

Title: “Sisters, doin’ it for themselves”: The Decentered Female Text of Yuliya Voznesenskaya
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Abstract:

Yuliya Voznesenskaya’s *Women’s Decameron* (1986) challenges the hegemony that ancient texts and male writers have over the traditions of storytelling by positing a contemporary version of Boccaccio’s famous Decameron. But as a set of one hundred stories narrated by ten women in a Soviet maternity ward, *Women’s Decameron* does something more important. In her collection of tales Voznesenskaya asserts hospital space as a timeless space and transforms the medical necessity of waiting into a human necessity – the need to fill that empty space of waiting by creating community and writing oneself into history through shared experience. In this sense, Voznesenskaya’s work posits a female version of the traditionally powerful male gaze, flipping the roles so that women patients take charge of their own meaning.

The proposed paper will juxtapose Voznesenskaya’s technique of ceding narrative voice to a collective of women with devices deployed in more conventional Russian texts written by the most authoritative male figures – writers who combine the role of historian and diagnostician, of writer and doctor, or indeed patient-writers who train their gaze on their own doctors. Extracting “ward scenes” from two important Russian doctor-writers and one doctor-patient—Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn—the article will argue that decentering the gaze and distributing the power makes for a feminine storytelling structure that gains its meaning from that very dispersion.

A recent article by Yelena Furman (2009) places the work in the context of French feminist theory, but also argues that Voznesenskaya deserves further exploration. Scholarly attention from Slavists Julie Curtis (1998), David Gillespie (1998), Helena Goscilo (1993, 1996), Beth Holmgren (2002) and Jerzy Kolodziej (1996), and from scholars of Boccaccio including Wiley Feinstein (1989) and Barbara Zazcek (2006), have illuminated *Women’s Decameron* from various sides. The current paper aims to highlight the medical humanities aspect of the text and add to this discussion.