
THE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS OF ALEXANDRA OSIPOVNA SMIRNOVA-ROSSET (on the history of the origins of one of the women of the Pushkin era)

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*“The black-eyed Rosseti,
In her autocratic beauty,
Captivated all these hearts”* (A.S. Pushkin)

“No, you do not know her ...” (Yu.N. Lubchenko)

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Alexandra Osipovna Smirnova (06.03.1809, Odessa - 07.06.1882, Paris), nee Rosset¹, is a widely known personage, especially in the history of Russian literature. One of the outstanding women of the Petersburg secular society, the maid of honor of two empresses (Maria Feodorovna and Alexandra Feodorovna), the wife of a diplomat, she was distinguished by rare beauty, intelligence, education and independence of judgments. She was in close friendly relations with all the famous people of her era; Pushkin, Lermontov, Vyazemsky, Khomyakov, Rostopchina, Myatlev, and others sought her company and dedicated their poems to her.

Her life is sufficiently illuminated in the scientific literature and journalism, so we do not set the task of repeating or rewriting the known events of her life. She became the object of our attention in the study of the topic of outstanding Moldavian women of the 19th century. In the works of Romanian historians (Bezviconi 1934, 11-12) already at the beginning of the 20th century there were notes in which her Moldavian origin was cultivated. Without any documentary evidence, this tradition is also shared by some contemporary colleagues (Colesnic 2000, 239-240)².

However, as a result of our research in the archives and libraries of St. Petersburg³, we were surprised that she had never linked her origins to Moldavian boyar families. Moreover, she avoided discussing this issue under any pretext. In fact, no one, even from close relatives, knew the truth about her family tree. And if she always wrote reliable facts about the mother's genealogical roots: *“...the mother has the blood of the Laurers and the Tsitsianovs (Georgian princes)”* (Смирнова-Поссет 2003, 19-20), she skillfully veiled what her father was. From her notes and diaries it can be seen that she attributed to herself the Italian or French origin of her father. In particular, in her memoirs she wrote: *“My father, Chevalier Joseph de Rosset, was an emigrant, quite well known, served on the Danube under the leadership of G.A. Potemkin (who awarded him the Order of St. Anne⁴) and A.V. Suworov (who awarded him the Order of St. George for Ochakov⁵) ... He was the commandant of the port of Odessa”* (Смирнова-Поссет 2003, 19-20).

This information is confirmed by her daughter Olga Nikolaevna Smirnova: *“The name of my grandfather Osip Ivanovich Rosset was preserved in the St. George's Hall of the Kremlin on the plate of the heroes of Izmail and Ochakov. In Odessa, he married N.I. Lorret of the*

³ Manuscript Department, Pushkin House of the Institute of Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences (PH IL RAS); The Russian State Historical Archive (RSHA); Manuscript Department, Russian National Library (RNL).

⁴ The imperial Order of St. Anne, established in 1735 as a dynastic award and in 1797 introduced by the Emperor Paul I into the decoration system of the Russian Empire for the distinction of a wide range of state officials and the military. Available at: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki> (accessed 12 May 2018).

⁵ The imperial military Order of Saint George was established by Empress Catherine II on November 26 (December 7), 1769 for the distinction of officers for merits on the battlefield and service in military ranks. Had four grades. Available at: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki> (accessed 12 May 2018).

¹ Rosset or Rosseti? About this we will write below.

² A reference is made to the work of Gh. Bezviconi 1934, 11-12.



1. Alexandra Smirnov-Rosset. Watercolor by Peter Sokolov, 1834-1835 (after <http://www.nearyou.ru/sokolov/rosset.html>).



2. Alexandra Smirnov-Rosset. Portret by Franz Xaver Winterhalter (after <https://www.bing.com/search?q=Franz+Xaver+Winterhalter>).

Tsitsianovs. From her French father my mother inherited the spirit of renaissance, taste, critical thinking, clear and precise style, the qualities of a satirical mind without mockery” (Smirnova 2003, 20). In our opinion, A.O. Smirnova-Rosset not only pays attention to these two high awards, she emphasizes the fact of the father’s special services to the country, especially if we consider that these orders were related to the state awards of the Russian Empire, which never ceased to have a special status of a dynastic award at the House of Romanov.

Quite ambiguous and veiled A.O. Smirnova-Rosset writes about her birth: “*On March 6, an ugly, dark-skinned girl was born. Who was named Alexandra in honor of her father’s cousin, Countess Alesandra Rosset*” (Смирнова-Россет 1990, 28).

In these propositions, it is interesting how she describes herself as a newborn or how she positions herself. Firstly, she writes in the first person. It is unlikely that any member of the family could talk about the child in this way. And the second detail, she writes about the relatives of her father. If the father arrived in the Russian Empire to serve as a foreign national, it is unlikely that he, as a military man, brought with him all his relatives. If she was named after aunt, Countess Rosset, then her aunt seemed to play a big role in the family. Moreover, another aunt, mother’s sister, Vera Ivanovna Lorer, was married to Mazarachi (the wife of I.S. Mazarachi) (Смирнова-Россет 1989, 73). The Mazarachi, like the Rosseti, were famous Moldavian boyar family in the late 18th century and in the 19th century (Bezviconi 1940, I; Bezviconi 1943, II).

Further in her biography A.O. Smirnova-Rosset presents even more interesting and fascinating information, which raises more questions than gives any explanation. Her bright childhood memories speak of some curious and worthy details of her origin. In particular, she writes: “*I often heard that the father and Duke of Richelieu were talking about Prince Cantemir, and when I asked “who was Tantemil (Cantemir)”*”, “*my father answered me: “Go play with your balloon, it does not concern you”*” (Смирнова-Россет 1990, 29). It’s amazing that, being very young, at the age of about 4 years, she remembered exactly the name of Cantemir, and that she singles it out in her memoirs. In addition, describing her childhood, she mentions that her godmother was

“Auntie Ekaterina Ivanovna Voronovskaya, and the godfather – Richelieu” ... and their house used to be attended by “the Tregubovs, the Cantacuzenes” (Смирнова-Россет 1990, 29). It is known that the outstanding families of Cantemir and Cantacuzenes were closely related to each other. Working in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) on the subject of the Cantemir family, we found information that indicates the relationship of these families. In particular, in the case “On the elevation of the Cantemir family to princely dignity” Dmitry Cantemir, the last representative of the Cantemir dynasty in the male line, demanded that the court transfer the surname to his grandson. In the genealogy presented and the justification for the right to inherit, among the families of Cantemir and Cantacuzen there also appears the surname of Rosseti⁶.

A.O. Smirnova-Rosset described these childhood memories in a rather mature and conscious age. Why she paid attention to these details, remains without explanation, especially since there were researchers before us who drew attention to these **inconsistencies** in the biography.

One of the scientists, who showed interest in some inconsistencies in the biography of A.O. Smirnova-Rosset, was P.E. Reinbot. In his monograph, not published to date, he gives arguments that her name was originally Rosseti. So it appears in all documents and, in particular, in the “*Official List of 1811*”. But curiously, in a copy of a later period the last letter “*i*” is then corrected by other ink for the letter “*o*”. Perhaps this strange story stretches from a distant childhood. In 1814, at the age of five, she was left without a father. The mother remarried, and the girl was practically deprived of affection and attention. Absolutely intolerant was the relationship with her stepfather. Warm memories in her memoirs are only about the grandmother. Very young she was sent to St. Petersburg to the St. Catherine Institute. During her studies she lost her mother and her beloved grandmother. In fact, she remained an orphan and a dowerless girl, of whom no one cared and no one thought about her future.

After she graduated with brilliance (the 9th graduation, she received the 2nd Empress’ cipher), the Empress Maria Feodorovna proposed to take her as a maid of honor. But the Grand Duchess Elena

⁶ This is a separate topic of the study, so we limit ourselves to brief information.



3. Alexandra Smirnov-Rosset. Portret by Orest Adamovich Kiprenskii (after <http://www.russianmuseums.info/M1465item>).



4. Grave (tomb) of Alexandra Smirnov-Rosset. Necropolis of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow (after <https://www.google.com/search?q=могила+смрновой+россет&rlz>).

Pavlovna “*flatly refused*”, motivating it by the fact that A.O. Smirnova-Rosset has “*incomprehensible, dark origin*” (Смирнова-Россет 1989, 584) (sic! - L.Z.) and that she was brought up not at the expense of the family, but at the expense of the Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich.

To clarify the circumstances, it was suggested to send a request for Alexandra Osipovna. She wrote about this event in the following way: “*Thus the Official List of 1811 appeared in our archive... The reference went for a month, a month later I was taken to the palace*” (Smirnova 1989, 584). In other words, she was forced to prove to others her noble origins and considered it “*insulting*” (Смирнова-Россет 1989, 584).

No less interesting are her relations with Emperor Nicholas I, who called her “*my voloshka (i.e. Wallachian)*”. In our opinion, this definition was not at all random. In addition, at her marriage, the emperor signed a secret decree of October 7, 1831, on granting her a cash allowance of *12,000 rubles for a dowry*⁷, while the usual dowry size for a maid of honor did not exceed 1,000-2,000 rubles.

The mention of her origin we find in the poem “*Foreigner*” dedicated to her by A.S. Khomyakov: “*Around her everything is charming; All the luxury of the South breathes in her... May the bright and beautiful angel Illuminated her from the birth, But she is alien to my Russia... With her I will say: “Holy Russia”, And her heart will not tremble*” (Смирнова-Россет 1990, 495-496).

After the marriage, Alexandra Osipovna received the status of “*the origin of full value*”. Her life, on the one hand, was brilliant; she became “*the center of the literary salon in the reign of Nicholas Pavlovich... This salon was a collection of the best forces of the whole country, the heart from which life-giving juices, bright ideas and true enlightenment spread to all parts of Russia. Here, there was an exchange of thoughts between those who were destined to wake Russia by word, and those who had the opportunity to conceive and prepare good initiatives in public life*” (Смирнова-Россет 2003, 36).

A.S. Pushkin, M.Yu. Lermontov, V.A. Zhukovsky, P.A. Vyazemsky, and many others were friends with her and dedicated their poems to her. She

had a special and touching friendship with N.V. Gogol, which caused heated discussions both among contemporaries and researchers. Her daughter, Olga Smirnova, wrote on the N.V. Gogol’s attitude to her mother: “*she thanks Gogol that he fell in love with her not for the external and brilliant, which brought her so much suffering and disappointments, but for sparks of the soul, hardly noticeable, which he himself inflated and warmed with his friendship*” (Smirnova 2003, 23). S.T. Aksakov described her as “*an extraordinary woman*”. She traveled all over Europe, “*went to Mickiewicz’s lectures, Liszt’s concerts, the Catholic Swetchine’s salon, Ravignan’s sermons*” (Смирнова-Россет 1989, 16-17).

Many years later, in August 1863, Alexandra Osipovna, nee Rossetti, was awarded a medal stamped on the occasion of the death of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, as a former maid of honor from her suite, who married Senator Smirnov⁸.

Summarizing the above, we would like to note that besides the fact that Alexandra Osipovna Smirnova-Rosset was unquestionably a person of outstanding and ambiguous character, she is also one of the mysterious figures, secretive and mysterious in nature. In the framework of our research, we had only one question: why and for what purpose did she carefully hide certain fragments from her life, her origins. The conclusion suggests one: we did not find the answer. There are more questions than answers. Perhaps after experiencing hardships and privations, loneliness and betrayal at an early age, she used the “*sweet lie to save*”, and it was this life-giving attitude that helped her to form a strong character.

Possessing dazzling beauty, grace and wide outlook, she had extraordinary firmness and rigidity in making vital decisions. And doubts and secrets have become some symbolic sign of this extraordinary woman.

Instead of the conclusion, we quote extracts from a letter from Anna Fyodorovna Aksakova, who was friends with Alexandra Osipovna, to her daughter, Olga Smirnova: “*We are the last fragments of the great and poetic era in Russia, the era when people thought and felt, when they were engaged in the great tasks of humanity in general and of*

⁷ RSHA, Fund 468, Inventory 39, Storage unit 151; PH IL RAS, Fund 244, Inventory 17, Storage unit 41.

⁸ RSHA, Fund 472, Inventory 9, Storage unit 319, Sheets 2-20б, 4, 190б. “*June 29, 1862 August 25, 1863. The case of the distribution of medals on the occasion of the death of the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna*”.

Russia in particular; we are obliged to bequeath and transmit the thoughts and work of this era to future generations, who will think and feel, after the modern generation has exhausted its meanness and vulgarity, which now constitute its daily bread“ (Смирнова-Россет 2003, 11).

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Forţa şi slăbiciunile Alexandrei Osipovna Smirnova-Rosset (cronică asupra originilor unei femei din epoca lui A. Puşkin)

Cuvinte-cheie: Alexandra Smirnova-Rosset, mistere biografice, saloanele literare din Sankt Petersburg, N.V. Gogol, A.S. Puşkin, M. Lermontov, istoria feminină.

Rezumat: Viaţa şi activitatea Alexandrei Osipovna Smirnova-Rosset sunt suficient de amplu narate în literatură. Numeroase lucrări ştiinţifice au fost consacrate persoanei ei (articole, disertaţii, monografii), astfel încât obiectul de studiu al prezentului articol va evita reconstituirea evenimentelor marcante din viaţa ei. Analiza personalităţii acesteia a devenit subiectul studiului de faţă în cadrul realizării cercetărilor privind femeile remarcabile din Moldova în secolul XIX. Note tratând originile ei moldoveneşti figurează în lucrările istoricilor români (Gh. Bezviconi), care datează de la începutul secolului XX. Această teză a continuat să fie susţinută de istoricii contemporani (Iu. Colesnic).

Cercetările efectuate în cadrul arhivelor şi bibliotecilor din Sankt Petersburg ne permit să afirmăm faptul că ea nu a sprijinit niciodată aserţiunile privind tangenţele cu familiile boiereşti moldoveneşti. De facto, nimeni dintre rudele ei apropiate, inclusiv soţul şi copiii, nu erau la curent cu originile ei moldoveneşti.

Lista ilustraţiilor:

1. Portretul Alexandrei Smirnov-Rosset. Acuarelă de Piotr Sokolov, 1834-1835.
2. Portretul Alexandrei Smirnov-Rosset, pictat de F.X. Winterhalter.
3. Portretul Alexandrei Smirnov-Rosset, pictat de O.A. Kiprenski.
4. Mormântul A.O. Smirnova-Rosset. Cimitirul mănăstirii Donskoi din Moscova.

Сила и слабость Александры Осиповны Смирновой-Россет (из истории происхождения одной из женщин эпохи Пушкина)

Ключевые слова: Александра Смирнова-Россет, загадки биография, литературные салоны Санкт-Петербурга, Н.В. Гоголь, А.С. Пушкин, М. Лермонтов, женская история.

Резюме: История жизни и деятельности Александры Осиповны Смирновой-Россет широко известна и достаточно освещена в литературе. Ей посвящены многочисленные научные труды (диссертации, монографии, статьи) и мы не ставим задачу повториться или переписать известные события ее жизни. Предметом нашего исследования она стала в рамках изучения темы о выдающихся женщинах молдаванках XIX века. В работах румынских историков (Г. Безвикони), уже в начале XX века, появились заметки, в которых культивировалось ее молдавское происхождение. Этой традиции придерживаются и некоторые современные коллеги (Ю. Колесник).

Наших исследования в архивах и библиотеках Санкт-Петербурга привели нас к выводу, что она никогда не связывала свое происхождение с молдавскими боярскими родами. Более того, она тщательно скрывала свою биографию. Фактически никто, даже самые близкие родственники (муж и дети), не знали правду о ее происхождении.

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3. Портрет А.О. Смирновой-Россет О.А. Кипренского.
4. Могила А.О. Смирновой-Россет. Кладбище Донского монастыря в Москве.

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