and private parts.” See Juusten (1569), 62-63.

⁵⁸Schlichting (1571), 246.

⁵⁹Schlichting (1571), 246-47. For other examples of public sexualized violence, see Schlichting (1571), 225, 242, 253, 261, 266; Staden (1578), 21, 28, 32-33, 35; Ulfeldt (1579), 38; Horsey (1584), 279, 299, 300, 304; Margeret (1607), 23; Massa (1610), 15, 77, 81, 143, 148; Petreius (1615), 192, 196, 207-208, 219; and Korb (1700), 185.

⁶⁰Horsey (1584), 267.

⁶¹See K. Höhlbaum, ed., “Zeitungen über Livland,” in *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst, Liv- und Kurlands* 2 (1876): 120-24.

It must be granted that there are likely many inaccuracies and much exaggeration in these accounts. However the very frequency and consistency of the foreign reports of wife-beating and mass sexual abuse demand that we take them seriously. Muscovite domestic abuse and sexualized violence are, I would argue, extreme though symptomatic articulations of the underlying logic of the patriarchal and carnivalesque sexual roles. Wife-beating and the public abuse of women appeared at moments when the symbolic orders represented by the domestic and carnivalesque roles broke down, for example, when wives were understood to be less than submissive to husbands or when the symbolic ambiguity of carnival had been replaced by open war. Such instances called forth efforts on the part of “authorities” to re-establish the everyday sexual order. They did so by grotesquely exploiting the potentialities of the patriarchal and carnivalesque roles. Husbands, instead of ritually subordinating their wives, literally beat them. Men at war, instead of playfully engaging in sexual games, used their physical and political superiority to sexually brutalize women. In both cases, the logic of patriarchy and carnival were extended in what was at once a symbolic and literal display of male power.

⁶²Massa (1610), 81 and Korb (1700), 185.

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