



Mikhail Lermontov

MASQUERADE

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by Mikhail Lermontov

Translated from the Russian
by Valentina Hine and Robert Leach

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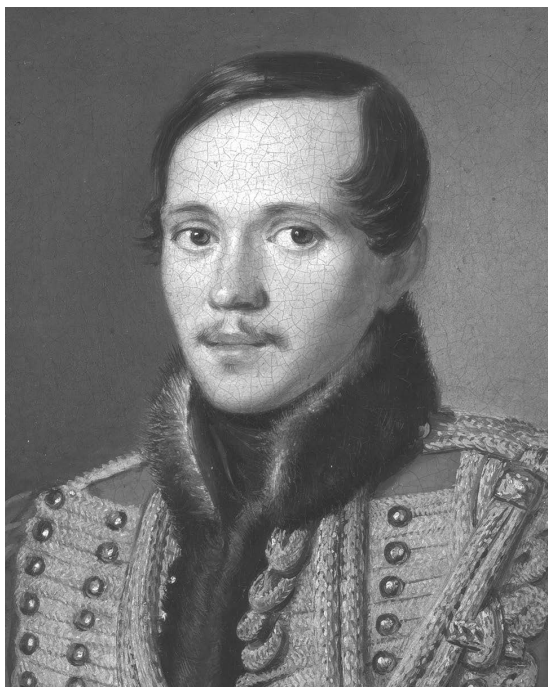
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(1814-1841)



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Introduction

'If one were to seek the [Russian] author who best fits the stereotype of "the romantic poet," Mikhail Lermontov would win without question.' So wrote John Mersereau Jr in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, and it is a judgment with which it is hard to disagree, and one which has been shared by most readers and critics since Lermontov's death.

Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov was born in Moscow in 1814. His mother came from a wealthy family, while his father was in the military. But their marriage seems to have been an unhappy one, and in any case his mother died in 1817. He was raised by his maternal grandmother, but she and Lermontov's father constantly disagreed about his upbringing. His youth was therefore turbulent and difficult, and in his teens his troubles were multiplied by his poor health. He was lonely, melancholy, haughty and even unapproachable. But he did not lack charisma.

He began to write poems, and by the age of fourteen he had already displayed a remarkable precocious talent. For the rest of his short life, he was prolific, creating not only poems, but also plays and novels. In 1830 he enrolled at Moscow University; two years later he joined the Life Guard Hussars; but at all times he continued energetically with his writing. Like so many of the Romantic writers throughout Europe, Lermontov came to admire especially Lord Byron, and in 1840 his novel, *A Hero of our Time*, gave perhaps the most telling expression of any to the Byronic figure. However, it should also be noted that Arbenin, the hero of the play,

Masquerade, was a significant earlier portrayal of that same Romantic Byronic hero.

But Lermontov's was a tangled and ill-fated life. He fought more than one duel, and in July 1841 in Pyatigorsk, he was shot in a duel, and died 48 hours later. He was just twenty-six years old.

He never saw his play, *Masquerade*, performed – the first performance did not take place until the 1860s. It was rejected by the censor on account of the sharpness of its satire, which culminates in the final act when the Lady remarks bluntly that the cause of her cousin's death was 'the stupidity of our society.' Moreover, much of the action of the play takes place in a very real setting – the house of Engelhardt, well-known in the early 1830s for hosting balls and masquerades attended by the upper echelons of society, even including members of the family of the tsar himself. Lermontov certainly attended a few such events there in 1834 and 1835.

The play tells of a gambler and rake, Arbenin, who has been reformed by the love of his innocent young wife, Nina. He thinks that he has discovered that she is unfaithful to him with Prince Zvezdich. He decides to kill the Prince, and when this fails, he tries to humiliate him by throwing a pack of cards in his face in a gambling den. In fact, Nina has not been unfaithful to him: she unknowingly dropped a bracelet at a masquerade. This was picked up by Baroness Shtrall, who gave it to an admirer of hers – Prince Zvezdich. But Arbenin refuses to believe in Nina's innocence, especially when he sees her speaking to the Prince at a society ball. He poisons her ice cream there, and when they return home, he tells her what he has done. She dies. But it is then that a stranger remorselessly reveals the truth to him, thereby driving him to insanity. It is a deliberately *Othello*-like story of unfounded jealousy, with the bracelet taking the place of Othello's handkerchief, though the characters are romantic, not Shakespearean.

It may also be noticed that gambling, such as that shown in *Masquerade*, was a perennially fascinating subject for the Russian intelligentsia of the time. Other treatments of it may be found in Alexander Pushkin's 1835 play, *The Queen of Spades*, which Tchaikovsky later made into the well-known opera; *The Gamblers*, Nikolay Gogol's play of 1840; and *The Gambler* (1866) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, written very rapidly with the aim, ironically enough, of making enough money to pay off his gambling debts.

The present translation of Lermontov's drama is entitled *Masquerade*, not *The Masquerade*, which is a possible alternative. The reason for this is because the action is not so much realistic as performative. To include 'the' in the title limits the subject; without 'the', the idea of masquerading becomes central. The masquerade is a place where participants are required to perform: the mask removes their usual quotidian person, and compels them to playact. Near the end of the play, Kazarin says to Arbenin, 'Enough of this, brother – take off the mask,' and admits, 'we're both actors.' If, therefore, a masquerade is inherently performative, the actors of Kazarin, Arbenin and the rest must decide how this performativity can be accessed. It asks questions, for example, of how the many 'asides' which the characters speak may be presented. The lack of the article in the title also focuses the question of Arbenin's behaviour – is it the result of demonic possession, as nineteenth century interpreters tended to suggest, or social pressure, as was often adduced in the twentieth century? And who then is the Stranger? The embodiment of some unseen force, or a hired assassin (as the great theatre director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, opined)?

Indeed it was Meyerhold's production in 1917 in St Petersburg which demonstrated this play's extraordinary dramatic power. At least five years in the making, and probably the most expensive production ever mounted in a theatre at that time, the production lasted in the repertoire of the Alex-

andrinsky Theatre till the 1940s, by which time the director himself had been done to death in one of Stalin's prisons. It was rehearsed and first presented, however, as the revolution was gathering pace, so that even reaching the theatre for the early audiences was extremely hazardous. The leading actor was turned away by soldiers at one early performance, though an officer who had seen him act managed to intervene, and thus enabled him to get through; Meyerhold himself and his designer, Alexander Golovin, had to run through flying bullets on one occasion; and on another, an audience member was actually shot dead at the entrance to the theatre.

But the production survived, and it was able to demonstrate the power of Lermontov's quintessential Romanticism.

Robert Leach





MASQUERADE

Characters

Yevgeny Alexandrovich Arbenin
Nastasya Pavlovna, 'Nina', his wife
Prince Zvezdich
Baroness Shtrall
Afanasy Pavlovich Kazarin
Adam Petrovich Shprikh
The Stranger
Host at the gambling house
A clerk
Sasha, Nina's maid
The Aunt
The Niece
Doctor
Old Man
Gamblers
Servants
Maskers
Guests

The action takes place in St Petersburg in 1835.



ACT ONE

Scene One

A gambling house. Card players: Zvezdich, Kazarin, Shprikh and others at the table, playing; more men standing around.

1 GAMBLER : Ivan Ilich, allow me, please.

BANKER : You're welcome.

1 GAMBLER : One hundred roubles.

BANKER : Certainly.

2 GAMBLER : Very well, begin, please.

3 GAMBLER : The luck's got to change – it's these cards, they're bewitched.

4 GAMBLER : I shall have to double the stakes.

3 GAMBLER : Play.

2 GAMBLER : On that? ... No, I'll get burned.

4 GAMBLER : My dear sir, you know that nowadays, unless you are extremely cunning, you can achieve nothing.

3 GAMBLER (*whispering to 1 Gambler*) : Be careful. Keep your eyes on him.

PRINCE : I'm going for broke!

2 GAMBLER : My dear Prince, emotions only poison the blood. Be so good as to remain calm while playing.

PRINCE : Be so good as to keep your advice to yourself.

(*They play.*)

BANKER : The card is dead.

PRINCE : Hell!

BANKER : Pass all the stakes, please.

Mikhail Lermontov was Russia's most renowned Romantic poet. He was born in 1814, and his short life was both difficult and sensational. He was brought up by his grandmother and as an adult he held various posts in the Russian military. But he also fought several duels, and was killed in his last duel in 1841. He was just twenty-six years old.

It was his writing, however, which brought him fame, and through which his name lives on. His work inspired, among others, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Chekhov. He was a prolific poet and he also wrote in prose. His novel *A Hero of our Time* remains a crucial work in Russian literature, and his play, *Masquerade*, is a landmark in the development of his country's theatre.

Valentina Hine and Robert Leach's new translation of *Masquerade* brings out all the searing tensions and dangerous actions of the society which Lermontov depicts, and conveys the performative perils which threaten the innocent when life is seen as a masquerade.

