

Making War, Not Love

Gender and Sexuality in Russian Humor

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Author's Note

Since humor is deeply embedded in a culture, it presents problems for the outsider. My own background in Russia should help in understanding the intricacies of Russian humor. Having lived in Russia until I was in my late thirties, and later trained in the West as a scholar, I offer an insider's knowledge from an outsider's vantage point. This study is a natural extension of my lifelong involvement with and interest in the phenomenon of laughter. From 1964 to 1974, under my pen name Emil Abramov, I contributed satirical columns and humorous short stories to *Krokodil* (The Crocodile), "The Club of Twelve Chairs" in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, and other major Russian publications. In the United States, I have published a number of satirical sketches and humorous essays in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, *Studies in Contemporary Satire*, *Confrontation*, *New Press Literary Quarterly*, and several other American periodicals as well as in many Russian émigré publications.

My research in Russian sexual humor has evolved from my study of Soviet underground humor. After publishing a small collection of Soviet underground jokes, *Forbidden Laughter*, I followed it up with analytical work on the subject. My next book-length effort resulted in *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia*. As the first extensive work on the subject, it attempts to offer to the Western reader not only a comprehensive collection of Russian ethnic humor of the second half of this century but its interpretation in sociopolitical and psychological terms.

The current study is devoted to another large area of Russian oral jokelore—gender-related matters. I hope it will interest scholars and students of folklore, gender studies, sociology, political science, cultural history, literature, sociolinguistics, and cultural anthropology, and the general reader will gain an understanding of Russia as a male-dominant society.

Although I cite a number of sociological research findings, this book is a study of folk humor. Therefore, references to Russians (and occasionally to other ethnic groups) are primarily concerned with their image as it is portrayed or transpires in this humor. A comic stereotype is invoked, foreknowledge of

which for both the teller and the hearer is a necessary condition for a joke's success.

I should also warn readers who may prefer to skip the analysis and read only the jokes that, while some Russian jokes make for an unpleasant (and even at times disturbing) reading, I have approached the selection of jokes solely on the basis of their analytical interest, choosing not the funniest (or tasteful) samples but those most representative of the variants and richest in texture. Note that reading jokes in a book is not the same as hearing them in an actual setting and in a certain mood. Even if this were possible, Westerners may lack something in order to appreciate them fully, something that French philosopher Henri Bergson considers a requirement for laughter—a “secret freemasonry . . . with laughs.”

Introduction

Learning about Russians as a people is important now as never before. Russian society is undergoing tremendous political and social changes. To deal successfully with the new Russia that is gradually emerging from the rubble of totalitarianism, we must know as much as we can about the world individual Russians inhabit, his or her attitudes and customs, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies, and the inter- and intragroup relationships of this complex society.

Although entertainment is the primary—the recognized—goal of telling jokes, the subjects they are related to are usually those that are most important to the tellers, even if they don't realize it. Humor expresses serious anxieties in lighter terms; it is this capacity to relieve frustration that makes laughter so attractive.

Properly analyzed, folk humor can help make visible areas of unacknowledged attitudes and behaviors in private, unofficial realms. Therefore, rendering tacit culture explicit is at the core of my analysis. What makes such analysis possible is the awareness that a joke dies as a bit of communication unless the teller and the hearer share common ground. Thus the implicit assumptions of the culture form the foundation of a joke. Analyzing and interpreting jokes make it possible to deduce certain behavioral patterns based on deeply held popular beliefs, the hidden underpinnings of a culture. In *The Silent Language*, anthropologist Edward Hall (1973) stresses the importance of understanding a people's sense of humor as one key to the structure of that society: "People laugh and tell jokes, and if you can learn the humor of a people and really control it you know that you are also in control of nearly everything else" (52).

Jokes, then, can give us clues to what people think about their lives; we learn by studying the way they verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Such lore is widespread among many people in Russia and elsewhere, although its degree of visibility and its meaning in every society must be determined separately for every group and for individuals within the groups. But its widespread presence and persistence cannot be denied.

Jokelore as part of everyday discourse is important not only because it reflects prevailing attitudes and mores but also because it reaffirms and sustains them. In *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika*, Nancy Ries (1997, 75) shows that everyday discourse, even when it “mourns or mocks” a certain norm, is instrumental in “its reproduction over time.” Thus repeated and continuous joke-telling, no matter how biting the jokes may be, assures one result: validation of the norm in the consciousness of the listeners. From this vantage point, jokes are masked contributors to the status quo. As British social psychologist Christopher Wilson (1979, 228) points out, “though jokes feed on subversive thought, on deviations from the normal and expected, they reinforce established views of the world.”

Jokes that Russians exchange with each other are most often called *anekdoty*,¹ from the Greek *anekdota*, meaning “unpublished things.” The Russians’ resort to humor in daily life when other avenues of expression are closed has long been begging for exploration and interpretation. The only contemporary Russian jokelore that has been systematically collected by Westerners is political humor. Sovietologists and American media observers sporadically attempted to analyze this material primarily to better understand Soviet society.

The Russian culture of popular laughter, however, is a much broader phenomenon than is generally believed in the West. Coming from a rich tradition of oral literature and folk tales, contemporary Russian popular laughter contains a wealth of sociological, anthropological, ethnographic, and other material. The data for such inquiry into this resource has not been sufficiently collected and analyzed, probably because of language and cultural barriers and the disregard of some scholars for contemporary folklore as an important expression of a people’s cognitive and emotional life.

At the same time, in recent years Western scholars have shown a growing interest in Russian sex- and gender-related issues. Among these studies are Igor Kon’s and James Riordan’s *Sex and Russian Society* (1993); Eve Levin’s *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700* (1989); Jane Costlow’s, Stephanie Sandler’s, and Judith Vowles’s *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (1993); Laura Engelstein’s *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and Search of Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (1992); and Barbara Heldt’s *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (1989). Igor Kon’s *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* (1995) was also published in the West.

Although some of these studies address Russian popular views on gender and sexuality (e.g., Catriona Kelly’s 1993 work on the popular puppet street show, “Petrushka,” a Russian variant of “Punch and Judy”), most of these scholarly works are devoted to high culture. In his otherwise exhaustive two-

volume studies, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (1968, 1975), Gershon Legman makes sporadic use of Russian samples, referring primarily to Alexander Afanasiev's nineteenth-century collection of Russian folk erotica, *Secret Tales*. Little contemporary Russian sexual material has been collected in the West; the field is, by and large, untouched by Western scholarly inquiry. Only a handful of sex- and gender-related jokes is included in such collections as *Russia Dies Laughing* by Zhanna Dolgoplova (1982) or my book *Forbidden Laughter*.

In those rare instances when Russian sexual jokelore has been analyzed in the West, it has almost never been approached from the anthropological, sociological, or psychological vantage point. Thus in his *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985), Victor Raskin scrutinizes samples of Russian sexual jokes as well as of ribald popular rhymes (chastushkas), but he does so only in the context of his linguistic theory of humor. Raskin was not interested in studying the material as it relates to Russian culture—behavioral patterns, customs, folk beliefs, and tacit assumptions held by various population groups.

With glasnost and perestroika and the lifting of official taboos on the publication of folk humor, the streets of Russian cities were soon flooded with hastily published books and booklets of current sexual jokes. However, a number of works devoted to the erotic in Russian culture published in recent years by Russian scholars—*Russkii eroticheskii fol'klor* (Russian erotic folklore) (1995), *Seks i erotika v russkoi traditsionnoi kul'ture* (Sex and eroticism in Russian traditional culture) (1996), both edited by Andrey Toporkov, and *Antimir russkoi kul'tury* (The anti-world of Russian culture), edited by Nikolai Bogomolov (1996)—concentrate on ancient erotic folklore. As Toporkov (1995, 9) points out, while the main avenue of interpretation of erotic folklore in current Russian scholarship is “establishing traces of agrarian magic or attempting hypothetical reconstruction of institutions of primordial society,” these studies shy away from any sociological and psychological analysis of the functions of erotic folklore today. My work is intended to fill this gap.

Sexual jokes abound in many societies. In most cultures, sexuality represents an important feature of human life as well as one of its most volatile and emotionally charged aspects. Since “the subject of sex and sex roles is a great reservoir of fears, resentments, defenses, projections of the repressed, displacement of emotions, myth, pure fabrication, and arrant nonsense” (Murphy 1989, 65) and straightforward discourse is often inhibited by almost universally imposed societal taboos, humor serves as a natural vehicle of expression of the whole array of human emotions related to these topics. As Michael Mulkay (1988, 9) shows, the sex-related joke, while frequently

told to amuse and entertain, not only benefits by bypassing the taboos but often exists solely because such taboos exist.

Western readers may recognize some of the jokes analyzed in this book as variants of jokes they have perceived as belonging to their own culture, past or present. (This proves that popular laughter is able to cross both spatial and temporal borders.) Since many Russian sexual jokes are similar to those of other peoples, it may seem that analysis of their "Russianness" presents a special problem of cultural identification.

Indeed, it would seem difficult to tag some of the jokes as being truly Russian. American society of the early 1970s was undergoing "sweeping changes in public attitude toward things erotic in almost every facet of daily life, from serious reading matter, to movie fare, to television commercials or magazine advertisements" (Hoffmann 1973, 9). Russian society is experiencing similar changes today.

In Russia, as in most Western societies, ribaldry is "accepted as a part of social contact and communication on every level," and sexual jokes are also perpetuated "in almost ritual manner" (Hoffmann 1973, 9). Even a brief look at the types of erotic folk tales (160–83) and the motif index of erotic folk literature (184–288) is enough to show that Russian Eros follows world patterns. A popular Russian series of jokes about "little Vova" is akin to Western jokes based on the mock sexual ignorance of children recorded and analyzed by Legman (1968, 65–72).²

However, the origin of a joke is much less important than its social/cultural/symbolic/communicative and context-summarizing functions as well as its emotional/psychological ones. These jokes are pulled from a vast reservoir of available material, not completely at random, but recurrently in direct correspondence to the emotional, often unconscious, needs of the teller and his intended audience. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, it is important to establish not so much the origins as the kinds of jokes that circulate most frequently.

Thus the effort to acquaint Western readers with samples of Russian humor makes this study comparative. Whenever possible, I cite similar American jokes. From this standpoint, the absence of Russian jokes on certain subjects found in American humor is sometimes telling. And when the jokes are similar, they operate in different cultural contexts, with different connotations. Accordingly, I have attempted to interpret the Russians' erotic folklore in terms of their everyday life, customs, and popular beliefs.

Although many folklore genres, like many works of high literature and art, provide entertainment, jokelore (especially sexual) seems to possess this capacity in the highest degree; it is often assumed that a joke is told for its

own sake. There exists, however, a scholarly tradition of serious interpretations of seemingly nonserious material, Sigmund Freud's classic *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960; originally published in German in 1905) chief among them. Russian folklore itself often looks beyond its text for deeper meanings and implications. Russian proverbs and sayings have long been considered "age-old people's wisdom" (*vekovaia narodnaia mudrost'*), and many fairy tales end in this way: "A fairy tale's a lie, but it has a clue in it and a lesson for all good fellows" (*skazka—lozh', da v nei namek, dobrym molodtsam urok*).

As for the modern Russian joke, which in part derives from the "everyday tale" (*bytovaia skazka*), Russians often point out that it is not just, as the saying goes, "There's some truth in every joke" (*V kazhdoi shutke dolia pravdy*) but "Only part of a joke is a joke" (*V kazhdoi shutke dolia shutki*). This saying captures the fact that it is conventionally often overlooked that humor, in fact, has no substance on its own; most of the time it is only a *mode* of expression, a shell charged with a serious substance (often objectionable, especially when it comes to sexual matters).

Thus I pay attention not to the comic techniques (unless they contribute to the content analysis) but to what jokelore's cleverness and wit try to render as merely amusing and entertaining.

Freud finds a similarity between jokes and dreams in their defiance of logic and reality. Since this book is about Russian humor, another similarity comes to mind, that between alcohol and humor. Russian scholar Zara Abdulaeva (1996, 211–212) makes much of the connection between Russians' love for the bottle and their country's turbulent history. Humor, like alcohol, has helped the Russians to cope with the unbearable reality of their country's cruel history. It is not by chance that in the Soviet years waves of jokes washed every man's shore with the constancy of daily tides. Both alcohol and humor help to blur a sense of reality and give the speaker a temporary license to suspend the conventions and proprieties of ordinary speech. Without much exaggeration, a Russian expression "What's on a sober man's mind is what's on a drunkard's tongue" (*chto u trezvogo na ume, to u p'ianogo na izyke*) may be paraphrased as: "What's on a serious man's mind is what's on a humorous man's tongue."

Humor's licensing of speech about the unspeakable often is used in the most exploitative genre of public communications—advertisements. Not only are sexual messages camouflaged but non-sexual ones are as well. For example, in the journal *Popular Photography* (October 1997, 35), aiming evidently at a younger buying public, the Nikon company has placed an ad for their "Advanced Simple" camera N50 model. Here is the ad in its entirety under the caption: "You Point it, You Shoot It":

When we say the N50 is easy to use, we don't mean "easy for people who've won Pulitzers for Photography." We mean seriously *simple* as in, hand it to an average dad and say "push here." In Simple Mode, you can literally point the N50, shoot it, and capture frame worthy, SLR-quality images like this. The camera is positively fool proof. Or more to the point, dad proof.

It is clear that the company is using humor to avoid a counterproductive, thus unspeakable, message. If the company could talk to every prospective buyer in private, the message of this ad would most likely sound something like: "Even an idiot can take good pictures with this camera." To make the same message publicly acceptable, humor and skill with words come into play. Thanks to this advertisement, the impossible in a serious mode became possible in a humorous one. It is set up by a reference to the mundane taking of a snapshot ("hand it to an average dad and say 'push here'") and reinforced with a parallel construction: ". . . fool proof. Or more to the point, dad proof." Thus the ad triggers a stereotypical image of an "average dad" as an aging man who is either "losing it" or just falling behind the times, overwhelmed by modern technology that is too sophisticated for him to handle.

Advertising copy provides insight into a people's psyche, but folk humor sometimes is the only source of inquiry. Although it relies on established stereotypes and misses all the oscillations, nuances, and subtleties of an ongoing social process, humor, due to its ability to handle the most emotionally charged and sensitive areas of human existence, gives voice, if only opaquely, to the usually unspoken aspects of a culture.

However, in using such an approach, caution has to be exercised. A treatment of folk material at its face value may be misleading because folklore in general can be as contradictory as life itself. For instance, readers of Vladimir Dahl's (1879) nineteenth-century collection of Russian proverbs and sayings may find in it pronouncements that show diametrically opposed attitudes toward various human values. Thus one proverb may praise love ("There is no value higher than love") and another one may condemn it ("Where there is one's love, there is one's woe"). One proverb shows disdain for a bachelor's life ("A bachelor is like a mad man. A bachelor is half of a human being"). Others find a married life not much better ("A bachelor may as well drown himself. A married man may as well hang himself").

What is a constant in my study is the context of the jokes and their point of view, almost all, throughout this text, a male one. As a rule, these jokes are exchanged in male company—in groups and man to man—in smoking areas, army barracks, factory shops, offices, while riding in train compartments or cabs, during drinking parties (there are no other kinds in Russia),

and the like. The tellers are Russian men of all walks of life—soldiers, students, taxi drivers, businessmen, petty and high officials, journalists, scholars, street sweepers, and so on.

Therefore, this work is a study of Russian masculinity as it expresses itself through humorous venues. While there is a growing literature on masculinity in gender studies (e.g., one about Andalusian culture: Brandes 1980), there has been very little research done on Russian masculinity. This study of the dominant masculinity structure and of the gender relations and gender structures shaped by it attempts to fill the void, at least in part. The humorous database of this study, seemingly casual, recreational, and entertaining by nature, should not be dismissed as insignificant; moreover, thanks to its inconspicuous nature, such a mode of men's self-discourse is highly effective in reproducing male behavioral patterns and reaffirming prevailing attitudes. The power of laughter as a corrective and instructive force is well known.

While the male-dominant point of view is expressed in many sex jokes, I do not agree with George Fine's view (1981, 11) that most of these jokes are "the product of male chauvinism." In his *On Humor*, Michael Mulkay (1988, 137) also argues that that "dirty jokes depict the relationship between men and women in terms of a radical form of sexual, social and linguistic domination of women by men." These statements make it look as if male dominance is unshakable and not threatened, void of any dynamics. Although most male jokes are undoubtedly misogynist, the picture is more complicated. While most humor in this study is male-centric and indicative of the male dominance in Russian culture, this humor not only asserts such dominance but also deals with dominance anxiety as well as other issues of gender hierarchy in a distinctly masculine culture.

Although sex jokes make "most clearly visible . . . men's most basic, serious assumptions regarding women and sexuality" (Mulkay 1988, 142), too literal a reading is misleading; humor by its very nature needs to exaggerate and simplify "elements that are already pronounced within serious discourse" making "in the domain of humor men's control over and sexual domination of women . . . exceptionally stark and unrestricted" (Mulkay 1988, 141). The true distribution of power in a given social grouping or unit, such as a family, may prove to be much more complex, as it is examined in chapter 6 devoted to marriage jokes.

A study of sex humor also may give some sexological insights, shedding some light on the most intimate aspects of gender relationships. However, by no means do I see jokes as a substitute for a scientific study of a nation's sexuality—the kind of project undertaken by Dr. Alfred Kinsey in the

United States. Sex jokes reflect sexual reality only to a degree; they constitute a *discourse* on the topic of gender relations and sex. While some jokes provide a truthful commentary, others seemingly contradict life, often fulfilling a wish or a fantasy. Therefore, it would be a mistake to depend on sex humor alone to understand Russian sexual practices. Humor is a specific discourse, often shaped around anxieties and insecurities, and therefore it cannot be relied on without reservations. To support my observations, whenever possible, I draw on sociological surveys, psychological and psychoanalytical studies, literature, and other evidence as well as on interviews with informants of both genders. I also make use of my personal observations of life in Russia, the country in which I spent most of my life.

The reader should bear in mind that, because humor is by nature aggressive, it often addresses the negative, troublesome aspects of a relationship. After all, the misogynist attitude, as expressed in jokes, has not deterred men all over the world from falling in love time and again. And despite the proliferation of antimarriage jokelore, most people continue to value the institution of marriage in deed, if not in word.

And tellers of dirty jokes need not subscribe fully to the opinions expressed. While some men may tell jokes that quite accurately reflect their views, some do not. Joke telling may serve as a mythmaking process and as a case of self-construction, as are other conversations reported by Nancy Ries (1997, 77). Men may tell jokes in order to come across as virile to themselves and to other men.

While male jokes are indicative of prevailing attitudes toward women, it would be wrong to assume that a man telling these jokes fully subscribes to the stereotypes he plays with. Thus Kevin Pollack, an American stand-up comedian, concedes that when he uses antiwomen jokes in his routines, "as a guy, [his] right brain laughs. But [his] left brain is horrified."³

In fact, men may use customary male jokes to cover up their deviance from the pressure group. Laughter may constitute conformity, a sign that the teller and his listener(s) stand on the same ground. It is not by chance that the Russians call joke-telling sessions, which spring up during parties and other informal gatherings, *traviv' anekdoty*, which, in this context, has two meanings borrowed from slang: "to let the jokes out [one by one]" and "to lie" [to make them up].

Jokes can be highly ambivalent. As American scholar Elliott Oring (1993, 31) argues, "like a proverb, a joke has specific performance meanings that are only discernible in situations of performance in relation to particular tellers, audiences, settings, and interactions." These meanings, though they may be "innumerable," are restricted, because otherwise "any joke would be

appropriate for any situation, and this is certainly not the case." In psychoanalytical terms, psychologists Renuart Hartogs and Hans Fantel (1967, 170) also find that jokes have "multiple goals: seduction, aggression, or release from sexual anxiety, depending on the story and the teller."

What seems to be the unifying property of all plausible "performance meanings" is their reliance on the instantaneously recognizable stereotypical images or attitudes the joke triggers. Because humor works by playing with the most deeply seated, well-established stereotypes in a group consciousness, it lends itself to studies of mass stereotypes in a given cultural context and historical moment.⁴

In his example of a joke about a businessman's decision to hire a secretary based not on her honesty but on her sexual appeal, Oring offers four "plausible performance meanings" (1992, 29–30): treatment of women as sexual objects, an attempt at sexual arousal, ridiculing men "who allow sexual impulses to overpower critical reason and judgment," and celebration of "male sexuality . . . in all circumstances . . . no matter how unsuitable" (31). These meanings do not really contradict one another, rather, they all correspond to the recognizable stereotype: Men see women as sexual beings first and foremost. What's more, one can imagine that all of Oring's four possible meanings are offered to a woman listener, to test her response and make her choose. She may be insulted by the joke's treatment of women as sex objects or aroused by its sexually explicit content; she may agree with the ridicule of male's self-destructive sexual drive or enjoy being the all-important object of men's desire. Folklorist Carol Mitchell's (1977, 329) study proves that joke appreciation gender-wise not only could be uneven but may depend on different elements of the joke.

The reader may find in these pages a number of jokes that seemingly attack not women's shortcomings but men's: womanizing, the double standard, a tendency to shirk domestic chores, and so on. These may seem to be women's jokes about men, but that is seldom the case. Russian female jokelore has a very limited coinage and circulation, and stand-up comedienne, as we know them in America, are yet to appear in Russian nightclubs or on TV. Feminism has not made much headway in Russian society.⁵

The existence of jokes ridiculing males, although they may reflect acknowledgment of their own faults, can be understood as part of the usual dynamics of satire. For instance, an ethnic joke that may sound self-effacing often is meant not as an attack on the teller's own ethnicity but on a subset of it from which he wants to distance himself.⁶

In the same vein, a man telling a joke that ridicules male behavior also may make a sincere attempt to distance himself (and his fellow listeners

whose agreement is often taken for granted) from “that kind of man.” The joke teller may refuse to see himself as the target and assume that the joke is about someone else. As Russians say, “This is not about me but about my next-door neighbor” (*Eto ne pro menia, a pro moego soseda*).

A clash of traditional and changing cultural pressures may account for the male jokes ridiculing men. On one hand, Russian everyday culture shows all the signs of preserving the traditional male dominance over women. On the other hand, many educated Russians feel the need to Westernize this attitude and to recognize women’s equality. These opposing cultural tendencies produce a conflict which is reflected in the jokes ridiculing males.

If the reader allows for the exaggerations, ambiguities and contradictions of the genre, he or she will find these jokes quite telling with respect to Russian sexual behavior and gender relations. As Kon (1995, 271) notes, “Russia’s current sexual attitudes and practices are . . . highly diversified according to age; gender; education; regional, ethnic, and social background; generational cohort, and religious affiliation.” In this respect, sexual jokelore is an equalizer. It appeals to a common denominator in all these diverse attitudes, shows what opinions and attitudes are shared by many groups that are otherwise heterogeneous in their makeup. By its very nature, a joke cannot be told to a listener who does not understand and appreciate the teller’s position. In this respect, jokelore is indispensable as an instrument of analysis and elucidation of the national stereotypes of attitudes and behavior, for discovering the anxieties expressed behind what Legman calls “the bravado of laughter.”

Using the methodology of content analysis, I examine Russian jokes of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods as well as other relevant material such as proverbs, sayings, catch phrases, chastushkas, folk parodies, and toasts, all of them, as a rule, of oral nature. They have been recorded in my private collection and in several of the Russian joke books I have consulted. While versions of some of the jokes analyzed in this work may be found in some English-language compilations, almost all my entries appear in English for the first time and are my translations. (I find a number of these jokes offensive to women and to my own taste, but I have included them on the grounds that a researcher cannot be a censor.)

Among the most comprehensive sources of sexual jokelore are O. Ivanova’s *Anekdoty i tosty* (Jokes and toasts) (1994 and 1996 editions), Iosif Raskin’s *Entsiklopediia khuliganstvuiushchego ortodoksa* (Encyclopedia of a rowdy Orthodox man; 1995), L. A. Barsky’s *Eto prosto smeshno ili zerkalo krivogo korolevstva* (This is just funny, or the mirror of the crooked kingdom; 1994), Yury Nikulin’s *Anekdoty ot Nikulina* (Jokes from Nikulin; 1997), and Victor Kulikov’s *Anekdoty pro novykh russkikh i drugikh zhitelei zemli* (Jokes about

the New Russians and other inhabitants of the Earth). Recently I also have made use of Internet postings of “Jokes from Russia” ([//www.anekdot.ru/](http://www.anekdot.ru/)); I denoted these jokes in the text with the abbreviation (JFR) and the date of an entry’s posting. Wherever possible, I have provided bibliographical data about versions of the jokes analyzed. (Often, to convey the flavor of a saying, a rhyme, a slang expression to readers who know Russian, I have provided the transliteration.)

Chapter 1 addresses the historical origins of the phenomenon of Russian sexual humor. It also discusses the idiosyncratic nature of Russian sex appeal, which is still deeply connected to the agrarian roots of Russian everyday culture, as it is expressed in painting and folklore—numerous folk rhymes (chastushkas), proverbs, sayings, nicknames, and slang expressions.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the key issue of male/female relationships—the ways in which gender roles are defined in the folk consciousness as they are enacted in oral humor. Contemporary jokelore affords ample evidence of the pervasiveness of the traditional view of gender roles in Russia and the tension it creates and sustains. Showing how sexist vocabulary, denigrating nicknames, and obscenities function to maintain male control, I analyze representative samples of jokes that treat women solely as objects of male desire as well as those that at the same time portray them as fools or as wanton. In contrast to such disparagement, numerous jokes approvingly portray the male as sexual predator and favorably contrast male camaraderie with female lack of gender solidarity. I address such male attitudes as they derive from cultural customs and the effects of upbringing in a country with a volatile historical background.

Chapter 4 is devoted to jokelore dealing with the most intimate part of the male/female relationship—courtship and lovemaking. I discuss these jokes in terms of recent studies of Russian sexuality and show the semiotic significance of certain sexual practices of Russian men as they are reflected in jokelore.

Chapter 5 analyzes various humorous folkloric material related to violence toward women. As wife-beating has been a frequent feature of everyday life, through analysis of the dynamics of the peasant family I attempt to give a new reading of the seemingly bizarre proverbs collected by Vladimir Dahl that treat the attacker’s violence as an expression of his love (e. g., “I beat the one I love,” *kogo liubliu, togo i b’iu*). I also address contemporary male jokelore related to rape and the myth that women always welcome it that these jokes help to perpetuate.

Chapter 6 explores contemporary Russian attitudes toward various aspects of married life as they are reflected in the jokelore and analyzes psychological

and sociological reasons for the savagery of jokes about mothers-in-law, contrasting it with the milder treatment of them in other cultures.

Chapter 7 treats the ways in which contemporary Russian jokes help Russian men deal with the most painful issues for the male ego—impotence and women's infidelity. Since the excessive consumption of alcohol plays a large part in these problems, I include jokes about drunken males.

While ribald *chastushkas* are discussed throughout in various contexts, chapter 8 considers the genre separately, relating it to agrarian pagan fertility rites and asking why women often sing these bawdy misogynist songs. As a way of understanding the function of this festive genre in rural areas, I examine the role of these performances in creating a sexually suggestive atmosphere sought after by both males and females. Finally, I examine the *chastushka* texts as verbal pranks, part of the entertainment of rural Russians.

Any folkloric material, especially of such a delicate nature, should be discussed not only with reference to text and texture (rhyming patterns, rhythm, alliterations, various tropes, etc.) but in terms of its context. Who is performing?⁷ Is the audience male or female or both? What is the age range of the audience? What is the occasion of the gathering, the mood? As folklorist Alan Dundes (1980, 24) points out, a context can not only interpret the text but explain its very *raison d'être*. However, researchers have yet to collect contextual information; without it, a *chastushka's* text may be misinterpreted. Therefore, my inquiry in this area must be considered a preliminary one.

CHAPTER 1

“The More of the Beloved’s Body the Better”: Jokelore of Russian Sex Appeal

The proliferation of sexual jokes in Russia has been a marked feature of daily discourse because sexuality has been a forbidden topic for long periods of modern history. Even before open discussion of sexual matters was considered politically undesirable under the Soviet regime in the 1930s, Russia was primarily a Victorian country in terms of sexual mores (Kon 1993, 19–20). For a long time, Russian literature and art avoided venturing into the realm of sex. Although much of nineteenth-century literature focuses on love and passion (in works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, and many other Russian writers), it never actually developed an erotic literary tradition.¹ Sex was totally avoided or trivialized and deeroticized in Barkovian verses (named after Ivan Barkov, an eighteenth-century Russian poet), or treated in its medieval ecclesiastic interpretation—as an evil to be condemned and confronted. (Tolstoy’s late-period *Kreutzer Sonata* and *Father Sergius* are especially indicative of this attitude.) The first growths of refined erotic culture, cultivated by artists, poets, and prose writers around the turn of the twentieth century, were eventually destroyed by the sweeping social changes of the Russian revolution of 1917.

Sexuality as “a culturally constructed phenomenon” (Highwater 1990, 11) is temporal, and its history often corresponds to the history of political doctrines. The history of ideology in the Soviet Union paralleled fairly closely the history of Communist sexual politics. As a rule, the most forceful political suppression was accompanied by the imposition of strict control in the sexual sphere as well. After brief experimentation with the idea of “free love” in the 1920s, the Soviet authorities expurgated (for ideological reasons)

any manifestation of sexuality. The strictly individual, private value of sexuality, in the party view, contradicted and endangered the collective cause to which people should devote their lives.

As the body serves as “a metaphor of society” (Highwater 1990, 11), bodily purity can symbolize the purity of ideology. Anthropologist Mary Douglas notes: “Societies, like other bounded groups, are vulnerable at their intersection with other groups. Thus much attention is paid in many societies to the orifices of the human body, for here matter passes from outside to inside, and vice versa. Societies which deem it important to maintain their separateness will also guard their [cultural boundaries or margins] against intrusion and pollution . . . and this may be symbolized through taboos on food and sex” (quoted in Highwater 1990, 11–12).

In the 1920s, when foreign specialists were invited to help build the new Socialist industry, attitudes toward sex had been fairly liberal. When Joseph Stalin consolidated his power in the late 1920s, borders were sealed and strict rules were imposed regarding sexual behavior.² At this particular juncture of Russian history, when the “iron curtain” was lowered to isolate the country from Western influence, foreigners in Russia discovered that the nation’s body wore a symbolic iron “chastity belt.”³ It was then that marriages with foreigners were strongly discouraged, if not altogether forbidden.

The late 1940s, marked by the further tightening of ideological controls, saw a new reinforcement of so-called Socialist morality which remained virtually unchanged until the introduction of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies in the late 1980s.

Of course, the ideological pressure greatly damaged people’s personal lives, but it failed to completely subjugate them, to strictly fit the party line(s). During most of Soviet time, sexual love was “a refuge for Soviet people from the harshness of life” (Shlapentokh 1989, 177). Premarital and extramarital love and sexual activity have never ceased to exist despite the great chances taken by lovers. Sexual jokes, therefore, with their aggressive, intentionally iconoclastic, often primitive and crudely biological nature, represented a defiance of the officially proclaimed “happy Soviet family.” In the post-Stalin period love, sex, and lovers increasingly grew into “private institutions.”

The collapse of totalitarianism brought a drastic turnaround in the sphere of open sexual expression. The works of Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, and other Western authors that discussed sex became available to Russian readers for the first time. With this revival, all the negative aspects of this new freedom became the subject of heated public debates. In a few years an officially asexual country became a country flooded with sexually

oriented material available literally on every corner. These developments notwithstanding, Russian gender-related folklore has hardly changed; recent samples of sexual jokes collected in Russia express the same emotions and attitudes, still deeply ingrained in the folk mind.

Sources of Russian Bawdy Jokelore

The Russians' bawdy jokes show a substantial connection with the international body of Indo-European folklore. Some motifs, themes, and uses of language are similar to those appearing in subliterate forms in contemporary Western collections. The evidence drawn from the enormous body of ever-present and popular jokes [*anekdoty*] challenges those Russian nationalists who insist that their sexual traditions differ from those in the West—that they are purer, cleaner. Most Russian sex jokes are not cleaner (and not much dirtier) than their Western counterparts. But some issues touched upon by this folkloric genre not only assert their importance—in their frequency—but are quite different; they are intrinsic to Russian conditions with deep roots in national history and culture.

The resemblance of Russian sexual jokelore to that circulating elsewhere is the result of direct borrowing and the fact that much sexual humor has common sources traceable to time immemorial. Sexual tales of ancient Eastern origin were carried by the Arabs to Spain and then to Italy, spreading throughout the whole of Western Europe; the same tales penetrated Russian folk culture via Byzantium, through Greek religious literature. The *Lives (Zhitii)* of the saints sometimes contained racy descriptions of the future saint's sinful life prior to his conversion. (What is less known, and perhaps worth exploring, is the contribution of Tartar and Mongolian tales to the Russian repertoire of sexual folklore. Taking into consideration a rather long stretch of Russian history when both peoples were closely interconnected and cohabitation, often forceful, sometimes voluntary, between Tartar men and Russian women was common [Popovsky 1985, 434], such an influence is quite possible.)

In the second part of the seventeenth century, with the beginning of the orientation of Russian statesmen toward Europe, European jokelore entered Russian culture via translations from the Polish; in this period Poland's own jocular literature was also translated into Russian (Dolgo-polova 1983, 12). Thus the collection of tales of everyday life, *Fatsetsii* (Facetiae), widely known to educated Russians of the time, contained a number of sexually colored stories that were, in turn, a product of Western literature of the same sort. The most notable was the Italian collection of

tales by Poggio Braccolini. Probably the seventeenth-century Russian courtiers observed by the European diplomat Adam Olearius (Kon 1995, 11) were telling stories from this risqué miscellany.

However, the Russians have their own rich tradition of erotic humor. Erotic material was part of several pagan fertility rites, such as harvest celebrations, weddings, and the rites of spring [*maslenitsa*]. The Russian ribald folk tales and erotic proverbs and sayings collected by Alexander Afanasiev and Vladimir Dahl in the nineteenth century also can be traced back to pagan times and had long been part of Russian everyday discourse. (These collections could not appear in Russia, only abroad—evidence of the state of public mores.) Many popular rhymes and ditties of Russian medieval street entertainers [*skomorokhi*] contained salacious humor. Throughout the nineteenth century there circulated a Russian folk artifact known as *lubok*—cheap prints made from linden bark, many of them licentious (Farrel 1991).

Developed around the 1870s (Keldysh 1991, 621), short rural popular rhymes (chastushkas)—which later, with the influx of peasants to the burgeoning industrial centers, also became part of nascent urban folklore—often have been concerned with sexual matters as well. Displaced from their traditional way of life, Russian peasants became factory workers; they used this rhyming medium to deal with unfamiliar and often uncomfortable social reality. Jokes, however, are a genre of urban folklore, beginning in the late seventeenth century (Dolgoplova 1983, 10).

Two Cultural Standards Clash

Of course, jokes that address phenomena peculiar to Russians are among those for which it is hard to find Western counterparts. Among them are those concerned with Russian sex appeal. While Russian standards of beauty are one-sided and chauvinistic—a Russian saying collected by Dahl (1879, I: 455) postulates: “If a man looks a bit better than the Devil, he’s a handsome fellow”—there is one aspect of Russian sex appeal in which both sexes are about equal—the shape of their bodies. Westerners traveling through Russia notice that both Russian men and women are often rather overweight. One explanation lies in their diet, which lacks those foods that help Westerners keep themselves in shape—fresh vegetables year-round, lean meats and poultry, and so on. These foods appeared on the average Russian’s table only sporadically through most of the Soviet regime. These and other factors contributed to unhealthy Russian diets, rich in starches and carbohydrates.⁴

However, one glance at the portraits of the Soviet leaders (Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin) should convince us that portliness results not

only from the lack of fresh vegetables (at least these leaders could have access to them) but from something else.

One of my Moscow informants, a female artist in her early 40s, expressed her conviction that a man is more attractive when he is corpulent. For her, a man should be “solid, have a sizable body” [*solidnyi, v tele*, cf. Ukrainian for a fat person—“a smooth one,” *gladkii*]. The Russian word for “a fat man” literally means “a complete man” [*polnyi*] and that for “a bad man” means also “skinny” [*khudoj*]. The word “healthy” [*zdorovyi*] in Russian has a colloquial meaning “big,” as in: “Look how healthy [read: big] your boy has grown!” [*smotri, kakoi zdorovyi tvoi mal'chik stal!*]. In his article “It’s Not Hunger That Kills You. It’s Food,” Russian doctor, V. D. Silantiev, notes that part of the problem of overeating in today’s Russia is following eating habits deeply imbedded in Russian consciousness of which “our beloved sayings, such as ‘our mouth is rejoicing when having a big bite’ [*bol'shomu kusku rot raduetsia*], ‘there should be a lot of a good person’ [*khorošhego cheloveka dolzhno byt' mnogo*] are emblematic” (1997, 21).

Such attitudes may be accounted for by the deep-seated conviction of a culture that, because of the tardiness of the industrial revolution, is still predominantly rural in its world outlook. As “no society entirely escapes its past” and “there are always elements that persist from prior conditions” (Barret 1984, 114), while Russia has made great strides in the direction of industrialization and urbanization throughout this century, in their habits and customs, the Russians are still in the process of cultural acclimatization.

The enormous cultural chasm between the intelligentsia with its European-level education and the mostly illiterate peasant masses (80 percent of total population; cited in Aileen Kelly 1999, 7) that existed before revolution of 1917 was closed only on the surface. A great many Russians from humble stations in life advanced to positions of power and control willfully and forcefully. According to Kon (1997), “as a result of the industrialization and collectivization of the country, as well as political repressions, in the beginning of the 1930s the social make-up of the leading cadres of the party and the state changed. More often than not, yesterday’s peasants took the place of intelligentsia and blue-collar workers by birth, a ‘villagization of the cities’ [*oderevenshchivanie gorodov*] occurred” (162).

Although with lesser vigor, this practice continued in the post-Stalin era as well. In Russia, having a college degree (especially in a technical field) and keeping a high position in society do not necessarily indicate civility and cultural awareness that the higher education seems to signify. Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1975, 242) only touches upon this phenomenon, talking primarily about this kind of people’s ideological complacency about the Soviet

regime: “Although the polish we have acquired is rather third-rate, it will be entirely in the spirit of the Russian language and will probably convey the right sense if we refer to this ‘polished’ and ‘schooled’ stratum, all those who nowadays falsely and rashly style themselves as ‘intelligentsia,’ as the *obrazovanshchina*—the semi-educated estate—the ‘smatterers.’”

As often happens with many issues that are publicly by and large unacknowledged, this cultural tension between refined Russian intelligentsia and unpolished, hastily promoted villagers in commanding positions is expressed in jokes:

- (1.1) A radio broadcast. The year is 1966.

Radio announcer (joyfully): “Good morning, comrades. We begin our concert on listeners’ requests. A boy called Vanya from the village of Godforsaken asks us to play for him his favorite song ‘Felt Boots’ [*valenki*]. You’re welcome, Vanya. Listen to your favorite song ‘Felt Boots.’”

1976. Radio announcer (joyfully): “Good morning, comrades. We begin our concert composed of listeners’ requests. A student of an agricultural trade school of the town of Remoteville, Vanya Petrov, writes to us asking to play for him his favorite song ‘Felt Boots’. You’re welcome, Vanya. Here is your favorite song ‘Felt Boots.’”

1986. Radio announcer (joyfully): “Good morning, comrades. We begin our concert composed of listeners’ requests. The Director of the Patrice Lumumba kolkhoz of the Godforsaken village Ivan Petrov asks us to play for him his favorite song ‘Felt Boots’. You’re welcome, Ivan. Here is your favorite song ‘Felt Boots.’”

1996. Radio announcer (joyfully): “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We begin our concert composed of listeners’ requests. A State Duma Deputy, Academician of the Russian Agricultural Academy, Ivan Sidorovich Petrov asks us to play for him a piece by Johann Sebastian Bach, ‘Tocatta and Fugue E-minor.’ (Even more joyfully). Dear Ivan Sidorovich, please DON’T SHOW OFF⁵ and listen to your favorite song ‘Felt Boots.’” (JFR 2/14/98)

In jokes of this kind, the artistic need to underscore the difference between the two disparate cultural standards coexisting in the Russian cities makes it necessary to use shocking words or urgent situations. Thus a museum is a place of worship of beauty for one Russian and for another, due to the notorious shortage of public toilets in the cities,⁶ just a place where a rest room could be found. The vulgar synonym for the imperative form of the verb “urinate”—“piss” [*sy* or *stsy*] used by one of the characters in the following joke betrays his low-class (peasant) background:

- (1.2) On a St. Petersburg street, one man asks another:
 “Can you tell me how to get to the Hermitage?”
 “What do you need it for? Piss right here.” (Private collection)

The clash of two cultures often is expressed as a linguistic contrast between crude street vernacular and educated Russian. A subtitle of a recent collection of jokes *Dinner Is Served. Pig Out Please* [*Kushat' podano. Sadites' zhrat', pozhaluista*] (Sonin 1995) is one example of this kind of humor.

- (1.3) One man complains to another:
 “The cultural level in our city has drastically plummeted.”
 “Yeah? How did you figure that out?”
 “Well, recently I came out of the joint—not that late, around 1 a.m.—
 and some kind of swine stepped on my ear.” (Private collection)

Much humor in the modern-day Venedikt Erofeev's classic “Moscow Stations” (Moskva-Petushki) derives from this tension between the high and the low, or, to be exact, from degradation of the high by associating it with the low. Often such dissimilar cultural standards are combined in one person. Venichka, the narrator of “Moscow Stations,” demonstrates a formidable knowledge of Russian and world culture—he is equally versed in modern and ancient history and literature; quotes by heart many biblical passages; shows an admirable acquaintance with sophisticated musical terminology—and at the same time lacks a sense of elementary hygiene, undoubtedly a remnant of old peasant lifestyle.⁷

Peasant folklore and folk life still show their strong presence in Russian everyday life. Superstitions, fortune-telling (not strictly commercial, as in the West), love potions, folk remedies, and many other popular forms of pagan culture are widespread among college-educated Russian city dwellers of today. This lingering peasant mentality and system of values manifests itself in the great proliferation of village folklore in everyday speech. Numerous proverbs and sayings of peasant origin expressing peasant values, points of reference, and outlook still permeate Russian speech. Not only are these idioms saturated with images from rural life, they often make judgments from the peasants' points of reference.⁸ Urban Russians still often address the sun and rain, the two most important natural phenomena in peasant life, with endearing diminutive suffixes—“the little sun” [*solnyshko*], “the little rain” [*dozhdichek*]. To underscore a person's physical strength, a Russian often says: “You can hitch him [her] to a plow” [*na nem (nei) pakhat' mozžno*].

While American folklore, as folklore in general, also shows traces of its rural roots, the Russian is firmly anchored in it. It often features not only the hut [*izba*; as in the expression “to sweep out the dirt out of one’s own hut” (to expose family dirty secrets) *vynosit’ sor iz izby*] but many elements of flora and fauna, closely familiar to a peasant of which modern Russian city dwellers have no immediate knowledge. For example, everyday expressions contain images of a black grouse [“as deaf as a black grouse,” *glukh kak tetevia*; Krylov 1973, 36], a woodgrouse [as in: “he’s like wood grouse at its place of mating,” *kak glukhar’ na toku*, meaning “When his mouth is open his ears are shut”; Krylov 1973, 36], a snipe [*kulik*; as in “Every snipe praises his own swamp,” *vsiaak kulik svoe boloto khvalit*, equivalent to the American “Every cook praises his own broth”; Krylov 1973, 12], or a poisonous grass *belena*, as in a question asked about someone suddenly enraged: “What’s it with you? Have you eaten ‘belena’ or what?” [*Ty chto, beleny ob’elsia?*].

Many Russian sayings not only metaphorically involve the peasant’s helper [“An old horse won’t spoil the furrows,” *Staryi kon’ borozdy ne portit*; meaning “old hands are most reliable”; “A horse has four legs, and even he stumbles” meaning “nobody’s perfect”; *kon’ na chetyrekh nogakh, da i to spotykaetsia*, Krylov 1973, 90], but they feature many details of harnessing equipment about which many of today’s urbanites have only a vague idea. Often-cited proverbs and sayings involve a horse-collar, reins, a shaft-bow, a pole, blinders, and the like.⁹

Food and Sex Appeal

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the closeness of Russian everyday culture to peasant culture can be seen in Russian eating habits. Peasant food, porridge [*kasha*], and *kvas* [a fermented drink brewed from bread crusts] are still popular among city residents, and many old Russian proverbs and sayings still currently in wide use reflect the villagers’ old ways of life. Not only does bread still occupy a central place in the Russian diet, but it has managed to preserve its traditional symbolism of emotional life. A Russian would say about loneliness: “There is no one to break bread with” [*ne s kem khleb perelomit*]; about one’s own state of depression: “a piece of bread gets stuck in my throat” [*kusok khleba v gorle zastrevaet*]. To indicate that someone is really involved in something, bread is used as the yardstick. A woman may say about her teenage son: “The Internet is his bread” [*ego khlebom ne kormi, dai poigrat’ s internetom*]. To say that someone has a one-track mind, a Russian may say: “All that hungry godmother is preoccupied with is bread” [*golodnoi kume khleb na ume*].

In peasant Russia, a meal, often as much as he could eat, was the only pay that a hired hand [*batrak*] would get for his labor. Thus the quantity of food consumed was the measure of these people's well-being, a notion expressed in such sayings as "A big bite [of food] makes one's mouth happy" [*Bol'shomu kusku rot raduetsia*] or "Eat till you get sweaty, work till you get chilly" [*esh' poka ne vsputeesh'—rabotai poka ne oziabnesh'*] A verb denoting living too luxuriously—*zazhrat'sia*—means literally "to overfeed oneself."¹⁰

The presence of fat, usually in the form of butter or cheese, in a peasant's food used to carry a socioeconomic significance. If a peasant could add butter to his kasha, it meant his household had a cow, and that often spelled prosperity for poverty-ridden serfs. (Traces of this rural mentality are seen in the name of the Western carnival Mardi Gras—Fat Tuesday with its license of indulgence in bodily pleasures, including eating; fat and oils traditionally were assumed to be the food of the rich.) Etymologist Max Vasmer (1986, II: 56) suggests that the Russian word "fat" [*zhir*] probably has its roots in the old Russian word meaning "food" and, thus, is connected to the old Russian word "to live" [*zhiti*]. A number of Russian sayings and proverbs reflect this peasant attitude toward food: "You can't spoil kasha with too much butter" [*Maslom kashu ne isportish'*] meaning "You can't have enough of a good thing." A man with an extravagance of fat in his food was an object of envy. The verb that literally means "to lead fat life" [*zhirovat'*] means "to live luxuriously, to carouse, to go on the buying spree" (Vasmer II: 56; cf. American "fat cats"). Of someone who really has all the luxuries, a Russian may say: "He rolls around like cheese in butter" [*kataetsia, kak syr v masle*]. When a Russian says about somebody "he's gone mad from fat" [*s zhiru besitsia*] he basically means: "Who does this guy think he is? Is his diet so rich that he can treat everyone like a vassal?" (Specter 1997, 7). Numerous other expressions also point to fat as a signifier of opulence. To describe his desperate state of affairs, a Russian may say: "Getting fat is not even on my mind; I'm lucky if I survive" [*ne do zhiru—byt' by zhivu*]. To reprimand someone for greediness, a Russian may say: "Would it be too fat [read: good] for you?" [*Ne slishkom li zhirno budet?*] (Smirnitsky 1992, 175).

- (1.4) A grandma boards a bus. A plump youngster offers his seat to her right away.

The grandma sits down, looks at him, and says: "What a good boy!"

"Well, it's nothing, it's not worth talking about. . . ."

"But what a good boy, after all. . . . A nice plump one." (JFR 2/3/98)

The joke is funny for Russians because of the difference in cultural points of reference. The old woman thanks the boy for a good deed by praising his plumpness, which in the up-and-coming culture of Western standards, sounds like an insult.

When the French word “bourgeois” entered Russian political vocabulary in the years preceding the Russian revolution, the Bolshevik propagandists spelled the word in a way that would make it comprehensible for the illiterate masses, fitting their associations of abundant and varied food consumption with wealth. The resulting word—*burzhui*—has as its ending an imperative form of the verb “to chew” [*zhui*], which associates prosperity with eating. Vladimir Mayakovsky’s famous lines rhyming these two words—*burzhui* and *zhui*—in a poem that promises the end of the bourgeois makes this association explicit:

Esh’ ananasy,
riabchikov zhui!
Den’ tvoi poslednii
prikhodit, burzhui!

Eat pineapples,
chew hazel-hens!
Your last day’s
coming, you the bourgeois!

Thus *burzhui* became for the Russian masses a symbol of gluttons, rich fellows in peasant terms. From the early days of the October revolution through Leonid Brezhnev’s time, Soviet political posters invariably depicted capitalists as fat men with big stomachs, and their profits were shown in the form of bursting grain sacks. Undoubtedly the red propaganda took into consideration the peasant conception of what a rich man should look like.

Childhood and adolescent socialization of urbanites of peasant origin shaped their view of sexuality and resulted in sexual conservatism and low sexual tolerance (Kon 1995, 271). This tension between two value systems finds its expression in jokes, many of which are a verbalized reaction to expressions of sexuality that do not fit in with predominantly peasant attitudes and customs and from which the jokes derive their sense of ludicrous. Many jokes play on the incongruity of having two, often opposite, standards of behavior and value systems.

In 1990, the majority of adults living in the cities (83 to 85 percent among sixty-year-old Russians, 60 percent among forty-year-olds, and about 50 percent of the twenty-year-olds) were born in the countryside (Kon 1995, 271). Their strong peasant heritage shapes their views on gender relations and on sex and sexuality. It is no wonder that Russians still use the words “a male peasant” [*muzhik*] and “a peasant woman” [*baba*] colloquially

to denote any man or woman. Today these words either carry a slightly jocular tone, implying a person's provinciality, or may be used approvingly; in contemporary Russian, the word *muzhik* carries a connotation of ragged, raw masculinity. About a "true man" a Russian would say: "He's a true *muzhik*," a "go-getter." Consider the following statement of well-known Russian actor Evgeny Menshov: "It seemed to me: If you are a man, you should play serious parts, important ones, and not occupy yourself with zany antics. If there are no such parts—then be a true *muzhik* [*bud' po-nastoiashchemu muzhikom*], take your fate in your own hands and get yourself involved in some other serious business, and do not keep swimming at the will of [life's] waves" (quoted in Sekridova 1998, 49). A Russian may also say about an admired woman: "She is a high-class *baba*" [*klassnaia baba*]. (For another treatment of the word *baba*, see chapter 2.)

In many societies today, slenderness is likely to suggest affluence—the ability to afford a special diet, membership in a health club, possession of exercise machines, etc. In a country in which the availability of food has been linked directly to weather conditions and in which periods of food scarcity have occurred often, indulgence in food is perceived as life-affirming, compensating for periods of hunger.

As Jamake Highwater (1990, 157) points out, people tend to view the human body as "a metaphor for nature." Hence in the peasant culture, abundance of food has served as a signifier of fertility and full-figured bodies have spelled prosperity, just as an expensive automobile signifies affluence in contemporary American culture. The Russian association of a full body with wealth can be seen in one of the old Muscovite bathhouse attendants' sayings as a customer leaves the public baths: "May you be happy, keep getting rich and keep gaining weight!" [*Schastlivo ostavai'sia, bogatet' vam i tolstet'!*; Ivanov 1986, 300]. An old Russian riddle about a wealthy family clearly shows what is the measure of their well-being: "The husband's [body] is thick, the wife's is wide" (Sadovnikov 1986, 511).¹¹

Current Russian oral humor continues this folkloric tradition. There is a popular series of jokes about the Russian parvenu of the 1990s—the so-called New Russian, the obscenely wealthy man, usually a lawbreaker, who drives the latest model Mercedes and owns a toilet made of gold. He is a "husky lad with a bull's neck" [*detina s bych'ei sheei*]. His acquisitiveness is still associated with eating:

(1.5) A young lady says to a New Russian:

"You know, I have seen you before somewhere. . . . I've got it: on a can of Spam." (Erokaev 1997, 90)

- (1.6) A New Russian comes to a restaurant. After he is seated at his reserved table, he says to the waiter: "Please make me a cake with 'To dear Vassya' written on the icing."

In half an hour, the waiter comes with the cake and asks: "Do you want me to pack it for you?"

"Why bother? I'll eat it here." (Erokaev 1997, 46)

Although real "New Russians" tend to surround themselves with long-legged, slim, attractive females, in folklore the wives of these *nouveaux riches* are also portrayed as heavy:

- (1.7) A grossly fat wife of a New Russian asks a furniture salesman: "Are you sure that beds made by this company are truly reliable?"

"Oh yes, lady, this is a very solid firm. They test every new model of their beds by borrowing a hippo from a zoo. However, in your case, I'd recommend 'proceed with care.'" (Erokaev 1997, 86)

As a man's worth has subconsciously been judged by how well he feeds himself and his family ["What's honor if you have nothing to eat?" *chto i chest', kogda nechego est'*; Krylov 1973, 244], rounded bodies, male and female, have long been the Russian standard of beauty. The most vivid illustration of this standard of female attractiveness comes from the paintings of Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927). In a series of his works devoted to merchants' wives, middle-class [*meshchanstvo*] women who, by and large, came from the peasantry, one can see fleshy females. To underscore the national character of this beauty pageant, Kustodiev named some of these portraits "Belle" (1915) and "The Russian Venus" (1925–1926). In two paintings, both entitled "A Merchant's Wife Sipping Tea" (1918 and 1920), the well-endowed female body and the luxurious food on her table are rendered as one and the same appetizing item, rich and sweet.

No wonder, then, that in the peasant folklore one finds numerous proverbs, sayings, chastushkas, and jokes that promote images of portly women as sexually appealing. As a folk saying from Dahl's collection attests, a girl should be "round and plump, and white [of skin] and rosy-cheeked, blood with milk" (1879, II: 311) (cf. the English expression "peaches and cream"). This equation of sex and eating can also be seen in parallel images, as in an ancient Russian song: "A gray duck is my meal, a beautiful girl is my bride" [*Sera utitsa estva moia, krasna devitsa nevesta moia*; cited in Pyliayev 1992, 38] and in a Russian riddle about a bride: "In the evening a little white hare jumps at will, after midnight it lies on a