INTRODUCTION

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Alexander Griboedov was born at the end of one world and on the cusp of another. This change had been building throughout the eighteenth century. Revisions to the law, the growth of a scientific community, and changed social standards transformed the country during the so-called Age of Empresses.

Literary life, too, changed in the eighteenth century under the empresses Elizabeth and Catherine II (“the Great”). Russian court life encouraged celebratory odes—on the ascension to the throne of the empresses, on the birth of various heirs, on battles won and lands conquered. Enlightenment genres such as the satirical ode, which encouraged moral and ethical behavior on the part of royalty and nobility alike, and the didactic play or dialogue, which featured more or less comedy depending on its audience, were practiced alongside translations and imitations of foreign works, primarily French, German, and (generally, via these) Latin and Greek. Even the very language Russians used was changing by the time Catherine II died in 1796. Writers and others worked to create a modern Russian to better capture Russia’s new circumstances, leaving behind an older language that had lumbered with the vocabulary of Church Slavonic and creaked clumsily due to convoluted syntax.

Catherine's successor, her son, Paul I, did his best to overturn his mother's legacy—including instituting male primogeniture for the royal family to ensure there would be no more matriarchs on the throne—but lasted fewer than five years himself before his violent murder brought his own son, Alexander I, to power. Alexander famously pronounced that "everything under me will be as it was under Grandmother." Russia's true "Golden Age" was about to begin.

This was the world in which Griboedov grew up, although we don't know with absolute certainty just when he was born. The place was eighteenth-century Moscow, and the date was January 4 (according to the old Julian calendar used in Russia until 1918), but scholars are still squabbling over the year. Even during Griboedov's lifetime there was ambiguity: 1795, 1793, 1792 . . . some argue for 1790, a birth year that would have made him older than his sister, Maria (1792–1856), and predated his parents' marriage. Probably—says the latest biographical work by scholar Sergei Fomichev—the year was 1794.

His family was part of the Russian elite, and we know he summered on his uncle's estate near Smolensk when he was young. Estate life also had changed during the eighteenth century, and Griboedov was surely witness to the effects. Some owners undertook vast projects to turn sites of agricultural production into more lavish places designed to express the cultural aspirations of the nobility. Such estates might include serf theaters and orchestras, as well as gardens, landscapes, and pleasure grounds on a European model. Other estate owners instituted scientific agricultural reforms and founded small manufacturing enterprises, such as textile and brick factories, tanneries, and processing plants. Griboedov's uncle's

estate, Khmelita, not far from the city of Smolensk, is now a museum devoted to the memory of Griboedov, but it also stands as a monument to eighteenth-century noble life.

Alexander Griboedov himself was an extraordinary person, graced with intellectual, literary, linguistic, and musical talent; filled with ambition, pride, and love for his country; and remarkably witty to boot. Taught first at home and then at Moscow University, Griboedov studied the major European languages as well as Latin and received a degree in 1808 in literary studies. Given his immediate family's relative lack of wealth, his future seemed to lie in the law or some form of government service. Expectations for the nobility had been shifting in these years as well. In the eighteenth century, noble boys were enrolled in the military by their parents and understood that their role was to serve their country: either on the battlefield or in state positions in the various ministries that had been invented by Peter I (these were known as the *collegia*—foreign affairs, war, justice, state revenues, commerce, etc.). They also might take up other positions in local governments or the state Senate. But by the nineteenth century, with new freedoms granted by the Charter of the Nobility, the desire to serve in state institutions had begun to wane.

Many noblemen still worked and strived for the promotions that would increase their social prestige, but others retired early or avoided service altogether. Life on a country estate like Khmelita could feel isolated, but at least it was inexpensive, whereas in the cities, the nobility found themselves spending their fortunes on their social lives—on clothing, furnishings, and entertainment such as balls or other gatherings. Some traveled or sent their sons abroad to study, and others continued to follow long-standing traditions: churchgoing

and religious holidays, family get-togethers, chatter and gossip, music and storytelling. This sense of tradition was often stifling: Moscow in particular was known for its tight web of nepotism—uncles aided nephews, grand dames found matches for poor relations, and favors were exchanged to facilitate career building (oddly, not unlike today's Moscow).

But for a young man without extensive means, military or government service was still the default option. Some sources report that Griboedov received a degree in law; others suggest that his studies were only moving in that direction. Either way, his education came to an abrupt end in 1812 when European events intervened.

Just two days after Napoleon and his French armies attacked Russia in 1812, Griboedov joined a hussar regiment in Moscow. He served under General Kologrivov in the cavalry reserves, where he met Stepan Begichev, who was to become an important influence and Griboedov's best friend and correspondent throughout the rest of his life. (Indeed, much of what we know about that life comes from those letters, along with the extensive travel notes Griboedov later maintained to share with Begichev.) There is evidence of some youthful shenanigans during the war (one anecdote describes him riding a horse up to the second floor of a home in Brest, where he served, while a ball was taking place) but not much in the way of brave service. Griboedov spent much of 1813 on sick leave, so he was really on active duty only in the year 1814, at the end of which he suffered a fall from a horse and was sent to St. Petersburg to consult medical specialists. Not surprisingly, Griboedov's petition to be promoted upon retirement from the regiment—a customary practice—was denied, and upon his discharge in 1816, he retained

the rank with which he had entered the service, a modest tenth in the fourteen-rank table of ranks.

In St. Petersburg, with a military career (however undistinguished) behind him, Griboedov joined the social whirl of friends and comrades, many of whom served in the bureaucracy by day and gathered at the theater in the evenings. Griboedov immersed himself in the life of the stage. When he finally took up a position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the summer of 1817, it was with the hope of continuing his social and literary pursuits in the capital. Curiously, he began his service on the very same day as did Pushkin.

That he was drawn to the theater is significant and perhaps not surprising. In the first third of the nineteenth century in St. Petersburg, the theater was the main venue for literary experimentation, with translated or imitative light comedies serving up plots, characters, and new forms of speech. The Russian language had shaken off its stilted, archaic forms and had absorbed just enough from neighboring European languages to enrich its lexicon and smooth its syntax. As the literary language matured, Russian writers took advantage of its grammatical and structural flexibility to bring together vivid folk semantics with elegant verbal discourse and pointed epigrams. All of this could be played with on the stage.

Griboedov's destiny, however—perhaps thanks to his linguistic skills—lay in diplomacy, and his days of desultory service in St. Petersburg were numbered. In March 1818, the Ministry that employed him informed Griboedov that he would be traveling to Persia as secretary to the diplomatic emissary. Argue though he might that, as a poet and musician, he needed to remain in the Russian capital, Griboedov found that his fate was sealed and that he

would be tied for the rest of his life to the tsarist state's military and diplomatic expansionism.

Why was Griboedov sent off to the periphery of the Russian empire? Perhaps, scholars have suggested, as a consequence of his role in a fatal duel that had taken place the previous November. What, in late 1817, had seemed a friendly obligation or, indeed, a lark—agreeing to help resolve a quarrel between Vasily Sheremetev and Alexander Zavodovsky over the former's mistress—turned into a double duel that also drew in the seconds, Alexander Yakubovich and Griboedov, although the latter match had to be postponed when Zavodovsky killed Sheremetev. Griboedov swore to the officials who investigated that he had had nothing to do with the scandalous and tragic events. His punishment, covert, as was often the case in imperial Russia, took the form of exile from the capital.

He and Yakubovich finally met to finish their portion of the duel in April 1819, in faraway Georgia, where Griboedov was then living. The men apparently approached the duel as a duty they owed to Sheremetev, and although they chatted like friends up to the moment it began, they did not hesitate to go through with the contest. Yakubovich shot first and wounded Griboedov in the hand. Yakubovich's second marveled that Griboedov chose not to approach the barrier, which he had the right to do, but instead shot from a distance and missed his opponent entirely. A talented composer and pianist, Griboedov never played as well again—his little finger was forever crippled.

For an aspiring playwright and author, reassignment to the Caucasus region was its own form of tragedy. Instead of indulging in the hospitality of friends in Moscow or theatrical and literary life

in St. Petersburg—or even enduring slow, dull days on his uncle’s estate at Khmelita, where he might at least have had some access to a serf theater and actors—Griboedov spent most of the rest of his life in motion between Russia and Tehran. No fixed home, no private life, no quiet evenings spent reading in the library or composing pieces at the piano. Instead, Griboedov became a military diplomat, tied to one or another general (Ermolov, Paskevich) and negotiating treaties and conditions with various foreign dignitaries, including the Shah of Persia himself.

He was constantly in transit. Griboedov complained bitterly in letters to his friends back home. “Let me tell you about my life,” he wrote in February 1820 to Pavel Katenin, who resided in St. Petersburg. “It has been a year and several days since I got on a horse and began my travels from Tiflis to Iran, the secretary of a wandering mission. Since that time I cannot find myself. What is it like? A man rides 70 versts a day, it goes without saying *every* day, and he rides for two months in a row: under the sultry Persian sky, through the snows of the Caucasus, with maybe two or maximum three weeks in between to rest in one place!”

Despite the hardships of travel and military life, there were some bright spots. For one thing, Griboedov would spend several months at a time in Tiflis, an urbane spot featuring vast noble families, many of whom were tied to the area by heritage or by affiliation with the Russian imperial government or military. Local Georgian noblemen became his companions, and Russian friends and comrades—including the future Decembrist, Wilhelm Küchelbeker—also passed through. Griboedov even had the opportunity to mix with English and Scottish travelers who were on their way to Persia or were surveying the Caucasus region.

During several trips to Tabriz and Tehran in 1819 and 1820, Griboedov fulfilled diplomatic functions, including helping to return Russian prisoners of war (and escaped serfs) to their homeland. It was in Tabriz, as Griboedov wrote in a letter to an unknown female correspondent, that he had the dream that was to serve as the basis for the plot of *Woe from Wit*. Griboedov began to compose his play while working for General Alexei Ermolov—sometimes known as the “butcher of the Caucasus”—whom he had met in Chechnya in 1819 and whose head of chancery he became in 1821. Finally, in February 1823, Griboedov was permitted to go back to Russia for what turned out to be a two-year leave—his first extended period at home since his St. Petersburg days.

In Moscow, Griboedov devoted the spring season to balls and social events, announcing to friends who were surprised at his frivolous pursuits: “Don’t worry! I’m not wasting my time.” Indeed, that summer at Begichev’s estate near Tula, Griboedov was quite productive. He wrote and published a poem about a poet-activist, entitled “David,” and composed a light opera with his friend Pyotr Vyazemsky called *Who’s the Brother, Who’s the Sister, or Deceit after Deceit*, featuring music by A. N. Verstovsky. And he used his observations of the Moscow social scene to put the finishing touches on his play *Woe from Wit*.

Griboedov left Moscow in summer 1824 for the capital. Of St. Petersburg, Griboedov complained that it was “deadly boring,” writing to a friend: “have you noticed that throughout Rus the pernicious air of a cemetery is spreading?” Nonetheless, he found friends and comrades there—writers, actors, fellow military and service people—and began to read *Woe from Wit* in salons and living rooms across the city. Rumor of the comedy spread, and it was

received with delight, curiosity, and enthusiasm. In October, Griboedov learned that the censor would not grant permission to publish his play, and although excerpts appeared in December 1824 in the theater almanac *Russian Thalia*, the following May an attempt to stage *Woe from Wit* at the Theater School failed.

In fact, that initial censorship may well have helped the reputation of *Woe from Wit*. The play was read aloud and copied by hand hundreds of times starting in 1824. Given the popularity of handwritten literature in the 1820s, *Woe from Wit* thus may have reached more people and circulated more widely than if it had been produced on stage or even printed in the author's lifetime. Although its initial publication in 1833 was subjected to censorship, it was finally issued without any cuts in 1862.

These eventful two years of Griboedov's life saw his literary fame begin to build. At this time, too, many of his compatriots were engaged in conversations about how Russia might benefit from a more liberal state. Meeting in secret societies, the reform-minded or even revolutionary young men were plotting to overthrow the government, and when Alexander I died in late 1825, they saw their moment. What came to be called the Decembrist revolt took advantage of a brief interregnum after Alexander's death and was quickly routed by forces loyal to the government. Severe reprisals followed: several thousand Russians were arrested and interrogated, dozens were punished with prison and exile, and five of the ring-leaders were hung. Although Griboedov was suspected, no evidence was found linking him to the conspirators. But Griboedov's play—about a disaffected youth whose speeches get him labeled a rebel, a troublemaker, and even mad—did come to be associated with the era's reformist youth. (Seen even in the nineteenth century as

a Decembrist and thus anti-tsarist work, *Woe from Wit* was quickly adopted by the Soviet regime in the twentieth century.)

Griboedov spent the first half of 1826 under investigation, but ultimately escaped with his life and reputation intact. Indeed, upon his release, he received a promotion to the seventh rank with the title of Court Councilor, and in this he was more fortunate than some of his former comrades, including both Yakubovich and Küchelbeker, who were exiled to Siberia in the wake of the revolt. Nevertheless, Griboedov's leave was over, and he was forced to return to his "wandering life" of travel between St. Petersburg, Tiflis, and Persia for the duration of the latest Russo-Persia conflict (1826–28). At the war's conclusion, he helped to negotiate the so-called Turkmenchai Peace Treaty—an accord that was so punitive it has entered the lexicon of the Iranians, who still exclaim, when they feel they are being tricked, "Ai, ai, Turkmenchai!" Griboedov brought the treaty to St. Petersburg to be signed and was sent back to Persia yet again to make sure its conditions were fulfilled.

Promotions accompanied this work, but Griboedov was nonetheless frustrated with his professional life. Attempting, perhaps, to leave diplomatic work behind, Griboedov used his stay in St. Petersburg in 1828 to present to the tsar's advisers a plan for a trading company, the Russian Transcaucasian Company, designed on the model of the British East India Company and the Russian American Company. Nothing came of his proposal, though, and on his way back to Persia, Griboedov stopped in Georgia to marry a young girl with whose family he had long been close. With his new bride, the 16-year-old Nina Chavchavadze, he traveled on to Tabriz. From there Griboedov went on to the Russian mission in Tehran, but his negotiations with government representatives failed, the

building was stormed, and in an international incident that still resonates in Russo-Iranian relations, Griboedov was massacred, along with almost three dozen colleagues.

And thus Griboedov's efforts in literature, diplomacy, economic development, and even family life with his pregnant bride came to an abrupt, if spectacular, end. Regardless of when he was born, Griboedov died before he was 40.

Some Russians continue to think of Griboedov as the author of only one work, *Woe from Wit*. That isn't quite fair. He did publish some poems, essays, and reviews. And he was, if briefly, part of a circle of playwrights, actors, and others who formed a vibrant theatrical community in St. Petersburg. The St. Petersburg theatrical scene brought to Russia a form of European neoclassicism, using especially French models, even as playwrights experimented with finding their own voices for the stage. Working alongside comrades Alexander Shakhovskoy, Pavel Katenin, Andrei Zhandr, and Wilhelm Küchelbeker, Griboedov translated and adapted foreign plays while writing original works as well. Some of the characters he created in the former and certainly the language he favored—clever, pointed, and conversational—would bear further fruit.

One of Griboedov's more successful efforts was his *Our Own Clan, or the Married Bride*, written with Nikolai Khmelnitsky from an idea by Shakhovskoy. The play was created to benefit the actress Maria Valberkhova, who performed the role of the married bride, Natasha, at its premiere. The timing of such benefits was one of the reasons many plays of the era were co-written; with a

deadline looming, a writer would enlist his friends to help. *Our Own Clan* was well received in performance and earned praise for its clever lines and unusual rhymes. Considering his own scenes to be relatively successful, Griboedov published them separately in the journal *The Son of the Fatherland* in 1817 as an extended dramatic poem.

Even if written for specific occasions and performers, these dramatic works had considerable staying power and often jumped to stages in Moscow and beyond. Griboedov's one-act comedy *The Young Couple*, for instance, played in St. Petersburg almost without interruption from 1816 to 1836 and also was performed in Moscow almost every year from 1816 through 1830. In 1818, *Feigned Infidelities* was presented as a benefit on two different occasions for two different actresses, Ekaterina Semyonova and Elena Vorobyova-Sosnitskaya, in the two capitals, and ran repeatedly in both cities in subsequent years. More significant, perhaps, these comedies became popular outside official venues. They were produced by amateurs in the domestic theaters of noble homes and by serf actors at theaters on noble estates, and evidence of their success can be found in letters, memoirs, and even in subsequent plays that quote and refer to them.

In fact, one could argue that Griboedov's influence on Russian letters started with the now forgotten *Feigned Infidelities*. The name Lensky—hero of *Feigned Infidelities*, so dubbed after the Siberian river Lena—would reappear in Russian literature in Alexander Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin* in a chapter penned in 1823: Pushkin's Vladimir Lensky is a young Romantic poet who returns from his studies in Germany to befriend the main protagonist. The name Onegin, incidentally, also follows this tradition and is derived

from the river Onega in the Archangelsk region. One might even argue that the tragic plot element in *Eugene Onegin*—its fatal duel, precipitated by Eugene's gratuitous flirting with Lensky's fiancée, Olga—was motivated by a kind of feigned infidelity, which also may have been inspired by Griboedov's work.

Although Griboedov's legacy in print and on stage, in Russian and in translation, deserves more attention than it has traditionally received, his output was significantly smaller than that of even those contemporaries, such as Pushkin and Lermontov, whose lives were also tragically cut short, and at a younger age. Without question, *Woe from Wit* is Griboedov's most enduring legacy. Influential in its own time and in every era since, it is one of the most quotable plays in the Russian canon. Many of its lines have entered Russian speech, spawning aphorisms and comical non sequiturs that constitute a running commentary on social and political life across two centuries.

That is all the more remarkable because, at one level, the play is so rooted in the specifics of its time and place. Life after the Napoleonic wars was characterized by a generational conflict. Expanded educational opportunities, travel, and encounters with Europeans—particularly during the war—meant that younger Russians had a new vision of society and their place in it. Longing for social and governmental reforms, the men of the 1810s and 1820s no longer understood or even respected their elders. This generational gap is the story captured in *Woe from Wit*.

A four-act play, *Woe from Wit* follows a neoclassical structure, with unity of time, space, and action scrupulously observed. The time is the present, probably the early 1820s—considerably after the 1812 Moscow fire but before the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

The location is Moscow, in the house of a certain Pavel Afanasievich Famusov, a widower with an attractive, marriageable daughter named Sophia. The hero, Alexander Andreevich Chatsky, has just returned from a three-year tour of foreign lands. He arrives, as Pushkin rephrases it, “from the ship straight to a ball.” This phrase, used to describe Onegin’s return to St. Petersburg in the final chapter of the novel *Eugene Onegin*, has become common usage. And it is just one of the many instances in which we can see evidence of Griboedov—the poet, the diplomat, the tragic hero—and his legacy in Pushkin’s work. Both *Woe from Wit* and Griboedov as a historical figure captured that writer’s imagination and feature in Pushkin’s letters and even in his fiction.

The play’s plot is fairly simple: the young Chatsky returns to Moscow to find it changed, or maybe the hero himself has changed while he was away. Chatsky tries to rekindle his romance with an old flame, Sophia, and finds himself woefully out of touch, unable to communicate with her or with his other former acquaintances or understand their ways of interacting. As is to be expected, comedic hijinks ensue—but these are mostly of a philosophical and linguistic nature. The social critique inherent in the play also should not be ignored: the parade of guests to the Famusov house represents a cross-section of high-society Moscow, and each turns out to be reprehensible in his or her own way.

In his absence, Sophia, Chatsky’s childhood sweetheart, has fallen for another man for whom he has no respect at all. The contrast between the outspoken Chatsky and his rival, Molchalin, could not be greater. The name Molchalin is etymologically revealing: the “Silent One” strikes Chatsky as a complete lickspittle, and Molchalin’s trusted position in the household and the respect he is paid by

those around him are clear signs of the nature of the society to which Chatsky has returned. He quips:

А впрочем, он дойдет до степеней известных,
ведь нынче любят бессловесных

... He'll go far.

Tight-lipped men are much in vogue today.

Indeed, Molchalin makes it a policy to maintain his own counsel:

В мои лета не должно сметь
свое суждение иметь

I'd rather not express my views. . .

I'd never dare. I'm far too young. . .

His employer is Famusov, whose name suggests that it is fame and status that interest him most. Famusov enjoys the reputation of a hospitable man, and at his home, guests gather in the evening to chat, gossip, play cards, and even dance. The guests offer a chance for the host to meet with his daughter's potential suitors. In the words of Sophia's maid, Liza:

Как все московские, ваш батюшка таков:
желал бы зятя он с звездами да с чинами

Like all the [Moscow] gentlemen
hereabouts, your father's set his sights
on decorations and high rank.

Indeed, Moscow society is obsessed with rank, and Famusov caters to one of his military guests, Colonel Skalozub, whose name implies that he “bares his teeth” (perhaps a reference to his awkwardness in social situations). Such an obsequious attitude toward men in uniform—military or civil—was the norm in Russia at the time, one the play satirizes as a significant social ill. But there are sympathetic military figures as well. Another officer, Platon Mikhailich, who visits the house with his wife, vocally expresses to Chatsky how much he misses the camaraderie he felt during the Napoleonic campaign. Now he has been reduced to the role of browbeaten husband, and the play highlights the misery of his marriage.

In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, national pride swells, and women, according to the play, love a man in uniform:

К военным людям так и льнут
А потому что патриотки.

They cling to uniforms, for love of land and tsar.

Griboedov makes light of such patriotism, though, as in this tongue-in-cheek description of Moscow women’s affected reactions to the Russian victory:

Кричали женщины: ура!
И в воздух чепчики бросали!

Hurrah! hurrah! the women cried
and tossed their bonnets in the air.

Chatsky admits to having missed his homeland while away. In an oft-quoted line (really a Latin saying, quoted also in a 1798 poem by Gavril Derzhavin entitled “The Harp”), he states:

И дым Отечества нам сладок и приятен!

the very smoke of home
is sweet and pleasant to the hearts of men.

Given the fact that Moscow was burned in September 1812, likely by the Russians themselves to keep it out of Napoleon’s hands, this line takes on new meaning. Chatsky also teases Sophia about the lack of change in Moscow since that event:

На съездах, на больших, по праздникам приходским
Господствует еще смешенье языков:
Французского с нижегородским?

But tell me, what’s the drill at social functions?
The same old din of intermingled tongues:
provincial Russian and Parisian French?

The linguistic cacophony of the capital arose in part from a Napoleonic-era effort to drop the French language, but here Griboedov also hints at the exposure that Muscovites fleeing the capital received to the provinces and to provincial accents. Having sat out the war in Nizhny Novgorod and other Volga cities, Moscow denizens brought those ways of speaking back with them. Trying

to speak Russian, they produced a macaronic mixture instead, and although they wanted to be patriotic, French continued to be the native tongue of many in the upper class. A play featuring a supple and elegant conversational Russian language could not fail to take note of this.

Any changes in Moscow, the play implies, are only external. When Colonel Skalozub awkwardly asserts that the fire vastly improved the city's looks, Chatsky adds with heavy irony:

Дома новы, но предрассудки стары.
Порадуйтесь, не истребят
Ни годы их, ни моды, ни пожары.

New houses, but old prejudices linger.
Rest assured, not fashion's iron decree,
nor time nor fire can prize them utterly
from those among whom they have taken root.

In this conversation with Skalozub, Famusov particularly frustrates Chatsky, as he had earlier when he suggested the young man should seek a position in the civil service. Chatsky had flatly dismissed this option:

Служить бы рад, прислуживаться тошно

Service, not servility: There I draw the line.

Chatsky does not see a role for himself in the bureaucracy. And now Famusov wilfully presents Chatsky as a talented but misguided youth, one who fails to fit into Moscow society and

misunderstands its mores, and thus maligns him to the colonel, provoking Chatsky to explode with a monologue that has become a famous indictment of Russian society. His opening line is among those quoted still by Russians: “Who are the judges?” (А судьи кто?). The speech continues for another 56 lines. One particularly venomous passage reads:

Где, укажите нам, отчества отцы,
Которых мы должны принять за образцы?
 Не эти ли, грабительством богаты?
Защиту от суда в друзьях нашли, в родстве,
Великолепные соорудя палаты,
Где разливаются в пирах и мотовстве
И где не воскресят клиенты-иностранцы
Прошедшего житья подлейшие черты.
Да и кому в Москве не зажимали рты
 Обеды, ужины и танцы?

Show us these great men, where do they keep state,
these fathers of our country we're to emulate?
Are these the robber barons, profiteers, and crooks
protected from the law by friend and relative,
whose money flows like water through a sieve
to furnish palaces, import French cooks,
worshipped by their clientele in exile,
who hope to see, never mind how vile,
the old regime restored? Can any man remain
in Moscow without softening of the brain,
incessantly attending suppers, dinners, balls?

In short, Chatsky finds Russian society—with its corruption, dishonesty, and vices funded by the inhumane practices of serfdom (which he indicts later in this speech)—to be utterly worthy of scorn, and he pulls no punches, so to speak. Famusov, recognizing this tirade as politically alarming, excuses himself from the room.

Chatsky's social downfall is predicted by two characters, Sophia's maid, Liza, and Molchalin. In the opening scene of the play, while trying to protect her mistress from getting caught after a night of illicit cooing and music making with her beloved, Liza reprimands her with a folksy saying:

Грех не беда, молва нехороша.

It doesn't matter if the wrong you've done
is buried in oblivion:

As long as you sneak around in secret, Liza implies, everything is fine, but as soon as society “outs” you, you had better be concerned for your reputation and your future. Molchalin, who is generally more careful than his boss's daughter, has a similar thought at the end of Act II:

Злые языки страшнее пистолета.

An idle tongue's more deadly than a firearm.

When Sophia wants to take revenge on Chatsky for his criticism of her beau, she spreads a rumor that he is mad, and her father's guests quickly take up the refrain. As we have seen, Famusov was already

inclined to see Chatsky—a man who refused to serve, to bow and scrape and thereby make a proper career for himself—as a dangerous element. From dangerous to insane turned out to be a short leap.

Later critics saw Chatsky as a man caught between generations, unable to find his place in military or civil service and unwilling to participate in Moscow society on its terms. Pushkin questioned Chatsky's intelligence (or perhaps, through Chatsky, Griboedov's own), writing to Bestuzhev in 1825 that "Everything he says is quite smart. But to whom does he speak? The first sign of an intelligent man is to know from first glance with whom he is dealing, and not to cast pearls before Repetilov [one of Sophia's repellent, reptilian, and repetitive suitors] and his like." However, Chatsky speaks not to Famusov and his guests but to the audience. In the monologue that brings Act III to a close, he champions an old Russia, accusing Moscow society of worshipping the French as personified by the "little Frenchman from Bordeaux" holding court in the next room. Chatsky maintains that anyone who has "five or six thoughts in his head" has no place in this society. "Behold," he declares as the scene ends. All around him the guests are waltzing energetically, and the older folks are headed to the card tables. Frivolity personified—but his recognition of this fact leaves Chatsky alone and isolated.

Pushkin followed Griboedov's work closely, writing to a friend from Odessa in 1823 to ask, "What's up with Griboedov? I hear he wrote a comedy [making fun of] Chedaev?" Griboedov had indeed drawn inspiration from Pyotr Chaadaev, whom he had known since his Moscow University days and whom Pushkin also revered for his clever mind and personal dignity. Griboedov tweaked his character's name slightly, but "Chatsky" did not fool anyone. In *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin celebrated Chaadaev for a different reputation—as a dandy,

an Anglophile, and a stickler for proper etiquette: “My Eugene, Chaadaev’s double,” Pushkin would write to characterize his hero’s sartorial habits. But the influential critic Vissarion Belinsky referred to Griboedov’s hero in an 1839 essay as a “new Don Quixote,” seeing in Chatsky a dreamer, a madman willing to fight against the norms of society in the name of something higher, in the name of freedom and liberty, justice and honor. Not just a fop, but an inspiration for future young reform-minded Russian noblemen.

When, in 1836—seven years after Griboedov’s demise and only a year before Pushkin’s own death by duel—Chaadaev was placed under house arrest by Nikolai I and “diagnosed” as insane for his pro-Western views, the connection between *Woe from Wit* and the true woes of Russian noblemen became clear. The fictional Chatsky became a harbinger of the historical Chaadaev’s fate—and although he may have been the first to be declared mad for not fitting into Russian society, he would certainly not be the last.

“A sharp critique of Russian values. Half of the lines are destined to become aphorisms.” With these words in an 1825 letter to a friend, Russian poet Alexander Pushkin predicted the fate of his colleague Alexander Griboedov’s verse comedy *Woe from Wit*. “And you know who the most clever character of the play is?” he asked. “Griboedov himself.”

Filled with the characters, scenes, and conflicts of Russia’s Golden Age, the play has been treasured by generations of Russian theatergoers as a masterpiece of the Russian stage. *Woe from Wit* also remains contemporary in Russia in part because of its quotability,

and we explored many of those beloved lines earlier. There are many more, though, and Russian speakers are not always aware of the source. Faced with bureaucracy, a Russian sighs dramatically: “What’s signed is signed, and off my back.” Another needs a favor and gets a positive response: “What could make more sense than helping a relation?” A third wanders into a meeting or a theater and meets an old friend: “Aha! Familiar faces all!” These lines, and more, spring from Griboedov’s play.

Although *Woe from Wit* has seen a number of English translations, unlike other works of the era—including Pushkin’s verse novel *Eugene Onegin*—Griboedov’s “immortal comedy” has not enjoyed an international spotlight, and that’s a shame. Native English speakers who are learning Russian are more likely to meet with Griboedov’s fame inadvertently, discovering, to their surprise, that his play is ever present even in modern Russian. I still recall my puzzled reaction the first time someone in Russia responded to my question, “What time is it?” by replying, “I’m happy.” This reference to the young lovers in Act I of *Woe from Wit*—who are unaware of the passing of hours because they are distracted by their amorous games—had to be glossed for me, the foreigner. “Oh, we always say ‘I’m happy’ when we’re not wearing a watch,” my acquaintance explained.

I remained confused until I finally read the play, where Sophie carelessly exclaims, “no one happy minds the clock.” Now, thanks to Betsy Hulick’s sparkling translation and this splendid edition, *Woe from Wit* will reach beyond the borders of Russia to amuse and enlighten English readers as well.