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## ARTICLES

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### MYSHKIN'S QUEER FAILURE: (MIS)READING MASCULINITY IN DOSTOEVSKII'S *THE IDIOT*

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“[P]aradise is a difficult thing, Prince, much harder than it appears to your beautiful heart.”  
Prince Shch., *The Idiot* (282)<sup>1</sup>

“Privilege the naïve or nonsensical.”  
Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (12)<sup>2</sup>

Of all Dostoevskii's heroes, Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot* (1868–69) has proved particularly divisive. Some see him as the “wholly good man” (*PSS* 28.2: 251) whom Dostoevskii described in his notebooks, an embodiment of kindness who ingenuously speaks the truth.<sup>3</sup> Yet as others point out, Myshkin's combination of goodness and sincerity not only causes bewilderment in St. Petersburg society, but also inadvertently leads to hurt for those around him and even himself.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while there is universal agreement on the

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1. All page numbers for *The Idiot* refer to Volume 8 of the *PSS*. All translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.

2. *The Queer Art of Failure* was published under the name “Judith Halberstam,” but the author now tends to favor “Jack” and male pronouns. Accordingly, I will use “Jack” and male pronouns here, though I acknowledge Halberstam's reluctance to commit to a single name or single set of pronouns (Halberstam 2012).

3. Young (1–7) provides a useful overview of current scholarship on *The Idiot*; Terras (*The Idiot: An Interpretation* 9–16) also discusses reactions from Dostoevskii's contemporaries. Broadly positive readings of Myshkin include Terras (*The Idiot: An Interpretation*), who approaches the novel from a Christian perspective and Frank, who suggests that the Prince is “an iconic image of Dostoevskii's own highest Christian ideal” (340–41).

4. For a classic negative reading of Myshkin, see Krieger, who argues that Myshkin, whatever his motives, brings misery and destruction to those around him. Lord goes even further, seeing Myshkin as a schemer with “simulated innocence” who plays other characters against one another (83).

similarities between Myshkin and the Jesus of the Gospels, there remains a debate about how to interpret these similarities. One interpretation views the Prince as a hero who admirably approximates the goodness of Christ.<sup>5</sup> However, others treat him as a failed Christ who cannot redeem those around him, or indeed as a mere parody of Christ whose actions do more harm than good.<sup>6</sup>

As Liza Knapp (196) points out, Dostoevskii's novel invites the reader to make a connection between Myshkin's holiness and his sexuality. During their encounter on the train to Petersburg in the first chapter, Rogozhin asks the Prince about his relationships with women:

"And are you a great lover of the female sex, Prince. Tell me, quick!"

"Me? N-n-no. Well, I... Perhaps you don't know, but well, because of my congenital illness I don't have any knowledge of women at all."

"Well, if that's how it is," exclaimed Rogozhin, "Then it looks like you're a complete holy fool, Prince, and God loves people like you!" (*PSS* 8: 14)

Teasingly, Rogozhin suggests the Prince's chastity is a blessing from God, an idea consistent both with Biblical teaching and with Russian folk belief about the sexuality of the holy fool.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, other characters are less kind to him, disqualifying Myshkin from the ranks of manhood, dismissing him either on the grounds of his childishness, his disability, or his effeminacy. The old schoolmaster at Nastasya Filippovna's name-day party, seeing Myshkin blush, compares him to an "innocent young girl [*devitsa*]" who must harbor "the most honorable intentions in his heart" (119). Nevertheless, this apparently unsexed, unmanly Myshkin becomes a rival for Rogozhin in the latter's pursuit of Nastasya Filippovna, as well as a serious contender for Aglaya Ivanovna's hand. Why does Dostoevskii emasculate his "wholly good" hero? How might an emasculated hero—whose story ostensibly ends in failure—require a novel with a different kind of formal structure? And how

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5. On Myshkin as a Christ figure, see Ermilova and Guardini. Knapp (191) reminds us that Dostoevskii did not expect readers to equate Christ with Myshkin, but rather to provide an "imitation of Christ and to portray Christ by indirection."

6. Holquist makes the argument that Christ's absolute nature and values cannot be contained within a hero who exists within the contingent world of a novel (109–110). Williams goes further, suggesting that "Myshkin's own changelessness [...] prevents him from being a 'savior' in any sense" (48). Thompson posits that "Myshkin resolves into a tragic parody of Christ, a failed kenosis without the backbone of the word" (76).

7. The idea that eunuchs are particularly blessed appears in Jesus's teachings as recorded in Matthew 19:10–12. Paul's teachings valorize chastity: see Galatians 5:13–26 and 1 Corinthians 9. Early Christian apocryphal writings, such as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, reveal the persistence of chastity as an ideal. Such chastity has been reinterpreted using queer theory in recent years: see, for example, Hunter, who suggests that "the early Christian doctrine of celibacy could be said to have 'queered' the traditional commitment to marriage and procreation that was the foundation of both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures" (21). On the sexuality of the holy fool in Russian culture, see Murav, 90–93.

might *The Idiot* as a whole—in both its content and its form—undermine the ideology of masculinity?

My study is hardly the first to take on these questions. Elizabeth Dalton's 1979 psychoanalytic study broke new ground by putting sexuality at the heart of her inquiry. While Dalton's approach resulted in many fresh insights, her Freudian framework assumes a fixed model of sexual desire that does not suit the dynamic and dialogic world of a Dostoevskii novel.<sup>8</sup> Nina Pelikan Straus, in her feminist reading, offers a different approach. Building on the conventional reading of *The Idiot* as Dostoevskii's experiment of placing the "wholly good man" into a realist novel, Straus suggests that Myshkin constitutes Dostoevskii's experiment with "an alternative model of masculinity" (53). The Prince, Straus argues, is "an antitype to male violence toward women personified by Rogozhin, and [...] an antidote to Western patriarchal rationality and secularism" (*ibid.*). However, Straus argues that this experiment fails because Dostoevskii offers only two polarities of masculinity in the novel: a choice between the "phallic knife"—Rogozhin—and the "castrated phallus" (69)—Myshkin. For Straus, these are two sides of the same coin. She suggests that Myshkin, with his asexual Christianity, must bear some responsibility for Nastasya Filippovna's eventual murder alongside Rogozhin's oppressive passion. Dostoevskii, in her view, errs in making the emasculated Myshkin into a would-be savior rather than equipping women with a voice and agency of their own. Ultimately, then, Straus belongs to the critical camp that takes a negative view of Myshkin; she reads *The Idiot* as an "exploded fantasy that an asexual Prince Christ could save the world" (70).

This article seeks to perform what we might term a reparative reading of Myshkin, and of the novel more generally. Such a reading aims to rescue Dostoevskii's "alternative model of masculinity" that Straus dismisses as invalid because of what she calls the author's investment in a "regressive" and "traditionalist" Christian mythology (69). I borrow the term "reparative reading" from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's final book, *Touching Feeling*, which calls for a shift away from the "paranoid" methods of literary criticism characteristic of new historicism and high theory, towards a more hopeful model of reading based on the idea that "the future may be different from the present" and "the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (2003: 146). Reparative readings can "extrac[t] sustenance from the objects of a culture" (2003: 150); my approach to *The Idiot* aims to do just that. Despite Myshkin's failure within the world of the novel, I argue that his compassion offers a queer alternative to the violent passion of a Rogozhin, while also suggesting that his behavior serves to expose the problems with the quieter, but no less destructive, forms of masculinity that operate in Petersburg.

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8. These criticisms of Dalton are elaborated in Straus (58), Terras (*The Idiot: An Interpretation* 66–68) and Young (5–6).

### Queer Masculinities in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

At this point, it is useful to clarify some of the terminology in gender studies and queer theory that underpins this study. By calling Myshkin's behavior "queer," I do not necessarily mean "homosexual," although the novel does hint at mutual attraction between him and Rogozhin. "Queer" is not simply a synonym for "gay" or "lesbian" in contemporary theory; rather, the term covers a wide range of non-normative gender performances and sexual expression that have a political value insofar as they "aggressively challeng[e] hegemonies, exclusions, norms and assumptions" (Giffney and O'Rourke 3).<sup>9</sup> I argue that Myshkin is queer insofar as he destabilizes the masculinity norms of the Russia of his time, and offers a radical alternative to them.<sup>10</sup> The term "masculinity" also requires explanation: here I do not refer to an essentializing set of archetypes about men's behavior, but rather, building on the work of Raewyn Connell and others, I refer to a socially constructed hierarchical system that privileges men over women generally while also rewarding a particular type of man.<sup>11</sup> "Hegemonic masculinity" is the term used by theorists to refer to the "most honoured way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 834) in a particular society. Although this is a normative ideal that few—if any—men can actually live up to, although it provides an ideal against which all marginalized and subordinate men are measured. I argue that Dostoevskii's novel is queer insofar as it reveals the absurdity of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, as well as mapping the damage that the ideal and the system does to men and women.

I aim to begin to do here for Dostoevskii what Holly Furneaux achieved in her *Queer Dickens*, a book that uses his writing to reveal a variety of Victorian British masculinities that go far beyond the stereotype of the severe, unemotional patriarch. Susanne Fusso (2006) has already made important strides in developing a richer, more nuanced view of sexuality in Dostoevskii's work that connects the poetics of sexuality to morality. Eric Naiman (2014) has

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9. This view of queer theory as an oppositional, anti-identitarian movement is elaborated in Halperin, who explains: "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (62). Halperin's book, which uses Foucault to lay the foundations for queer theory, represents an early milestone in the field along with Warner, who explores the ethics of queer theory. In the 2000s, there has been an "anti-social" turn in queer theory increasingly concerned with resisting the co-optation of LGBTQ people into the mainstream of neoliberalism (see Ruti).

10. I see my work on Myshkin's defiance of gender and sexuality norms creating a queer alternative as an extension of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the Prince's "carnivalizing function." As Bakhtin remarks, "Wherever Prince Myshkin appears, hierarchical barriers between people suddenly become penetrable, an inner contact is formed between them, a carnival frankness is born" (174).

11. Connell provides a foundational constructivist account of masculinity as part of a social, political and economic system of gender. See especially 67–86. For a cultural studies perspective on masculinity, see Reeser.

offered a queer reading of Kalganov in *Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80); he suggests that Dostoevskii “manifests his openness and his refusal to pass judgement on alternative tracks of sexual desire” (416). However, more work needs to be done. Specifically in the case of *The Idiot*, one idea that needs re-examination is the assumption—present in Straus’s work, for example—that Myshkin’s Christianity necessarily connects him to a legacy of patriarchy, the subordination of women and compulsory heterosexuality. In fact, queer theologians such as Patrick Cheng and Elizabeth Stuart have argued that the message of radical love at the heart of Christianity offers the same kind of disruptive potential as queer theory does.<sup>12</sup> It is this kind of queerness that I see Dostoevskii experimenting with in *The Idiot*.

*The Idiot* is a queer novel at the level of form—plot and structure—as well as its literary language. Myshkin’s queerness shapes the plot of the novel insofar as the other characters continually misread him and jump to the wrong conclusions about his motives and his desires. As Diana Burgin (165–66) points out, other characters misinterpret Myshkin when they try to read his behavior according to existing literary models, and several critics have pointed out that such misunderstandings drive the narrative of *The Idiot* as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Young borrows the term *scripting* to describe the way in which Dostoevskii’s characters engage in self-fashioning through telling stories and writing letters to another; such scripting, she suggests, is “undertaken by all the major characters, with the primary aim of engaging the others, resulting in clashes between multiple, frequently contradictory scripts” (18–19). This article builds on Young’s approach but highlights the role that gender and sexuality play, both in shaping the scripts that the characters create, and the way in which they are interpreted. The performative turn in gender studies that began with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* proves particularly germane to such an approach; that is, the idea that gender is constructed through a repeated series of acts before an audience. Such gender performances are never

12. Just as queer theory aimed to go beyond the earlier identitarian discourse of gay and lesbian studies, so queer theology moved beyond earlier work that sought to include gay and lesbian people into the church, instead suggesting a radical transformation in how Christianity should think about identity and sexuality *per se*. In this vein, see Loughlin, 9–10, who suggests that theology—the quest to know the unknowable—is by its very nature a queer enterprise. Similarly, Elizabeth Stuart’s work has suggested that queer theology denaturalizes gender and sexual identities, which, in Christian thought, lack any “eschatological significance” (2003: 114); she argues that Christianity, properly understood, offers a far more radical critique of gender and sexuality than the contemporary movements to include LGBTQ people in the church do. The work of Patrick Cheng provides an accessible introduction to queer theology: see his work on radical Christian love (2011) and the queerness of Christ (2012).

13. See, for example, Jones’s ideas about how Dostoevskii’s characters explore “what might happen when people attempt mutually to objectify and classify one another” (77). Young builds on this idea when she describes how scripting necessarily involves bringing other characters into one’s own script (19–22). Kasatkina suggests Myshkin’s indiscriminate Christian love has the unintentional effect of producing jealousy in those around him (203–4).

simply a matter of voluntarism; we should not succumb to the naïve liberal assumption that one can be whoever one wants to be. Rather, to pull off a successful gender performance requires both a degree of skill from the performer, and the audience's ability to recognize the gender meaning inherent in the performance.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, arguably the gender performances that are most worthy of analysis are precisely those that do *not* succeed, either because the performer lacks the skill—or refuses—to create a legible performance, or the audience, willfully or otherwise, misreads it. My interpretation of *The Idiot* in this article identifies key points when gender performances—especially, but not exclusively, Myshkin's—are misread and how these misreadings reveal fissures in the gender system. Although Myshkin often looks ridiculous in the eyes of other characters, Dostoevskii does not use the novel to humiliate him, but rather to cast a defamiliarizing gaze on the rituals of Petersburg society. Dostoevskii thereby creates what we might call apertures in the gender order of the text, openings that reveal the absurdity of the gender system and the possibility of a different, more equitable and just society. Such possibilities often go unrealized, but they exist nonetheless as potentialities within the text, and, in that sense, they might be compared to the kind of “sideshadowing” that Gary Saul Morson sees as part of Dostoevskii's narrative technique, particularly in *The Idiot* (Morson 117–172; esp. 134–137). For Morson, sideshadowing as a technique allows Dostoevskii to imagine multiple possibilities (what *might have been*), testifying to the author's worldview based on indeterminacy and the presence of free will. Unlike Straus, who sees Nastasya Filippovna's murder at the end of *The Idiot* as the inevitable consequence of both Rogozhin and Myshkin's activity, I suggest the novel implies the possibility of alternative outcomes that could have been realized.

I am aware, of course, that I cannot rewrite the conclusion of Dostoevskii's novel, nor offer a queer, happily-ever-after ending for Myshkin, Aglaya Ivanovna, or Nastasya Filippovna. The Prince's failure cannot be reversed. Nevertheless, I agree with Robin Feuer Miller that Myshkin's failure—and the narrator's loss of faith in him—need not mean the *novel's* failure; Miller suggests that Dostoevskii intentionally uses these failures to force the narrator in a “highly charged re-creation of moral experiences” (228). Harriet Murav makes a similar point when she observes that the novel's “failures and ‘gaps’ ought not to be seen as such, as an absolute limit, but as providing the opportunity for further interpretation” (83–84). In this article, I suggest ways in which queer theory can provide insights to deepen our understanding of such failure. Jack Halberstam's 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure* aims to “dismantl[e] the logics of success and failure with which we currently live,” sug-

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14. See Reeser's discussion (82–89) of Butler's theory of the performativity of gender and how different performances of masculinity can be misinterpreted by others.

gesting that “[u]nder certain circumstances, failing [...] may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Failure is a particularly “queer” art for Halberstam precisely because queerness so often involves an inability—or refusal—to live up to the expectations of success that a heteronormative, capitalist society places upon us, including gender norms, reproduction and the accumulation of wealth.

Although Myshkin operates in a different world from our own, a nineteenth-century Russia with only a nascent capitalism, there nevertheless exists a prescriptive hegemonic masculinity in the Petersburg society in which he moves. One character who aspires to this ideal is Ptitsyn: he measures success in terms of gaining a good income and a suitable wife who will attract the praise of those around them. Such success is brought into question in the novel: Varvara Ardalionovna can barely hide her disgust when she thinks of Ptitsyn, her husband, as an “almost cultivated” (*pochti obrazovannyi*) man guilty of “small acts of meanness” (*melkikh podlostiakh*) (389). Dostoevskii deliberately posits Myshkin’s queer failure as a contrast to the conventional success of such men as Ptitsyn, Radomsky and Prince Shch. It is hard to see how an author could provide a fairy-tale ending for Myshkin—say, marriage to Aglaya or Nastasya—without contradicting the very queerness that he embodies. Myshkin’s ultimate reversion to idiocy, I would suggest, should not be read as a criticism of his personal failings, but rather as an exposé of the absurdity of the gender system in Petersburg society, and, more importantly, as a critique on how that system has served as a vehicle to drive the plot of the realist novel.

### Misreading Myshkin

The Prince produces elegant calligraphy that impresses the Epanchins, but his own behavior renders his character illegible to those around him. The Epanchins’ doorman is left nonplussed by the Prince’s informality when he insists on waiting in the anteroom; Nastasya Filippovna mistakes him for a servant in the Ivolgins’ home, even jibing, “They should send you packing!” (86). However, the most extended instance of such misunderstanding occurs between Myshkin and the Epanchin family. On their first meeting, General Epanchin, keen to distract his wife from her current suspicions surrounding his fidelity, foists Myshkin on her and his three daughters. “A complete child, a pitiful case; he is sick and suffers from fits” (44), explains the General, an infantilizing description that alarms Madame Epanchina and delights Aleksandra, Adelaida and Aglaya, who joke that they can play blind-man’s-buff with him. Myshkin shatters these expectations, not only proving capable of adult conversation, but offering his own sharp observations of the women’s own characters. Moreover, the General’s assumption that introducing the Prince will divert attention away from the subject of the pearls that he allegedly purchased for Nastasya Filippovna proves unfounded. In fact, Myshkin directly,



but innocently, brings up Nastasya's beauty in conversation, causing tempers to flare and exacerbating the situation. This is an early example of how Myshkin's naivety often unintentionally exposes the foibles of the other characters, including, in this case, the General's alleged romantic misdemeanors.

The Epanchin sisters soon realize that the Prince is not the childish imbecile whom their father describes, yet they still cannot accept that Myshkin's apparent naivety is sincere. "This Prince might be a great rogue and not an idiot at all," whispers Aleksandra, to which Aglaya responds, "That's probably right; I saw it coming long ago," adding "It's a dirty trick for him to play such a role, and what does he hope to get out of it?!" (48).<sup>15</sup> The word the sisters use for "rogue," *plut*, also means *picaro* in Russian, that is, the hero of a picaresque novel or *plutovskoi roman*, a genre that the Epanchin sisters, avid readers, would know. For these suspicious young ladies, Myshkin cannot be truly innocent; his apparent naivety and gender non-conformity must be part of a ruse, a performance staged with some ulterior motive in mind. Is he seeking marriage to one of the daughters? Financial assistance from the family? Using Sedgwick's terminology, we might say that Aleksandra and Aglaya here perform a paranoid reading of Myshkin's behavior.<sup>16</sup> Seeking a literary prototype, they may see him as similar to, say, Frol Skobeev, Russia's best-known picaresque hero.<sup>17</sup> Frol disguises himself as a young lady to inveigle his way into his beloved Annushka's party, using a seemingly innocent disguise to lure her into bed. Yet whereas Frol uses this façade of queerness in order to achieve the most masculinist and heterosexual of ends—the violation of Annushka—the Prince has no such goals in mind. When pressed on affairs of the heart, the Prince explains he was "not in love" but "happy otherwise" (57); he then expounds the details of his non-sexual relationship with Marie based on compassion, which has brought great happiness to both of them.

Central to Myshkin's story of his relationship with Marie is the role of the local children. Children, the Prince says, are like little birds because "there is nothing more beautiful than a little bird in this world" (58), and he develops an affection for them as well as sympathy for the persecuted Marie. He recounts how the schoolteacher and the pastor, paranoid readers of his behavior, forbid him to see the children; Schneider even suggests he employs a "dangerous 'system'" with them (63). Some critics, too, have proved suspi-

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15. In his critique of Myshkin, Lord agrees with the Epanchin sisters' first impression of the Prince: his innocence is "simulated" and he possesses a "talent for scheming" (83).

16. Naiman has also pointed out that Dostoevskii creates characters who are paranoid readers of each other's actions, though he points out it is not clear whether Dostoevskii expects his own readers to "adopt such strategies" (400).

17. "The Tale of Frol Skobeev" ("Povest' o Frol Skobeeve") is an anonymous bawdy rogue's tale widely circulated among the reading public in the late 1600s and early 1700s. It is reproduced in Gudziĭ 421–430. For critical commentary on its relationship to the picaresque, see Morris 51–74.

cious of Myshkin's relationship with the children. These include Dalton (70–73), who argues that the Prince's view of childcare is naïve at best, and dangerous at worst, because his opinion that children should be told everything risks exposing them to corrupting influences at a vulnerable age. However, queer theory opens up a different way to read this encounter between Myshkin and the children. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* aims to reclaim that which is normally characterized as "childish and immature," finding that children and representations of the child can offer a counter-narrative to "the tyranny of the adult" and "a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure" (2011: 120). Myshkin, too, recognizes how children may see what adults cannot: "a child, even in the most serious matter, can give very helpful advice" (58).

Myshkin remarks that he deceived the local children in one matter only: he let them assume that he loved Marie, even though he did not, because the idea brought such delight to them. One could argue that the children feel comfortable mapping the Myshkin/Marie relationship onto their pre-existing idea of heterosexual romantic love, rather than facing up to its radical alterity. I would like to suggest a different reading: namely, that the children's fantasy about Myshkin, the eccentric Prince from a land far away, falling in love with the local girl who is abused and an outcast, constitutes an example of what Halberstam calls "queer fairy tales" (2011: 120). Halberstam uses this term to refer to children's films that constitute "exciting ways of staging queer time and radical new imaginings of community association" (2011: 119). The children's misreading of the Myshkin/Marie relationship, though based on heterosexual romance, is refreshingly transgressive in how it allows for a union that transcends boundaries of nation, class, and, especially shame, for it allows Marie's "dishonor" to be forgiven. The authorities of the town—the teacher, the pastor, the doctor—refuse to countenance such a narrative, eventually forbidding Myshkin to see the children. Schneider even comes to suggest that Myshkin himself is "a complete child" (63) and the Prince admits that he feels more comfortable in the presence of children than adults, whose rituals and conventions he does not understand. Halberstam's theorization of ignorance and stupidity provides a powerful tool for a reparative reading of Myshkin: he suggests that "[s]tupidity could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing" (2011: 13). Myshkin's ignorance thus can be read not only as a character trait, but also a strategy to challenge social conventions, power structures and even epistemologies elsewhere in the text.

It is this queerness that allows Myshkin to gain the Epanchins' confidence in a way that other men, who exhibit a more conventional masculinity, cannot. For example, the rich, distinguished Prince Shch., Adelaida's fiancé, an ideal match in the eyes of society, never quite enjoys the same level of intimacy with the family that Myshkin does. The final pages of the novel even

hint that the Prince Shch/Adelaida union may not work out: Radomsky suggests they “weren’t fully in harmony with one another” (509). By contrast, although the Epanchins see Myshkin as a poor prospect for Aglaya in many regards, eventually rejecting him, they come to value his sincerity and his goodness. Even after the disastrous soirée during which Myshkin shatters the Chinese vase—and any hopes of marrying Aglaya—Madame Epanchina continues to defend him. “I’d have thrown out everyone else from last night and kept him!” (460) she exclaims. This moment is one of the apertures in the text when a character invites us to imagine an alternative outcome, the conditional (Russian *by*) invoking the queer possibility of Aglaya and Myshkin proceeding with the marriage even in the face of social opprobrium.

Another such aperture appears in Part IV of the novel, when the General and his wife argue about Myshkin’s suitability as a husband. The General begins to enumerate Myshkin’s virtues—he is an “excellent fellow” with a “good name,” but he soon falters, and the text records, in parenthesis: “(Silence)”; “(Again silence)”. The General tries to continue but finds he cannot: “He has... and... and... and... (Prolonged silence and complete breakdown).” For her part, Madame Epanchin finds herself conflicted, on the one hand raising objections about the Prince—“and... and... what would Belokonskaya say?”—while on the other hand, she feels something shuddering in her heart, and an internal voice asking her: “But what is it that the Prince lacks?” (421). Here, the General and his wife find that their communication breaks down as they try to verbalize the case for or against Myshkin. I have deliberately reproduced all the repetitions, ellipses and parentheses here: the stuttering speech with its broken rhythms recreates sonically and linguistically Myshkin’s indefinability, his resistance to categorization and his queer challenge to society. I build here on Burgin’s (173) idea that the eloquent use of language in *The Idiot* tends to distort, rather than convey, truth, as well as recent scholarship on the ethical and narrative significance of silence in the novel by Nariman Skakov and Sasha Spektor.<sup>18</sup> Myshkin provides an interruption to the expected flow of the narrative of a society novel, and indeed to Aglaya’s own life story, leaving Madame Epanchina to ponder “And was he really and truly the sort of husband we had imagined and foreseen [prochili] for Aglaya?” (*ibid.*). This rhetorical question anticipates an answer in the negative, yet it also provides an aperture in the text, an opportunity to reimagine the script that was pre-written for Aglaya and for Myshkin and the institution of heterosexual marriage.

As the Epanchin sisters come to know the Prince better, they realize that he

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18. Skakov argues that the silent gestures of *The Idiot* “make the monologic closure of Dostoevskii’s text impossible” and “evade the all too familiar commonness of the language” (139). Spektor notes that silence has a dual role in the text: it can be a “marker of the divine” that provides a contrast to “morally compromised dialogue,” but it can also be an expression of “the utter absence of spirituality” and a “harbinger of physical violence” (558).

is not a “rogue,” but instead give him a nickname from a different literary source: “The Poor Knight,” from Pushkin’s 1829 poem. The poem is a pastiche of medieval European chivalric writing, carrying with it a mythologized masculinity of the ideal knight as a chaste man devoted to the Virgin Mary.<sup>19</sup> Pushkin’s knight holds this ideal of beauty as he goes to fight in the crusades, before returning to his country to die alone, in a castle. Aglaya interprets this pseudomedieval literary ideal seriously rather than cynically, preferring it to Cervantes’ famous parody of chivalry: “‘The Poor Knight’ is the same as Don Quixote, but he is serious, rather than comic” (207). This comment reveals Aglaya’s longing to escape from a novelistic, dialogic world—that of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*—into the monologism of a medieval knight’s tale.

However, when Aglaya recites the Pushkin poem, it is hard to tell whether she is in earnest or jest; as Robin Miller points out, her recitation is “double-edged” (190). Moreover, when Aglaya switches the letters around in Pushkin’s poem, changing “AMD”—*Ave Mater Dei*—to “NFB”—Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova, it is not only a willful misinterpretation of the poem, but also a misreading of Myshkin’s masculinity. Aglaya arguably removes the queerness from the poem, taking away the radical Christian message—a chaste devotion to the Virgin Mary—and instead maps the story on to a much more conventional heterosexual romantic plot, in which Myshkin is performing great deeds for a flesh-and-blood woman, Nastasya Filippovna. The aperture here lies in the version of the Pushkin poem that is *not* read, insofar as it implies an alternative, queer gender order. Such a version may be closer to Myshkin’s own feelings, as when he describes his love for Nastasya later, it hardly conforms to romantic heterosexual love: he “loves her sincerely and completely, and that it was as if his love for her was like for some pitiful, sick child who cannot be left to his or her own will” (615).

At the end of the novel, the narrator gives an overview of how the Petersburg society gossips (mis)understood Myshkin’s relationship with Aglaya. The gossips evoke yet another literary precedent, this time calling Myshkin a nihilist in the vein of Turgenev’s Bazarov. In this interpretation, the Prince genuinely loved Aglaya, but deliberately renounced her in favor of Nastasya in the most public way possible, so that he could create a scandal, demonstrate his own unconventionality in loving a “fallen woman,” and thereby broadcast his radicalism to the world. Dostoevskii does not expect his readers to accept this interpretation of events: the account is riddled with factual inaccuracies—including the lie that the Prince spoke only broken Russian—and the novel never suggests such cynicism or self-interest on the part of

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19. As Karras (47) notes, in medieval Europe the religious ideal of chastity sometimes sat uneasily alongside the chivalric tradition, which demanded that a knight carry out noble deeds in the service of a woman. It is this same confusion, I would suggest, that exists in *The Idiot* when Aglaya insists on interpreting Myshkin’s love for Nastasya Filippovna according to a romantic heterosexual paradigm.

Myshkin. Nevertheless, Yevgeny Pavlovich subsequently puts forward a milder version of this interpretation to the Prince himself. He accepts that Myshkin acted “out of an unusual naivety,” but questions him on whether his professed affection for Nastasya might be an attempt to “publicly declare his own magnanimity” (481).<sup>20</sup> According to Yevgeny Pavlovich, Myshkin saw an opportunity to satisfy his own vanity in playing the role of the “chaste knight” with Nastasya Filippovna.

Does this passage mean that the reader should discount Myshkin’s compassion as a self-serving performance? Dostoevskii is, after all, a master at creating characters who pull off masterful performances that manage to deceive others, deceive the reader, and, at times, even deceive themselves. Yet, as I have suggested elsewhere, Dostoevskii also creates sympathetic characters whose behavior is misunderstood by others as performative when in fact it stems from genuine sympathy; Shatov in *Demons* (1871–72) is a case in point (Doak 115–118). Moreover, there are reasons to suggest that Yevgeny Pavlovich’s denunciation of the Prince is also a misreading, or at least an oversimplification of Myshkin’s motivations, as Joseph Frank points out (338). Doubt is cast over Yevgeny Pavlovich’s reliability from the beginning; he himself has a reputation for “conquests” over “unhappy hearts” (155). He speaks not only as Myshkin’s rival, but also from a position of power in the gender hierarchy, for his ability to conform to the dominant standards of masculinity places him above Myshkin.

Moreover, the reader should be suspicious that Yevgeny Pavlovich is able to provide such a complete and eloquent account of Myshkin’s actions and motivations, as Burgin (167) notes. When the narrator assures us that this account stems from Yevgeny Pavlovich’s “extraordinary understanding of psychology” (483), this phrase should serve as a warning for readers of Dostoevskii, for the term “psychology” in his work often denotes not penetrating insight, but rather a simplistic and deterministic view of human nature that the novels rail against.<sup>21</sup> For his part, Myshkin gets little chance to respond to Yevgeny Pavlovich’s verbal tirade. He accepts part of the blame, blushing and responding awkwardly to his questions, “Yes, that could all be so, may be, you are actually right...” (482), but he often manages only a hesitant “yes, but...” These incomplete sentences suggest the shadowy existence of another narrative that cannot be put into words so easily. It is in those hesitations, those ellipses, that the reader is asked to imagine a queer alternative to Myshkin’s failure.

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20. As Knapp (200) points out, Dostoevskii may have modelled Radomsky’s attack on the ill effects of Myshkin’s goodness on Belinsky’s critique of how Jesus unintentionally did more harm than good, an idea Dostoevskii would develop further in the Grand Inquisitor.

21. See, for example, the discussion in Terras (*Reading Dostoevskii* 44–46) of how Dostoevskii’s mistrust of psychology plays out in *Crime and Punishment* (1866).

### Fabricating Masculinity

In stark contrast to Myshkin, with his reticent speech, stand those characters who strive to impress others with their narrative prowess. Those men who succeed according to the hegemonic standards of masculinity that exist in the world of the novel gain their success not because of their actions, but because they manage to create stories about their actions that are acceptable to an audience. The *petit jeu* that the guests play at Nastasya Filippovna's party—where the men confess the worst thing they have ever done—provides the novel's best illustration of this idea. From the outset, the game is established as an exclusively masculine preserve: Ferdyshchenko underscores the fact that “[l]adies are excluded” (120), and one participant asks how he should proceed if his worst action is “something that cannot be said... in the presence of ladies” (121). Nastasya Filippovna, who *does* participate in the game, is the exception that proves the rule: her participation alarms and excites the crowd precisely because she is breaking the cultural norms of femininity.

The cruel Totsky, Nastasya Filippovna's self-styled benefactor and tormentor, shrewdly warns at the beginning that such a game is merely a “special kind of bragging” (120). Totsky is right: the men's confessionals are not intended to atone for their misdeeds, but to entertain, shock and impress the audience. “Just think, gentlemen, just think how we will look at one another after the stories, say, tomorrow!” enthuses Ferdyshchenko. These are performances of masculinity, destined to succeed or fail based on the listeners' reaction. Ferdyshchenko, the first to enter the game, provides a tale of stealing three rubles and allowing a servant girl to take the blame. He intends his story to appear deliciously devious, but it backfires as it looks instead simply like a “dirty trick,” as Nastasya Filippovna calls it (124). “Oddly enough, it was quite possible that he [Ferdyshchenko] expected his story to meet with a very different kind of success,” the narrator comments, directing us to the fact that this performance of masculinity has failed. By contrast, General Epanchin, who has considerably more social nous, manages to combine his story of how he vented his anger on his dying landlady with an account of his subsequent atonement: fifteen years later, he provides money for two elderly women to spend their final days peacefully in an alms-house. The General thus turns his anecdote into a miniature coming-of-age story that, on the one hand, allows him to boast of his youthful virility—he was a “hot-blooded” (125) junior officer—while also demonstrating a more mature, restrained beneficent manliness in his act of social charity. Ferdyshchenko, bemused at the General's ability to succeed where he has failed, complains that he has told “one of the best actions of his life” and has “outfoxed” (*naduli*) him (127).

However, Totsky manages to outsmart both the General and Ferdyshchenko with his tale of how he procured camellias for Anfisa Alekseevna, putting to

shame her admirer Petya.<sup>22</sup> Though Totsky calls his intervention in the affair “a most original idea” (*preoriginal'naia mysl'*) (129), it is in fact derivative of romantic fiction, as critics have pointed out; Totsky himself even compares the unlikely course of events to a novel. This is not the only occasion in the novel when Dostoevskii employs the word “original” as a critique of conventionalized masculinity: Ferdyschenko also tries to impress others with his “originality,” but it never “works out” (80); on hearing of Ganya’s plan to marry Nastasya Filippovna, Myshkin chides him by calling him “very weak and not in the least original” (104). Returning to Totsky, his affair with the camellias is so banal that it follows Sedgwick’s theory of homosocial desire in the nineteenth-century novel almost to the letter; Sedgwick famously proposed that the romance plot of nineteenth-century fiction is driven not by male-female heterosexual desire, but by rivalry and desire between men, in which the woman becomes a mere object. Indeed, Totsky almost seems to anticipate Sedgwick’s work when he deliberately emphasizes the fact that he had no romantic interest in Anfisa: he explains his actions were “simply mischief, done simply out of lechery” (“prostaiia shalost', iz-za prostogo volokitstva”) (129).

Totsky impresses his immediate audience, but the reader of the novel can see how Dostoevskii is using him to show the absurdity of the romantic model of masculinity, the supposedly “original” ideas and, indeed, the kind of texts it produced. Moreover, as if to underline the harmful effects of romantic masculinity, the story concludes with the injured party, Petya, volunteering to fight in the Caucasus, trying to recover from his humiliation by going to a frontier where men have traditionally sought to test and prove their manhood. Totsky concludes his tale by informing his listeners that Petya died in Crimea, wondering: “If I hadn’t interfered with that bouquet of flowers, who knows, that man might still be alive today” (129). Here, Dostoevskii provides his readers with another aperture of what-might-have-been, inviting us to consider how the world might look different without normative ideas of hegemonic masculinity.

If Ferdyschenko’s tale does not succeed with his audience because it is too unsophisticated, Totsky risks alienating the reader because his proves too polished. Masculinity, theorists tell us, must not appear contrived; a well-dressed man must wear his garments with apparent nonchalance (Reeser 7). Similarly, the prose that men use to dress their manly feats should not appear too stylized, or they risk exposure as mere imitators of others’ feats. This is the lesson that General Ivolgin learns when he boasts of throwing a lady’s lapdog out of the window of a railway carriage, a hilarious story that initially has his son Kolya beaming with filial pride, but Nastasya puts him to shame when she reveals she read the same story in a French journal. More often, however,

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22. Fusso (28–29) has suggested that Totsky’s anecdote has one more aim: through the symbolism of the camellias, he wishes to convey a message to Nastasya Filippovna that he waited for her to reach sexual maturity before entering into relations with her.

Ivolgin's tales appear as drunken ramblings, so far-fetched that they evoke ridicule rather than respect from his audience. As Deborah Martinsen has pointed out, Ivolgin longs to be a romantic hero, to restore his position in the Petersburg society to which he once belonged (187).

Myshkin listens with "a certain sense of disbelief" (81) to the story the General relates about his close friendship with the Prince's father, how their friendship nearly ended over a duel over a woman, Myshkin's mother. The duel is stalled at the last moment when they realize their friendship is more important than heteronormative love. This story, the reader is led to believe, is just another embarrassed failed performance of masculinity from a humiliated old drunkard. Yet however contrived, Ivolgin's tale arguably creates another aperture in the text that allows for the articulation of an alternative masculinity.<sup>23</sup> Like Totsky's story of the camellias, Ivolgin's tale concerns homosocial bonds among military men and is ripe for Sedgwickian analysis. However, whereas the triangle in Totsky's story is based on male rivalry, Ivolgin's is based on mutual affection: "A torrent of tears fell from the eyes of us both, our hands began to tremble. Both of us, both of us, at the same time! And, naturally enough, we embraced each other and began to outdo each other with kindness. The Prince shouts, 'She's yours!' and I shout back, 'She's yours!'" (81). Admittedly, one must recognize that this tale still places women in the role of exchange objects, with the difference being that the General and Prince Myshkin Sr. now want to *give them away* rather than compete over them. Moreover, Ivolgin's story is, in many ways, more cliché and less sophisticated than Totsky's: the affect of the "torrent of tears," trembling hands and embraces derives from a sentimental masculinity that appears hopelessly naïve when set against Totsky's well-made tale that owes more to Byronic models of masculinity. Nevertheless, as Martinsen points out, Ivolgin's stories highlight the existence of an "ideal," a potential "restoration of community" that conceals the "devastating truth of [his] flawed state" (195). Moreover, Ivolgin's credibility also receives an unexpected boost later in the novel when Aglaya reveals that it is true that he looked after her as a child, prompting a confused outpouring of genuine emotion from the old General. This revelation invites readers to reassess Ivolgin's tall tales, showing how the ideal communities that he imagines may not be as laughable or unimaginable as they first suspected.

### **Female Masculinity: Aglaya Ivanovna and Nastasya Filippovna**

It is not just the male characters in *The Idiot* who stage performances of masculinity. As we saw with Nastasya Filippovna's intervention in the *petit jeu*, women also seek to disrupt the gender order. However, it is the proud

23. Dalton reads Ivolgin's anecdote as a "negative or homosexual resolution of the Oedipus complex" (122), but one does not need this Freudian framework to see the parodic—and yet strangely sincere—treatment of sentimental masculine friendship in the story.



Aglaya Ivanovna who revolts most clearly against the prescriptions of femininity. All three Epanchin sisters are masculinized from the moment they are introduced: they are first described as well-built, robust women with “powerful arms, like men’s” (32); at the dinner table, they refuse to hide their appetites in accordance with convention. Aglaya later plans to cut her own hair short and encourages Aleksandra to do the same, making their mother wonder, in despair, if she has raised three *nigilistki*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Aglaya’s relationship with Myshkin involves a series of gender role reversals, as Olga Matich (1986) has pointed out. In one amusing passage, Aglaya even explains to Myshkin how to load and fire a pistol. Eventually, impatient with the Prince’s reticence in proposing marriage, Aglaya takes it upon herself to force a proposal from him, demanding whether he intends to ask the question in an outburst over dinner, yet another act of gender deviance that outrages her parents.

Dostoevskii’s views on women have already received much scholarly attention.<sup>25</sup> His non-fiction writings reveal some common ground with those moderately in favor of women’s emancipation, particularly in the sphere of education. In *Diary of a Writer*, he speaks favorably of strong women—speaking of their “sincerity, determination, seriousness and honor” (*PSS* 21: 125)—and even seeing them as a repository of the Russian national spirit. Yet Dostoevskii also expressed his own anxieties about the emergence of the masculinized nihilist woman. “Their total rejection of femininity, their slovenliness, their crude, affected tone were repugnant to him,” noted his wife Anna Grigorevna, although she added that Dostoevskii came to respect the earnest dedication of the women’s movement in the 1870s (*Dostoevskaia* 174). Indeed, his 1876 obituary of George Sand defended her against Russian detractors who mocked her for her masculinity; Dostoevskii, by contrast, spoke of the “great moral purity” of her heroines (*PSS* 23: 35). Yet his own fictional portraits of masculinized women are often negative—one thinks here of the satirical portrayals of Varvara Stavrogina and Yulia von Lembke in *Demons*, or indeed the narrator’s unflattering description in *The Idiot* of the short-haired *nigilistki* who believe that simply putting on a pair of blue spectacles has allowed them “to acquire their own ‘convictions’” (381). However, Dostoevskii’s portrayal of Aglaya proves more mixed, suggesting the author’s own ambivalence on this score. The novel does offer a critical view of Aglaya as a performer whose attempts to do masculinity are at times laughable, as in her detailed instructions to

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24. Stites provides a history of the women’s emancipation movement in nineteenth-century Russia; on *nigilistki* specifically, see 89–114. On the sartorial styles on nihilists specifically, see Thorstenson.

25. There remains significant disagreement about the gender politics of Dostoevskii’s work. Heldt and Andrew, for example, see misogyny in Dostoevskii’s works, whereas Briggs offers a much more positive assessment of his representation of women. Straus sees the emergence of a proto-feminist consciousness in Dostoevskii, although her book suggests that such consciousness is absent from *The Idiot*.

Myshkin on how to load a pistol. Yet she is also shown to be a strong and compassionate character whose imitations of masculinity stem from an earnest—if rather naïve—romantic desire to improve the world, as well as a frustration with the constraints of the gender system.

An example of how Aglaya challenges gender can be seen in her first meeting with Myshkin. When he suddenly relates his impressions of an execution he witnessed in France she has a ready riposte:

“I didn’t like it at all and afterwards I felt rather queasy. But I admit I was transfixed. I couldn’t take my eyes off it.”

“I wouldn’t be able to stop watching either,” said Aglaya.

“They don’t like it when women watch. The newspapers even write about the kind of women who watch executions.”

“Well, if they find it’s not women’s business, then by saying that, they want to claim that it’s men’s business (and, therefore, to justify it). I congratulate them on their logic.” (54)

Existing discussion of Myshkin’s stories normally concentrates on Dostoevskii’s attitude towards the death penalty, or how he works autobiographical material—the episode of his own mock execution—into his fiction (e.g. Young 84–85). Yet Aglaya’s response also merits further discussion. First, she seeks to establish her own masculinity by explaining that she, too, would like to watch. Moreover, her sarcastic quip about the French newspapers offers an astute point about how gender ideologies have tangible social consequences. Aglaya implies here that the myth of femininity serves an ulterior function: by masculinizing capital punishment, society thereby legitimizes it. Her impassioned speech therefore shows a sophisticated take on the relational nature of gender, and how the mass media endorses the link between the ideology of masculinity and state violence.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam speaks of a “shadow feminism” that refuses “the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal power” (2011: 124). Halberstam is not simply speaking of literal mothers here, but rather, calling for women to have the confidence to break free of tradition-bound feminist genealogies. As Katherine Briggs (127) points out, there is generational conflict between Madame Epanchina and Aglaya, who is revolting both against her own mother and against the liberal, moderate line on women’s emancipation she takes. The narrator wryly points out the Epanchins consider themselves enlightened because they allow their daughters to take the lead in finding their own matches. Madame Epanchina in particular has a complex relationship to what she calls the “accursed woman question”: part of her despises her daughters’ “new ideas,” yet what terrifies her most of all is that her daughters will grow into “eccentrics” (*chudaki*) who resemble her (271). Aglaya even admits to Myshkin that there are similarities between her and her mother, but she nevertheless insists on making a more radical break from her family, and, specifi-

cally, from the sociocultural expectations of femininity. “I want to be brave and never be afraid. I don’t want to attend all their balls, I want to do good in the world,” Aglaya explains to Myshkin (365).

Here, Aglaya expresses a desire to enact publicly the socially unacceptable ideas that her mother may have held privately, but never expressed openly. Aglaya’s longing for freedom makes her into a more naïve version of positive, liberal heroines such as Elena in Ivan Turgenev’s *On the Eve* (*Nakanune*, 1860) or Lyolenka in Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia’s *Pansionerka* (*The Boarding School Girl*, 1861). However, this is not simply a case of Dostoevskii mocking his liberal predecessors, as is so often his wont. Aglaya’s impassioned speech is sincere, even if her dreams are “absurd” (*nelepo*) (366), as Myshkin recognizes. In fact, this portrayal of Aglaya anticipates the enthusiastic young woman who volunteers to nurse the wounded in Serbia who appears in Dostoevskii’s 1876 *Diary* in a section titled “Again about Women” (*PSS* 23: 51–53). Dostoevskii expresses his admiration for this young woman’s convictions but wishes there were a better education system to match her needs and voices his worries about what will become of this naïve young lady when she goes to the field hospitals.

However, the conclusion of *The Idiot* gives Dostoevskii’s own answer to the kind of fate that might lie in store for such an enthusiastic but ingenuous young woman. Aglaya, the narrator informs us, travels to Paris where she falls in love with an *émigré* Polish count who turns out to be fraudulent. In a sardonic tone that mocks Aglaya’s naivety, he tells us that she was smitten by “the extraordinary nobility of his soul, tormented by suffering for his motherland” (509). Aglaya’s gender trouble now transforms into what Naiman aptly calls “nation-panic” (413): she joins the Polish nationalist movement and the Catholic faith, leading to a quarrel with her family. Having misjudged Myshkin initially based on a misreading of Cervantes, it seems that she has now misread this Count, seeing in him the kind of romantic masculine hero who might feature in a Mickiewicz poem. Dostoevskii emphasizes the agony that Aglaya’s behavior causes her mother, seemingly giving credence to Evgeny Pavlovich’s earlier harangue against liberals when he connects liberal politics with shunning one’s own mother and one’s own nation: he complains that the liberal “denies Russia herself, that is, he hates and beats his own mother” (277). Of course, one could hardly expect Dostoevskii, for whom motherhood is sacrosanct, to award a happy ending to Aglaya, who follows Halberstam’s advice to “lose [her] mother” (2011: 124). Yet Dostoevskii has also planted the seeds for a more reparative reading of Aglaya’s behavior. If Aglaya ultimately fails, it is not through want of trying, and, as Dostoevskii will suggest directly in “Again about Women,” it is an indictment of the society that has failed to educate women and create roles for them, rather than the individual herself.

Better still, might the reparative reader wonder whether Aglaya’s ultimate

fate is not a failure at all? What if she actually has found a worthy cause as a Polish nationalist in Paris, away from Petersburg society and its gender ideologies? What if the town gossip about the Count's fraudulent nature—like the rumors about Myshkin—bears no relation to reality? Such an interpretation is, of course, an intentionally audacious misreading of Dostoevskii, insofar as it cheekily ignores the Polonophobia and anti-Catholicism well-attested elsewhere in his output, as well as the narrator's sardonic tone when he discusses the fraudulent count's supposed virtues in the conclusion of *The Idiot*.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, this positive interpretation of Aglaya's actions is not without textual foundation, precisely because the text has previously presented her convictions as sincere. Although Aglaya appears awkward and naïve, she is surely more sympathetic than those characters who move with ease through the high society world of balls and parties of St Petersburg.

If it is difficult for the reader to develop a reparative reading of Aglaya's fate, it is even more challenging to do so with Nastasya Filippovna. One might argue that Dostoevskii ultimately destroys both the novel's most challenging, masculinized women, and its most feminized man, in order to restore the existing gender order.<sup>27</sup> Yet queer theory suggests alternative ways of reading Nastasya's story that restore her agency, at least in part. The shadow feminism that Halberstam proposes "speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an anti-social femininity" (2011: 124); he builds on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1998), in which Spivak controversially offered a defense of the Indian practice of *sati* (the act of a woman's self-immolation following her husband's death) as a potentially feminist practice that Western liberal feminism could not accommodate. In *The Idiot*, Nastasya Filippovna's actions are similarly self-destructive: she chooses to go with Rogozhin, calling "Save me! Take me away! Right now, wherever you want!" (493). Moreover, she is driven to choose Rogozhin precisely because she knows that it will lead to her own demise, as Rogozhin himself acknowledges earlier in the novel. "Marrying you is like drowning myself," Rogozhin reports Nastasya as saying, "So let's have the wedding all the sooner!" (180). Nastasya flees from her marriage with Myshkin towards Rogozhin, where she knows that death awaits. As Olga Matich ("Dostoevskii's Troubled Temporalities") and others have suggested, Nastasya's choices are limited at the end of the novel; in our modern idiom, she is an abuse survivor traumatized by mental illness. Nevertheless, this line of interpretation arguably underestimates the fact that Nastasya does retain the agency to choose between Rogozhin and Myshkin at the end of the novel. Perhaps choosing the knife is a final, queer revolt against the fact that she, like Spivak's subaltern, "cannot speak" in a

26. On Dostoevskii's attitudes to the Catholic Church, see Blake and Discherl. On his Polonophobia, inextricably linked to his negative attitude to Catholicism, see Perlina.

27. This is the view, for example, of Heldt (36), who argues that Dostoevskii has a propensity to kill off "bad" women who are angry at the abuse they have suffered.

society that has allowed Totsky to abuse her and rewards his kind of masculinity, as well as against the institution of heterosexual marriage that she knows cannot work for her and Myshkin.

While Aglaya provides a portrait of the liberal face of women's emancipation, Nastasya represents an alternative shadow feminism that is unwilling—or unable—to compromise with the world as it is. The sense of horror that Nastasya provokes among the Epanchins—Madame Epanchina calls her “that creature” (*tvar'*) (274)—testifies to their fear of the fact that Nastasya's anti-social behavior mirrors their own mistrust of social convention, a mistrust that Nastasya takes to an extreme. Just as Aglaya initially misreads Myshkin's kindness and naivety as the performance of a rogue, she later misreads Nastasya by accusing her of making “theatrical performances” (473) out of her own victimhood: “you can love nothing but your own shame and the constant thought you have been abused, and made to feel shame” (471). The narrator primes us to question Aglaya's accusation by emphasizing this is a speech “prepared long ago and much thought over” (*ibid.*); the polish of Aglaya's speech suggests it is she, not Nastasya, who is performing a role here. Moreover, what is frightening about Dostoevskii's Nastasya is that the text does not allow her to be dismissed as a woman with a victim complex; nor is she willing to be a Mary Magdalene figure, a “fallen” woman who is saved by the benevolence of a liberal man. Critics have pointed out (e.g. Matich “Dostoevskii's Troubled Temporalities” 410) that Dostoevskii uses Nastasya to parody the emancipated woman “in keeping with his social politics,” seeing her as a conservative's answer to, for example, the sentimental depiction of reformed prostitutes in the works of Nikolai Nekrasov. However, one could also argue that Nastasya—whether Dostoevskii intended it or not—lays down a more radical challenge to the gender order of his day.

### **Myshkin, Rogozhin and Queer Theology**

Straus argues *The Idiot* ultimately fails because Dostoevskii tries to combine what cannot be combined. “The last picture in the novel,” she writes, “is of the dead Nastasya and the half-dead Myshkin caught in the vise of Russian culture's absolutist polarities—Christianity and sexual liberation—and resurrected by neither” (56–57). From her point of view, Nastasya is the sacrifice that Dostoevskii requires for his failed experiment in creating a new masculinity; her death provides “an opportunity for Myshkin and Rogozhin's final male bonding, revealing how she has served as ‘traffic’ between them” (113). However, as I have argued, Nastasya does maintain an element of agency in choosing Rogozhin, even if that it is a choice that is difficult to square with a liberal feminism that would prefer to see her emancipation. I would like to conclude this article by proposing a reparative reading of the bond between Myshkin / Rogozhin, one that posits their encounters not merely as another example of the homosocial behavior described by Sedg-

wick, but rather one that creates an aperture for imagining a different kind of relationship between men.

Matich suggests that *The Idiot* revolves around Myshkin's failed attempt to liberate Nastasya from the role of fallen women (2016: 397), but one could argue that the novel also centers on his attempts to liberate Rogozhin from his own sensuality. From the beginning of the novel, Dostoevskii opposes Myshkin's hypomascularity and Rogozhin's hypermasculinity, and yet there are also parallels between the two men. Positioned at either end of the gender spectrum, neither man can adopt the façade of measured masculinity that nineteenth-century Petersburg society demands—a space occupied by, say, Ptitsyn or Totsky, men whose covert cruelty is masked by a conformist exterior. Both Myshkin and Rogozhin are implicitly non-procreative men: even the latter, for all his “monstrous [*bezobraznyi*] passion” (27), is the child of a father who admired the *Skoptsy*, a sect of castrates. Although during their meeting in Part II, Rogozhin believes that he and the Prince “cannot be compared” (174), that encounter ends in an exchange of crosses and Rogozhin ceding Nastasya Filippovna to Prince: “She's yours! I give up! Remember Rogozhin!” (186). The reader here is reminded of General Ivolgin's unlikely tale of how he and Myshkin's father avoided a duel by promising to avoid fighting over a woman. At one level, the parallel with Ivolgin's tale casts a shadow of doubt over Rogozhin's sincerity. Yet at another level, it provides a reminder of how an alternative masculinity might be possible. Moreover, this encounter shows how, despite David Bethea's view that time is closed in *The Idiot* and the novel's apocalyptic ending inevitable, apertures such as this suggest the opening of time and point towards another potential ending, even if it is not realized.

Queerness—in all senses of the word—surrounds the conclusion of this encounter between Rogozhin and Myshkin as they descend the staircase. When Rogozhin calls after the Prince, the narrator calls it “[y]et another *strange* occurrence!” (184, italics mine). Silence reigns as Rogozhin proves unable to articulate his sentiments to the Prince: he stays quiet as he takes Myshkin by the arm, and the blessing from the old woman—Rogozhin's mother—is offered in silence. As the Prince takes his leave, he gently reproaches Rogozhin: “At least let me embrace you, you strange man!” (185). Rogozhin refuses at first, “somehow strangely chortling to himself” (185), “[b]ut then his face was transformed: he grew terribly pale, his lips trembled and his eyes lit up” (*ibid.*) as he tightly hugs Myshkin. Does the tension here stem from Dostoevskii's homosexual panic, to use Sedgwick's terms; is the tongue-tied Rogozhin unable to articulate the love that dare not speak its name? The passage certainly provides fodder for contemporary adaptations that wish to play up the homoerotic angle, such as Estonian director Rainer Sarnet's *The Idiot* (*Idioot*, 2013) does in his adaptation of this scene, with a lingering camera shot of Myshkin embracing a bare-chested Rogozhin. Yet

Rogozhin's affection for Myshkin may be inexpressible not simply because of the prohibition against homosexuality, but also because Christian, brotherly love also defies the boundaries of language, appearing only briefly in the silences and hesitations of the text. Myshkin notices fleeting, barely detectable moments in this scene when Rogozhin's sarcastic smirk disappears from his face; these mark the potentiality for the two men to develop a different type of relationship.

Contemporary queer theology suggests that Christian love itself may, in fact, be the queerest of all forms of love. Stuart, for example, has argued that Christianity offers a vision of queer community based on a model of friendship that refutes the dualism between *eros* and *agape*, as well as binary notions of gender and sexuality, building on Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Arguably, the "queerness" surrounding the exchange of crosses between Myshkin and Rogozhin, and indeed the confusions of gender and sexuality that we have seen throughout the novel, demonstrate Dostoevskii's attempt to escape from such binaries. *The Idiot* begins to imagine a radically different notion of community that does have a Biblical precedent, even if the history of the Christian church has often obscured it.<sup>28</sup> Reading Dostoevskii in this way opens up an alternative, reparative reading compared to Straus, whose understanding of Christianity as essentially patriarchal proves too narrow. This queer Myshkin is not synonymous with Christ, but he resembles Cheng's "queer Christ" (2012: 69–146) insofar as he collapses the distinction between *eros* and *agape*, transgresses the sociocultural norms of his day and is ultimately rejected by those he comes to save.

This reparative approach to *The Idiot* also allows us to challenge the negative picture of Myshkin offered by theologians such as Rowan Williams, who criticizes Myshkin as a character "with no history" and this "timelessness [...] prevents him being a savior" (51–52). Yet I would contend that Myshkin *does* have a history: the reader learns about his time in Switzerland, and his relationship with Marie. Perhaps the problem for Williams is that Myshkin's story does not conform to the kind of history, or narrative, that typical heterosexual masculinity would typically produce, and so is not recognizable *as* history. I would argue that what Williams sees as "timelessness" is in fact a queer temporality, or, rather, a refusal to accept the temporally bound expectations of hegemonic masculinity, and in that sense, the Prince does offer a form of salvation.

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28. In Knapp's discussion of women in *The Idiot* (195–96), she rightly points out that Christianity has a history of radical inclusion as well as one of patriarchy and exclusion. Briggs (149) also begins to bring a "feminist theological perspective" to the text, suggesting that Aglaya and Nastasya "do not conform to paradigms of the Madonna and the Whore."

## Conclusions

As we have seen, Dostoevskii's queer theology also requires a queer way of reading narrative. Critics have long wrestled with the convoluted structure of *The Idiot*, with its unexpected twists, turns, and tangents. In a seeming paradox, the Dostoevskii novel that is closest to a "novel of manners (or ill-manners)" (Miller 8) is also a novel with a "gothic master plot" (Bowers 89). Alyson Tapp has suggested that the tensions in the novel derive from Myshkin's attempt to bring the absolute values of Christian compassion, which hark back to the epic, into the dialogic world of a novel of manners, where they prove "ultimately destructive" (427). Tapp offers a productive analysis of these tensions, but her work focuses on the fallen, temporal world of the novel where I would suggest that the Christian love ought to take center stage. While I share Tapp's view that Myshkin poses a challenge to the generic narrative patterns of the realist novel, I would suggest we see his challenge in a more positive light, as a potentially liberating disruptiveness. One expects the novel of manners to culminate in heterosexual marriage, but Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna both make queer choices that render this ending impossible. One expects the gothic novel to culminate in a grisly tableau—which *The Idiot* does—but Dostoevskii uses Myshkin's Christian love to imagine the possibility of an alternative ending. Modifying Tapp's thesis, then, I would suggest that it is not so much that the Prince brings a logic of absolutist values to the realist novel, but rather that the realist novel as a vehicle is too conventional to sustain the host of queer alternatives imagined at different points by Myshkin.

In order to appreciate the radicalism of Dostoevskii's queer vision, then, we must learn to read him differently, and, to borrow Halberstam's term, to ditch the hermeneutics of suspicion and "privilege the naïve" (2011: 12). A queer reading entails looking again at those moments—awkward pauses, stuttered words, silences—in the novel where the narrative gets interrupted and Dostoevskii invites us to imagine alternative futures. Prince Shch. is right that "[p]aradise is a difficult thing," but the reparative reader can catch glimpses of it in rare moments in the text that hint at the potential for different kinds of relationships that defy the limits of language and confound the expectations of plot. It may seem odd to insist on a reparative reading of Dostoevskii, the most suspicious of all writers himself: never content with straightforward causality, he equips his characters with multiple motivations for their actions. Moreover, he makes his characters into paranoid readers of each other's actions, as they struggle to figure out each other's hidden motivations and desires, as they find each other role-playing and performing. However, the enduring radical challenge of *The Idiot* is not simply confirmation of Butler's wisdom that all our actions are performative. Rather, Dostoevskii begs us to consider: what happens if we dare to be naïve enough to read each other's behavior, in all its queerness, as sincere?



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#### Тезисы

Коннор Доук

Квир-провал князя Мышкина: (не)правильные толкования маскулинности в «Идиоте» Ф.М. Достоевского

В этой статье анализируется главный герой «Идиота» Ф.М. Достоевского с точки зрения квир-теории. На основе этой теории автор освещает давно обсуждаемый вопрос: если Достоевский был намерен изобразить “вполне прекрасного человека” в своём князе Мышкине, почему тот самый герой приносит вред и вызывает страдания у окружающих людей? В отличие от тех критиков, которые считают Мышкина “разрушительной силой” (Роуэн Уильямс), автор этой работы предлагает новую, более положительную интерпретацию главного героя, опираясь на идею “репаративного прочтения” (Ив Седжвик) и “квир-провала” (Джек Халберстам). Согласно Халберстаму, под “квир-провалом” следует понимать не только неудачи, но и “уничтожение логики успеха и неудачи в настоящем обществе”; более того, Халберстам считает, что понятие квир-провала открывает “более кооперативные, удивительные способы существования в мире”. Автор этой статьи утверждает, что в «Идиоте» Достоевский критикует гендерную систему в России XIX века, особенно конфигурацию маскулинности. Более того, автор предлагает новый подход к исследованию нарративных стратегий Достоевского. Опираясь на работы Гари Сола Морсона и Сары Янг, автор данной работы фокусируется на провалах коммуникации, на моментах молчания и разрывах в тексте, утверждая, что такие приёмы далеко не случайны, а составляют квир метод повествования. Такие моменты являются приглашением

читателю воображать другие завершения романа, то есть, додумывать альтернативный художественный мир, в котором, согласно Седжвик, “Будущее может отличаться от настоящего времени” и “в свою очередь, прошлое могло бы оказаться другим, чем оно оказалось на самом деле”. В конце статьи, автор обсуждает выводы этого подхода с точки зрения теологической перспективы романа; он утверждает, что можно понимать князя Мышкина как “квир-Христа”.