

Title: The Burden of Superfluity: Reconsidering Female Heroism in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*

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It has become a truism of criticism of Chekhov's dramatic work to stress how the playwright sought to overcome the strictures of the 19th-century melodramatic tradition, how his four major plays progressed along a trajectory that gradually eliminated the superfluous. According to this interpretation, Chekhov's first major play, *The Seagull* (1896), represents the first in what one of his translators termed a "miraculous progression to cut away the melodramatic moments of the 'plot'" that culminated with *The Cherry Orchard*, where "essentially nothing happens." Similarly, his characterization has been praised for its authenticity, for its ability to reveal the unadulterated essence of the human soul. At least one prominent critic, however, has suggested that this praise cannot be equally applied to Chekhov's female characters, whom he identifies as the playwright's Achilles heel, writing that "on the few occasions that Chekhov's characterizations risk being caricatures, we find they are always of women."

This paper explores these seemingly conflicting conclusions through a detailed examination of female characterization in *The Seagull*. It attempts to situate the play in the context of its relationship to the mythology of Russian womanhood, with its specific literary and cultural precursors in nineteenth-century realism. By looking more closely at *The Seagull* (as well as briefly at *Ivanov*, the play that preceded it), it will shed light on the following questions: Does Chekhov indeed strip away the extraneous and the melodramatic from his characterization of women? Do the female characters in *The Seagull* transcend the burden of "terrible perfection"—to borrow Barbara Heldt's famous formulation— or do they succumb to it? My reading will demonstrate how Chekhov reorders the elements of the binary of the "superfluous man" versus the "virtuous female," inherited from nineteenth-century realism, in an original and unexpected way.