

Title: The “Treacherous Eunuch” in Pursuit of Freedom

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Abstract:

Starting one of the chapters of his novel with a parodic Orientalist reference to the “treacherous” nature of eunuchs, Tynianov proceeds to sketching a number of relatable human characters. The most important among them is the character of Mirza Yakub, the eunuch from Fath Ali Shah’s harem and the Shah’s treasurer. Mirza Yakub’s request for asylum in the Russian mission, and his declaration of a desire to take Russian citizenship was considered to be the main trigger for the 1829 tragedy in Teheran, both in the accounts of his contemporaries and in the historical reevaluations of the events. While siding with a British conspiracy theory as one of the possible causes of the tragedy, Tynianov clears Mirza Yakub of the accusations that he was collaborating with the British. Neither does he interpret Mirza Yakub’s desire to flee the Shah’s harem as a pursuit of financial gain, of which the eunuch was also accused. Instead, Mirza Yakub’s longing to return to the place of his birth appears in the novel as a quest for authenticity and personal freedom. The conflict between individual happiness and the confinement of a harem in the novel follows the pattern established by Montesquieu in his “Persian Letters.” Just as the eighteenth-century thinker of the Enlightenment, Tynianov uses the image of the harem to allude to the status of personal freedom in his own country, the Stalinist Russia.