

CREATING THE EMPRESS:

*Politics and Poetry in the
Age of Catherine II*

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INTRODUCTION

The main topic discussed in this book is the relationship between political and literary symbolism during the reign of Catherine II. Much has been written about Catherine's political and social ideas; this work, however, takes a drastically different approach. I intend to examine not the relationship between literary texts and political ideas, but the ways in which literary texts interacted with a kind of political symbolism which manifested itself in various forms of verbal and non-verbal discourse. This political symbolism created its own mechanisms of representation through an entire system of images, metaphors, and mythic allegories. Although they centered on relevant political symbols borrowed from the European tradition, they manifested themselves differently in the Russian context. I discuss these manifestations and their development in Russian culture in this work as well.

I interpret diverse forms of political imagery not as a mystification of reality, but as an important part of that reality itself, no less real than economic forces of social practices. I admire the statement of Ernst Cassirer who referred to the history of man as the actions of *animal symbolicum*. Cassirer rejected anthropological and psychoanalytical models for history, an approach which stemmed from the neo-Kantian opposition of the rational and irrational. He considered the myth not only a constant of all primitive civilizations, whether they are ancient or not, but an inherent essence of any modern culture as well. The rise of totalitarianism in Europe as well as the imperialistic wars definitively showed that "myths of state"

(Cassirer's *Myth of State* was published in 1945) have a tendency to undergo a permanent *renovatio*.

Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1928–1940) allowed for a structuring of culture based on a system of mythological projections. This approach proved fruitful for both analyzing political myths as well as for decoding a hidden symbolic mode in literary texts. In the forties and fifties, historians of the Warburg School (Edgar Wind, Frances Yates, and Aby Warburg) successfully applied this concept to their brilliant study of Renaissance arts, philosophy, literature, and politics. They also became interested in the theme of Empire that is in the theme of an eternal return of Roman Imperial allegories and metaphors, the reincarnation of classical paradigms, and the reinterpretation of previously established epic models. These scholars' discourse (I should also mention an excellent work by Frank Kermode *The Classic. Literary Images of Permanence and Change*) proved extremely useful in helping me define my task as a careful explication and close consideration of the political imagination developed in Catherine's time in both the political and artistic spheres.

The flourishing of neo-classicism in this period encouraged more elaborate imperial representations, which corresponded well with an ideological *translatio imperii* onto Russia. The revival of neo-classical images during Catherine's rule saw the first translations of Homer's *The Iliad* and Virgil's *The Aeneid* into Russian. These texts "deeded to posterity the poetic matrix out of which Western imperial iconography was to be continuously recreated."¹

The Imperial idea, like Janus the two-faced god, always looked in opposite directions. One side corresponded with a rational component made up of real politics, geo-political interests, and economic benefits. The other side, the irrational one, turned toward the past: to dynastic myths and the rewriting of history, to the moving of capital cities, to the renaming of towns, to the adoption of outlandish titles and emblems, and to the reenactment of distant victories and defeats of yore. Empire perceives and understands

¹ Marie Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas. The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (New Haven & London, 1993), 11.

itself only in the mirror of the past — against the background of events and artifacts transpired. A novice Empire plans its domination over other nations using the old maps. It inevitably looks over its shoulder at the past, carrying along universal phantoms and chimeras into the future, whose heritage is eventually passed onto it. Frances A. Yates writes: “Every revival of the Empire, in the person of some great emperor, carried with it, as a phantom, the revival of a universal imperialist hope”.²

In 1787, Prince de Ligne, a witty Austrian diplomat traveling with Catherine II to a recently incorporated Crimea, witnessed her conversation with the Austrian king Joseph II, who held the honorary title of Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Joseph II, as a guest of honor on this first royal trip to the ancient land of Taurida, was obliged to listen to Catherine’s constant, ambitious remarks on the future Russian conquest of Constantinople. Prince de Ligne remembered the situation: “Their Royal Majesties shared their views for awhile concerning those cursed Ottomans. As a great admirer of the glories of antiquity and hardly a fan of modernity, I spoke about the restoration of Greece. Catherine speculated about the necessity to revive Lycurguses and Solons. I leaned towards Alchiviad. Finally, Joseph II, who preferred the future to the past, as something material to a chimera, remarked, ‘What the hell are we busying ourselves with Constantinople for?’”³

Russia, as a young Empire, was still infused with the “political energy” of mythmaking and converted its political pragmatism (access to warm-water ports, acquisition of new lands, the security of its southern borders, etc.) into an inspiring tale about the restoration of ancient Hellas and its philosophy, Olympic Games, and wise rulers. I use the term “convert” fully realizing that the process of forming and asserting an imperial imagination will always oscillate between two poles—the rational and the irrational. The formation of any type of political “phantom” into a “symbolic form” is a creative process.

² Frances A. Yates, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1993), 1.

³ Prince de Ligne, *Letters à la Marquise de Coigny* (Paris, 1914), 38–39.

Empire will always co-opt representatives from the literary world into its service. Paradoxically, artists and humanists of the Renaissance eagerly participated in the creation and development of imperial symbols and allegories by attaching the whole rediscovered repertory of classical antiquity to the emperor. "Ephemeral spectacles," ballets, and the art of decorating were all normal means for expressing the political reality of Renaissance culture.⁴ As artifacts were more convincing than actual facts, the people were attracted to the emperors more for their "peaceful eloquence" than for any tyrannical exercise of power.⁵ Intellectuals of the seventeenth century inherited the urge to serve the king, seeing such service as a way to become respectable members of the "king's body," in other words, by the end of the reign of Louis XIV, members of the "state's body."⁶

In eighteenth-century Russia, the world of politics completely controlled the world of literature. The latter, however, created the mode of reception of the former. It was the literary works which generated the symbols, metaphors, and allegories which the political world appropriated for its own use. Eventually, the "symbolic capital" of the Empire and its political imagination became not only socially and economically converted; it often stood as its sole achievement. Summing up the reign of Catherine II, Vasilii Kliuchevskii shrewdly noted that her success lay not so much in her inconsistent internal reforms and aggressive foreign policy as in the "force of public excitement."⁷ This "political energy," which corresponded in various complex ways with literary imagination, will be the subject of my book.

⁴ Roy Strong, *Art and Power. Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650* (Berkely & Los Angeles, 1984), 5.

⁵ Frances A. Yates, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, 210.

⁶ Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le roi-machine. Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1981), 25.

⁷ V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Sochineniia v deviaty tomakh*, V (Moscow, 1989), 312.

Chapter One

COUP D'ÉTAT AS CROSS-DRESSING

The eighteenth century was, for the most part, a time of female rule in Russia. In order to attain the throne and maintain power, however, the female monarchs had to exhibit masculine behavior. The French diplomat Charles Masson devoted a whole chapter of his *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg* to women in positions of power at the Russian court. Repudiating the “gynecocracy,” as he called the reign of six successive Russian tsarinas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Sophia, Catherine I, Anna Ivanovna, Anna Leopoldovna, Elizabeth, and Catherine II), he compared Russia to the kingdom of the Amazons: “The existence of the Amazons no longer seemed a fable after I beheld the Russian women. Had the succession of empresses continued, we might perhaps have seen this nation of female warriors replicated on Russian soil, in the same climate where they had previously flourished.”¹

The medieval formula of “the King’s two bodies,” which implied the notion of the Emperor as God-Man,² developed in interesting fashion in the Russian context. The church, which equated the tsar with Christ and considered him an incarnation of celestial rule, denied women the right to be anointed sovereign.³

¹ Charles François P. Masson, *Secret Memoirs of the Court of Petersburg, particularly towards the end of the reign of Catherine II and the commencement of that of Paul I* (London, 1801), 307.

² Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), 20–21.

³ V. M. Zhivov, V. A. Uspenskii, “Tsar’ i Bog: Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii

Traditional Russian ideology, influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church, interpreted the “man-woman” opposition to be one of “sacred-profane.” Women were often assigned pagan attributes and considered to be dependent and subordinate creatures.⁴ Church and society both cultivated the concept of a “blessed womb” and assigned to royal women the task of producing a male heir.⁵ An influential theologian, statesman, and admirer of Peter the Great, the archbishop Feofan Prokopovich, had to find eloquent excuses to justify the coronation of Catherine I, Peter’s widow and heir. In his *Speech on the Funeral of Peter the Great* (1725), addressing Catherine I, he declared: “The whole world sees that your female flesh does not prevent you from being like Peter the Great.”⁶ His skillful rhetoric was meant as a defense of “female flesh” as suitable enough (but not ideal for the embodiment of God on Earth) in order to legitimize Catherine I’s right to be the new Russian ruler. To Russians, the sacred, divine nature of kingship was always masculine. Russian female rulers of the eighteenth century inherited this medieval role distribution and had to reckon with it. Notably, the usual scenario for any palace revolution in the eighteenth century involved a ritual act of cross-dressing.⁷

Anna Ivanovna, the Duchess of Courland and the daughter of Peter’s step-brother Ivan V, came to the Russian throne in 1730 with the help of the Supreme Privy Council. She began her coup d’état with a symbolic change in gender. She repudiated the “conditions” set for her rule by certain boyar elites (“verhovniki”) by deciding

monarkha v Rossii,” in Uspenskii B. A. *Izbrannye trudy*, 1 (Moscow, 1994), 141.

⁴ Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs. 900-1700* (Ithaca & London, 1989), 19.

⁵ Isolde Thyret, *Between God and Tsar. Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia* (DeKalb, 2001), 16–46.

⁶ Feofan Prokopovich, *Sochineniia* (Moscow — Leningrad, 1961), 128. Unless noted, all translations are mine.

⁷ See the brief, but very important notes by Iu. M. Lotman: Iu. M. Lotman, *Kul’tura i vzryv* (Moscow, 1992), 140–141. The Amazon image of Catherine II has been examined in the article: John T. Alexander, “Amazon Autocratrixes: Images of Female Rule in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Gender and Sexuality in Russian Civilization* (London, 2001), 33–54.

to rely on the capital guards. Assuming the most suitable image for a new legitimate sovereign of Russia, she performed several ritual acts of cross-dressing. She called for the guards of the Preobrazhenskii regiment and introduced herself to them as their colonel. Later, she was awarded the order of Saint Apostle Andrew the First Called (with a blue ribbon), which was conferred only upon the highest-ranking male officials of the state. The choice of this particular order was rather peculiar. Another order existed — the order of Saint Catherine the Martyr of God (the female equivalent of the order of Saint Andrew), with a red ribbon — which Peter I had established in 1714 as a way to commemorate the brave deeds of his wife Catherine during the military campaign against the Turks in 1711. Both the masculine (Saint Andrew) and feminine (Saint Catherine) high orders existed from Peter I's time until the end of the eighteenth century. The matter of male-female orders and those who held them became so important for the succession that in 1797, Paul I issued strict instruction that the orders forbid the intermingling of the genders. According to the decree, all male royal children were to receive the Saint Andrew orders while all female ones were to receive the Saint Catherine orders. Paul I was trying to prevent female pretenders to the throne from using the male orders as a symbolic tool for establishing their sovereignty.

Anna Ivanovna's performance served as a model for the next round of female usurpers. The Empress Elizabeth (Elizaveta Petrovna, 1741–1762), the daughter of Peter I, executed her coup d'état using a similar scenario. Although the rulers whom she had to dethrone were a rather powerless and inept pairing of mother and son and not a strong, independent ruler, she nevertheless made use of all the symbolic aspects of a man's accession. During the night of November 25th, 1741, the infant tsar Ivan Antonovich VI and his mother-regent Anna Leopoldovna, Princess Brounshweig-Bevern (who had ruled from 1740–1741) were deposed quietly and without bloodshed. Elizabeth also relied on the support of the military. Before setting out for the barracks of her loyal regiments, Elizabeth put a cuirass over her usual clothing.⁸ It was not that she feared

⁸ S. M. Soloviev, *Istoria Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, XI: 21–22 (Moscow, 1963), 124.

physical injury; the change in dress was purely a symbolic one. The coup consisted of the army's peaceful arrival at the Winter Palace with Elizabeth carried aloft by grenadiers. The royal family (the Brounshweigs) were pulled asleep from their beds and physically removed. The cuirass, a piece of armor covering the body from neck to waist, was part of military dress. There was a cuirassier regiment among those loyal to Elizabeth's army. When the revolution was over, Elizabeth placed an Andrew ribbon on her clothes. Then, early the next morning, she announced that she was the colonel of the three infantry regiments, the cuirassier regiment, and the cavalry guard. At the same time, she took the title of captain of her favorite grenadier company in the Preobrazhenskii regiment.⁹ Later, she would follow the same ritual in celebrating the anniversaries of her accession by dressing in their uniform and visiting their barracks.¹⁰

Elizabeth loved luxury and entertainment, something to which many of her contemporaries attested. The play with cross-dressing became one of her favorite amusements, especially the masquerade balls. The Empress liked to change into men's military dress, which stressed her beautiful proportions. Elizabeth did not strive to create an overtly erotic atmosphere through her acts of cross-dressing, as many did in Europe.¹¹ Hence, the choices for costumes for others were always strictly controlled. The Empress punished anyone who violated her rules, her particular mood, or her tastes.

Catherine II, then Grand Duchess, was a keen observer and student of her predecessor's acts of cross-dressing. She wrote about one particularly intimidating masquerade ball in her *Memoirs*:

"In 1744 in Moscow, as I have already related, the Empress had a fancy to have all men appear at the Court balls dressed as women and the women as men, without masks; it was like a Court day metamorphosed. The men wore whalebone petticoats, the women the Court costume of men. The men disliked these reversals of their sex and were in the worst

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Teatral'naia zhizn' Rossii v epokhu Elizavety Petrovny*, 2 (Moscow, 2005), 541.

¹¹ Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization. The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, 1986), 40.

possible humor, because they felt hideous in their disguises. The women looked like scrubby little boys, while the more aged had thick short legs, which were anything but attractive. The only woman who looked really well and completely a man was the Empress herself. As she was tall and powerful, male attire suited her. She had the handsomest leg I have ever seen on any man and her feet were admirably proportioned. She dressed to perfection and everything she did had the same special grace whether she dressed as a man or as a woman."¹²

Cross-dressing in the time of Elizabeth became one of the most representative features of courtly culture. She loved not only cross-dressing masquerades (a routine, weekly event, according to court journals), but hunting as well. The Empress chased down her prey in Izmailovo near Moscow on horseback and in masculine dress."¹³

Catherine began to develop her own strategies even in those early, difficult years at Elizabeth's court. Given the situation, her main function (as far as establishing a legitimate position in the Russian royal family) was to produce a male heir. Her ambitions, however, could not be limited to the traditional roles of mother and wife. Catherine the Great began establishing and projecting an image of her as Emperor (as opposed to Empress) as she strove to justify contemporary pronouncements that she was indeed Catherine *le Grand*, as the Prince de Ligne, an Austrian diplomat, referred to her.¹⁴

In *Memoirs*, written later, in the 1770s, Catherine draws her retrospective portrait carefully, emphasizing the masculine traits

¹² *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*. Transl. from French by Moura Budberg (New York, 1955), 185–186. See a very interesting work on the history of Catherine's *Memoirs*: Monika Greenleaf, "Performing Autobiography: The Multiple Memoirs of Catherine the Great (1756-96)," in *The Russian Review*, 63 (2004), 407–426.

¹³ *Teatral'naia zhizn' Rossii v epokhu Elizavety Petrovny*, 2, 531.

¹⁴ In 1787, Prince de Ligne, in his letters to Marquise de Coigny, written during his trip to Crimea with Catherine II, called the empress "Catherine *le Grand*": "La simplicité confiante et séduisante de Catherine Le Grand m'enchanté, et c'est son génie enchanteur qui m'a conduit dans ce séjour enchanté" (Prince de Ligne, *Lettres à la Marquise de Coigny* (Paris, 1914), 53).

of her image. She changed her pale features as a young Grand Duchess to correspond to the necessary stereotypes of her later masculine strategy. From the beginning of her *Memoirs* on, she develops a myth about a “perfect child.” According to this myth, her parents had wanted a son and were not pleased by the birth of a baby girl. Catherine goes on to stress that books were the main source of pleasure in her life. She read not only French novels, but political, “masculine” literature as well, specifically Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, *On the Spirit of the Laws* and *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and of Their Decadence* by Montesquieu. Count Louis-Philippe Ségur, appointed French ambassador to the Russian court in 1785, believed that nature, reluctant to bestow any gifts on her husband Peter III, had showered them on Catherine, who had the “talent, courage, and firmness of a man born to command.”¹⁵

Catherine II’s favorite pastime was horseback riding. Elizabeth had also loved riding and dressing as a man. However, whereas Elizabeth dressed as a man and rode horses to demonstrate her beauty and grace, Catherine did the same for different reasons. She had to project her unique personality and her ambition to be more than a wife of the Emperor and the mother of an heir to the throne. The masculine style of the young Duchess was most likely fashioned after the persona of the well-known libertine (and mistress of Voltaire), Countess Sophie Bentinck (1715–1800). Catherine devoted a number of pages in her *Memoirs* to a description of this acquaintance from her early years.¹⁶ Separated from her husband and with an illegitimate child, the Countess exerted a huge influence on the thirteen year-old Catherine. Against the will of her parents, Catherine spent many days with the Countess, who gave the future Russian empress her first lessons on emancipation. Catherine recounts that she looked “like a man” and rode like

¹⁵ *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Ségur, ambassador from France to the court of Russia and Prussia, written by himself*, II (London, 1826), 159.

¹⁶ Catherine wrote: “Countess Bentinck came riding to meet us. — I had never seen a woman on a horse; she fascinated me, for she rode astride. When we arrived at Varel, I never left her side. This attachment displeased my mother and my father even more” (*The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, 43).

a "riding-master."¹⁷ It was Countess Bentinck who gave Catherine a taste for riding.

Catherine became a splendid rider; according to her *Memoirs*, she could spend days on horseback. At the same time, the young Duchess began to take on an additional role. She underlined her loneliness and her undeserved humiliation at the hands of a capricious and suspicious Elizabeth who clearly feared the growing popularity of the extravagant Grand Duchess. Catherine played the role of "insulted Prince" (stepping in for her husband Peter III): she rode alone and read books:

"To tell the truth, hunting did not interest me at all, but I passionately loved riding; the more violent that exercise the more I enjoyed it, so that if a horse ever broke away I galloped after it and brought it back. Also I always carried a book in my pocket in those days; any moment I had to myself I spent in reading."¹⁸

One incident at court was particularly significant. Elizabeth prohibited Catherine from using a man's saddle. Catherine remembers:

"It was during that year that I invented for myself saddles upon which I could sit as I wanted. They had the English crook and one could swing one's leg to sit astride; the pommel, furthermore, could be screwed off and one of the stirrups raised or lowered as one required. If the grooms were asked how I rode, they could truthfully say: "In a lady's saddle, according to the Empress's wish. I switched my leg only when I was sure that I was no going to be observed <...>"¹⁹

At the same time, as Grand Duchess, Catherine was inverting gender roles; she created an image of herself as a strong and intelligent political figure. She appeared far more masculine than her weak, politically incompetent (and sexually impotent) husband. Thus, even before he was overthrown, she had begun to claim Peter III's place in terms of both power and gender. The Amazon motif

¹⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹⁸ Ibid, 183.

¹⁹ Ibid.

had gained political significance by the time of her coup d'état in 1762. Catherine the Great had transformed Elizabeth's acts of cross-dressing at court into a serious political strategy.

Coup d'état as cross-dressing

Catherine's accession to the throne was accompanied by a series of acts of cross-dressing. The initiative and range of this power play belonged, for the most part, to the young Countess Catherine Dashkova (1744–1810). Her role in the events of 1762, many scholars believe, was somewhat exaggerated by Dashkova herself as well as by memoirists who relied on her story. In this case, however, who played the prominent role in the organizing of the complot is less important than the ideological gestures that the participants in the revolution of 1762 demonstrated, and later described in their memoirs.

The evening before the main event, after one of the participants in the conspiracy, Captain Peter Passek, had been arrested, Dashkova urged her ally Nikita Ivanovich Panin (1718–1783), an influential politician, to take immediate action aimed to incite the people and the army to revolt. Meanwhile, Panin, the observant courtier appointed as mentor to Catherine's son Pavel Petrovich in 1760, decided to bide his time. Then, an eighteen year-old woman "lost no time in donning a man's greatcoat and setting out on foot"²⁰ to the place where the plotters usually gathered. She insisted that Catherine come back to St. Petersburg from Peterhof (a carriage had secretly been readied for just such a trip). When the courageous Dashkova returned home, her tailor informed her to her disappointment that the officer uniform which she had ordered ahead of time was not yet ready.²¹ According to her designs, this masculine attire would play an important role in all events of the revolution.

Dashkova appeared at the Winter Palace early in the morning. There she met up with Catherine, who had just returned from the Kazan Cathedral where she had taken the oath of Empress earlier

²⁰ *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkov*. Transl. by Kyril Fitzlyon (London, 1958), 70.

²¹ *Ibid*, 71

in the day before members of the clergy. Dashkova, however, was much more occupied with a ceremony of a different kind. She carefully observed the tradition of all previous palace coups which contained a ritual act of cross-dressing; a female pretender dresses as a man (or dons significant elements of male attire), removes her "female" ribbons and decorations and substitutes "male" ones. Dashkova took off Catherine's ribbon, the symbol of the order of Saint Catherine, and pinned the blue ribbon of the "male" order of Saint Andrew, which she had borrowed from Nikita Panin, on Catherine's clothing:

"Suddenly I noticed that she (Catherine. — V. P.) was still wearing the Order of St. Catherine and had not yet put on the blue ribbon of the Cross of St. Andrew. (The wife of the Emperor did not wear the blue ribbon; she was entitled only to the Order of St. Catherine, who had been founded by Peter I for his wife, and the Emperor Alexander followed his example in this respect.) I ran to Mr. Panin to borrow his blue ribbon, which I put on the Empress's shoulder. Thereupon she took off her own insignia of the Order of St. Catherine and asked me to put them in my pocket."²²

Then, both women changed out of their dresses and put on uniforms from one of the Guards regiments; Dashkova borrowed Captain Talyzin's uniform for the purpose and Catherine took one of Lieutenant Pushkin's, as these two officers were roughly similar to them in height.²³ Apart from the cross-dressing, there were other ideological connotations connected with the uniforms. Dashkova made a special note:

"These uniforms, by the way, were those the Preobrazhenski Regiment formerly worn from the time of Peter the Great down to the reign of Peter III, who abolished them in favor of Prussian type uniform. And it is a peculiar thing that no sooner did the Empress arrive in Petersburg than soldiers threw off new Prussian uniforms and donned their old ones which they somehow managed to find."²⁴

²² Ibid, 73.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 73—74.

This donning of the green uniform of the Preobrazhenskii regiment, with its three-cornered hat decorated with oak leaves, had a double meaning. It demonstrated not only a change in status — the Grand Duchess had become the Empress — but manifested her political strategy as well. Peter III, who idolized Frederick II, had instated a new type of uniform for the Guards, one patterned after the Prussian model. The uniform was embroidered with gold, very uncomfortable, and very expensive. The Guards had hated it, associating the uniform with a new political orientation towards Prussia, a recent enemy. By dressing up in the uniform of the Preobrazhenskii regiment (the founding of which Peter I regarded as his proudest achievement in the military sphere), Catherine II exhibited a return to Peter's "behests." It was most likely Dashkova who masterminded this symbolic action. Such a kind of uniform was apparently ordered to a sluggish tailor. Early in the morning both ladies, dressed as men, set off on horseback ahead of the army bound for Peterhof to meet a deposed Peter III and his allies. It was significant that on the night of June 30th, 1762, after the coup was over, drunken soldiers from the Izmailovskii regiment, incited by malicious gossip, came to the Summer Palace (where the new Empress was resting) and demanded to see her. Despite her fatigue at not having slept in several days, Catherine rose, put on the Preobrazhenskii regiment uniform and set out on horseback from the palace to accompany the soldiers to their quarters. The political show had been performed to the very end.

The image of an Amazon-like Russian Empress, riding a horse in front of her loyal regiments, became an immutable political emblem in eighteenth-century Russia. The image of Catherine II was firmly established by the well-known painting "Catherine astride the white horse *Diamond*" by the court painter Stephano Torelli, a professor of the Academy of Arts who lived in Saint Petersburg from 1762 to 1784. The artist portrayed the empress the way she wanted to be portrayed. A self-willed horse turns the head around and foams the furrows. Russia is represented by a female figure; she is kneeling as she places the royal crown on Catherine's head.²⁵

²⁵ E. Ia. Dan'ko, "Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo v poezii Derzhavina," in *XVIII vek*, 2

Catherine's masculine dress was not a simple contribution to the historical episodes of 1762. Torelli, an experienced European artist, depicted Catherine's accession in accordance with the European concept of monarchical power which viewed it as a sacred marriage between king and kingdom.²⁶ This marriage consisted of a traditionally female nation (the country) and a traditionally male power figure (the king).

Fitting the Empress' Images

By 1766, after the first four years of her reign, Catherine felt a sense of stability and was first able to appreciate the achievements made during her reign. Meanwhile, she saw a keen necessity in creating and establishing her imperial image. Catherine, more than anyone else, perfectly understood all the complexities of her status and all the advantages of a rightly chosen mythology.

Political and ideological challenges provoked the novice Russian female ruler to develop new politico-mythological paradigms of self-representations in order to secure and strengthen her successful but illegitimate accession to the throne. The former German Protestant princess Sophia Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst set out to prove that she was entirely Russian and sincerely devoted to Russian Orthodoxy. She also had to prove that she was absolutely legitimate and even more masculine than her recently deposed, murdered husband, Peter III. She successfully accomplished the first two tasks while still Grand Duchess and wife to the heir apparent. Ekaterina Alekseevna (the name she took on June 28th, 1744, the day she converted to Orthodoxy) quickly learned to speak Russian and familiarized herself perfectly with the ceremonies of the Orthodox Church. She not only became a pedantic observer of the superficial formalities of the Russian religious services and customs, but also skillfully exhibited the Russian qualities of her soul. Her inconsolable grief during the days

(Moscow — Leningrad, 1939), 194.

²⁶ The concept of the ruling as a marriage between the king and his kingdom was a part of the French coronation ceremony: Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven & London, 1998), 128.

of Elizabeth's funeral in the winter of 1761–1762 was etched in the memories of her contemporaries. The French diplomat and political writer Claude Carloman de Rulhière gave an account of those days, adding a sharp commentary on the theatrical nature of Catherine's behavior: "During the obsequies of the late Empress, she gained the hearts of the people, by a rigorous devotion, and a scrupulous fidelity in the observance of the rites of the Greek religion, abounding more with ceremonies than with morality."²⁷ Pulling off being "exclusively Russian" and "completely Orthodox" was not extremely hard, especially after the irritating and distasteful pro-Prussian habits of Peter the Third, who had worshipped Prussian Emperor Frederick II.

As she wrote in her *Manifesto*, Catherine II came to the throne proclaiming the necessity to defend "an old Russian Orthodoxy" that had been persecuted under Peter III. The manifesto declared that a change in ruler would protect Russians against the planned adoption of a "foreign religious system."²⁸ Contemporaries testified that Peter III once called for the archbishop Dmitrii Sechenov and forced him to issue a decree stating that all icons be removed from churches (except for icons devoted to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary). He also ordered all priests to shave their beards and to exchange their long cassocks for a "foreign type of pastor cloth." Confused Russian clergymen were sure that "the Emperor meant to abolish Russian Orthodoxy in favor of Lutheranism."²⁹

In 1762, the Russian poet and playwright Alexander Sumarokov (1717–1777) composed a laudatory inscription for Catherine's portrait (painted by P. Rotary, engraved by Evgraf Chemesov) in which he emphasized the messianic role of the novice Empress who had set out to save Orthodoxy within Russia:

²⁷ Claude Carloman de Rulhière, *The History, or Anecdotes of the Revolution in Russia, in the year 1762*. Transl. from French by M. de Rulhière (London, 1797), 49. Catherine knew about the manuscript, and tried to obtain it. She could only reach a compromise with the writer to permit publishing his book only after her death.

²⁸ *Put' k tronu. Istoriia dvortsovogo perevorota 28 iunia 1762 goda* (Moscow, 1997), 490.

²⁹ *Zapiski Andreia Timofeevicia Bolotova 1737–1796*, 1 (Tula, 1988), 332–333.

She has freed Russian glory from her bonds,
She has rescued Orthodoxy for her empire,
She was given the wisdom to govern,
And the truth to come to the throne.³⁰

It was more difficult for her to prove her legitimacy, as she really did not have a legal right to the throne. In 1762, Rostov Archbishop Arsenii Matseevich, one of Catherine's main opponents in the first years of her reign, made an exact count of all the "complications" in the status of the novice Empress. Being prosecuted and exiled, Matseevich testified: "Her Highness is not from our country, she is not versed enough in our Orthodoxy. She should not take the Russian throne. Ivan Antonovich should reign in her stead."³¹ He also made suggestions: "It would have been better if she (Catherine. — V. P.) had married him."³² Catherine attentively studied his statements. The last proposition, to become the spouse of Ivan (VI) Antonovich, a mentally retarded prisoner from the Elizabeth era, was especially impressive. Catherine rather successfully overcame the barrier of her nationality and even of her religious convictions. However, as she understood clearly, her main task was to establish herself as a legitimate Russian Emperor, an heir to Peter the Great. Although it would not be easy, it was an absolute necessity.

The mythology of Empire always makes a distinction between the monarch as a real person and the monarch as a sacred figure, an incarnation of the state's "body." These beliefs would exhibit their resilience for centuries in the European political sphere. The mortal body of a king was thought to contain the immortality of a sacred imperial essence which "never died."³³ Imperial Russia

³⁰ D. A. Rovinskii, *Podrobnii slovar' russkikh gravirovannykh portretov*, 2 (Saint Petersburg, 1887), 823. Besides A. Sumarokov, M. Lomonosov and E. Dashkova made their inscriptions. See on the history of the inscriptions: V. P. Stepanov, "Zabytye stikhotvoreniia Lomonosova i Sumarokova," in *Russkaia literatura*, 2 (1978), 111–115.

³¹ S. M. Soloviev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen. 1762–1765*, 268–269. See also: V. S. Ikonnikov, "Arsenii Matseevich, mitropolit Rostovskii," in *Russkaia starina* 26 (1879), 190.

³² N. I. Pavlenko, *Ekaterina Velikaia* (Moscow, 1999), 92.

³³ Richard Jackson, *Vive le roi! A History of the French Coronation from Charles V to*

was no stranger to this concept but did infuse it with certain specific political ideas and poetic metaphors. After the death of Peter the Great, during the reign of his daughter Elizaveta Petrovna, the personality of the first Russian Emperor became an object of the intense mythological elucidation. Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765), who had recurrently sung the praises of Elizabeth and her heir and nephew, the future Peter the Third, expounded on mythological role of their God-like predecessor in his *Ode on the Name Day of His Imperial Majesty Grand Prince Fedorovich in 1743* (Ода на День Тезоименитства Его Императорского Высочества Государя Великого Князя Петра Федоровича в 1743). Here Lomonosov evokes Peter the Great (comparing the two Peters, grandfather and grandson, was extremely popular at the time):

He was your God, Russia,
He took the earthly parts of your body from you,
When he descended from the mountains <...>³⁴

According to Lomonosov, Peter the Great was the God of Russia, an incarnation of God on Russian soil. Thus, medieval Christian theology which depicted an imperial earthly incarnation was transformed into a political concept of an “imperial body” as a symbol of nation or country. Catherine’s strategic affinity for Peter I was used to prove her *ideological heritage* from Peter the Great. She tried her hardest to prove that she was Peter’s heir not by blood, but by spirit and by the ideological power of reforms which she carried out in Russia. Peter the Great received the status of a Russian Deity (although his opponents viewed him as the opposite, the Antichrist) and his “immortal spirit” descended upon Catherine II.

Vasilii Petrov, in his poetic epistle *To Galaktion Ivanovich Silov* (Галактиону Ивановичу Силову, 1772), solemnly summarized Catherine’s hereditary “rights”:

Peter’s spirit lives in Catherine’s body.³⁵

Charles X. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984); Antoine De Baecque, *The Body Politic. Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800* (Stanford, 1997).

³⁴ M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8 (Moscow — Leningrad, 1959), 109.

³⁵ *Poety XVIII veka*, 1 (Leningrad, 1972), 348.

"Peter's spirit," as Petrov suggests, substitutes for legal or ancestral rights. By adopting "Peter's spirit", Catherine also gains access to his revered, imperial charisma. The Empress, an ardent reader of Diderot and Montesquieu, was attempting to apply an ideological strategy from the Enlightenment onto the feudal, aristocratic political structure of Russia. These new imperial representations assumed that her strategy of personal achievements, intellect, and education should be considered more relevant than blood ties.

The literary reaction to this strategy was quite significant. Lomonosov attempted to apply his experience as a laudatory poet onto this new situation. He wrote two odes: *Ode to the Empress Ekaterina Alekseevna on the Occasion of her Accession on June 28th, 1762* (Ода императрице Екатерине Алексеевне на ее восшествие на престол июня 28 дня 1762) and *Ode to the Empress Ekaterina Alekseevna on New Year's Day 1764* (Ода императрице Екатерине Алексеевне в новый 1764 год). In the first ode (which was written literally during Catherine's coup d'état in 1762), Lomonosov, obviously failing to comply with Catherine's new strategy, portrayed her as Elizabeth reborn:

Listen, all limits of the world,
And know what God can do!
Elizabeth has risen for our sakes,
Church and Palace are triumphant.³⁶

The metaphor could not have pleased Catherine, who did not want to be associated with Elizabeth's character traits, especially her gentleness, Lomonosov's favorite epithet when describing her. Catherine's intentions were not simply to reign like gentle Elizabeth, but to govern as a strong and powerful Emperor. For Catherine, a capricious and weak-willed woman who had shifted the day-to-day affairs of ruling into the hands of her minister or any other

³⁶ M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8, 772. See on the difficult relationships between Lomonosov and Catherine II: S. N. Chernov, "Lomonosov v odakh 1762 g.," in *XVIII vek*, I (Moscow — Leningrad, 1935), 178—180; Elena Pogolian, *Vostorg russkoi ody i reshenie temy poeta v russkom panegirike 1730-1762 gg.* (Tartu, 1997), 107—123.

person nearby could not be viewed as a good model. During the first years of Catherine's reign, Peter I had become the mythological model for her to follow. Lomonosov came to understand his mistake on a personal level, when, in 1763, Catherine signed the order for his retirement. (She would rescind it a few days later).³⁷

In his second ode, Lomonosov completely eliminated all comparisons of Catherine with Elizabeth. Moreover, Catherine II received poetic legitimization from him as a "granddaughter" of Peter the Great:

Among all the triumphant sounds
Be sure of my fervor for you,
Now, I sing the praises of Peter's granddaughter,
As I sang his daughter's before.³⁸

Eventually, Lomonosov abandoned his irritating habit of listing all the achievements of Catherine's female predecessors (Catherine I and Elizabeth), which was perceived as giving political advice on how she should rule. He mentioned only Catherine I, Peter's wife, who had ascended to the throne after him. Briefly, but gracefully, Lomonosov invoked "God's sanction" to explain the miracle of Catherine's accession:

O, scepter, crown, throne, and palace
Are given to Catherine again,
Glorify the second Goddess!
The First received it from Peter, the second from God!³⁹

The statement on the strength of her rule, sanctioned by not only Peter the Great but God himself as well opened the door to a poetic legitimization of Catherine's accession. It was no accident

³⁷ Stephen Baehr disregarded, in his book, a rudeness of Lomonosov's comparison: Stephen Lessing Baehr, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia. Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture* (Stanford, 1991), 40.

³⁸ M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8, 789. Entitling Catherine Peter's "granddaughter," Lomonosov underlined his solidarity with the *Manifesto* of 1762 that contained a sentence: "Peter the Great, our gratifying grandfather <...>" (*Put' k tronu*, 493).

³⁹ M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8, 789.

that soon after this ode was written Lomonosov was promoted to the rank of State Councilor.

***Ode on the Occasion of the Magnificent Carousel:
Patterns of Competition***

On June 16th, 1766, Catherine had a grandiose carousel staged in St. Petersburg. These tournaments became a popular component of a late Medieval and Renaissance courtly life; later, they flourished in European courts as a luxurious Baroque half-theatrical, half-military championship. On June 5-6, 1662, the most famous carousel had given by Louis XIV when five military groups dressed as Romans (headed by the King), Persians, Turks, Indians, and Native Americans participated in a magnificent performance. On January 2, 1743, the young Queen Maria Theresa of Austria decided to celebrate her victories during the War of Austrian Succession by performing a ladies carousel in her Hofburg Palace in Vienna: she herself was among other participants of this ladies contest. Russian empress Catherine II thoroughly studied their lessons.

In this event in Russia, the four branches of the armed forces (dressed as Slavs, Romans, Indians, and Turks) competed in horsemanship. However, the most impressive part of the feat came when young women from the best families suddenly appeared in ceremonial chariots and proceeded to open the festivities. The "Russian Amazons" were a tremendous success and became the focus of the whole performance.

In the same year, Vasilii Petrov (1736–1799), a humble teacher of poetry, stylistics, and rhetoric from the Slavonic-Greek-Latin Academy, had suddenly come to incredible fame. The Empress Catherine the Great very much appreciated his *Ode on the Occasion of the Magnificent Carousel in Saint Petersburg in 1766* (*Ода на великопепный карусель, представленный в Санкт-Петербурге 1766 года*). The lucky author of the work received a gold snuff-box along with 200 chervonets as a sign of royal favor, gifts quite traditional for the time. Two years later, his exemplary skill in publicizing all the latest trends in Russian imperial policy earned him another

promotion. Petrov was appointed personal translator and reader for the Empress's cabinet.

Petrov wrote the *Ode on the Occasion of the Magnificent Carousel*, his print debut, while living in Moscow. He did not witness the impressive ceremony in the capital, getting all his information from an extensive report on the festival published in the *Moscow Gazette* (July 7th, 1766).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Petrov grasped the essence of the events. In his poem, he depicted the appearance of the Amazons in "roaring chariots" as the central event of the carousel. He refers to these Russian young women as "Sparta's maidens," admiring their skills in chasing "wild boars" with "foaming mouths," along the moss. He solemnly predicts that these "Russian daughters" would outdo the men and gain possession of their "laurels."⁴¹

Consequently, Petrov makes the expected parallel—Russian armed maidens remind him of the legendary Amazons and he immediately projects the Russian festivities onto the ancient model. In his poem, he even evokes Penthecilea, an Amazon queen, who, according to myth, headed the Amazon legion which came to the aid of the Trojans.⁴² Her sober appearance allows the poet to imbue the description of the Russian feast with shades of antiquity. Troy would not have been destroyed if "such maidens" had come to its aid. Petrov writes:

All the Greeks would have perished in Ilion,
If such maidens had fought them.
Rivers of blood would have flown to Pont. <...>

⁴⁰ The detailed account on the carousel was published in *Pribavlenie k Moskovskim vedomostiam* (July 7, 1766). See also: A. K. Ganulich, "Pridvornaia karusel' 1766 goda i ee otrazhenie v literature i iskusstve." In *Ekaterina Velikaia: Epokha Rossiiskoi istorii. Tezisy dokladov* (Saint Petersburg, 1996), 234–237; Anthony Cross, "Professor Thomas Newberry's Letter from St. Petersburg, 1766, on the Grand Carousel and Other Matters." In *Slavonic & East European Review*. 76:3 (1998), 487–493.

⁴¹ *Poety XVIII veka*, 1, 327. See on Petrov's odes in *Russkaia oda. Razvitie odicheskoi formy v XVII–XVIII vekakh* (Saint Petersburg, 2005), 275–308.

⁴² Wm. Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons. A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* (Baltimore & London, 1984), 78–81.

The Trojan kingdom would stand safe,
And Perham would raise its proud walls.⁴³

By focusing the reader's attention on both the Russian and ancient Amazons, Petrov expounded on a notion that was already in the air—the image of Catherine II as an Amazon Queen. Voltaire first developed this metaphor in a letter written on July 24th, 1765 in which he compared the Russian Empress to another Amazon Queen, Phalestris.⁴⁴ Voltaire's skillful flattery helped him to clarify a confusing comparison. The legend goes that Phalestris wanted to have a child but, ignoring all ordinary men, finally went to Alexander the Great with a proposal to father her child. In Voltaire's thinking, Catherine was so great that the roles would have been reversed: Alexander the Great would have come to Russia to obtain Catherine's favor.

Petrov had managed to pay an exquisite compliment to Catherine II, who had planned the festival and obviously considered it a very significant political event (she was very much interested in how it was received in Europe). But he had gone even further than the usual panegyrics written by poets of the time. He deftly linked the Empress with the most important imperial myth of all, the one which spoke of the Trojan roots of the best European royal houses.⁴⁵ The ancient dynastic myth linking the Amazons, a ruined Troy, the fugitive Aeneas, and eternal Rome came to the surface repeatedly in the European tradition. Virgil's *Aeneid* and other ancient legends (the main sources for this mythology) served as a kind of allegorical genealogy which rendered imperial power sacred.

⁴³ *Poety XVIII veka*. 1, 327.

⁴⁴ *Documents of Catherine the Great. The Correspondence with Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767 in the English text of 1768*. Edited by W. F. Reddaway (Cambridge, 1931), 3.

⁴⁵ Frances A. Yates. *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1993), 50; Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (Cambridge, MA -- London, 1983), 58; Marie Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas. The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (New Haven — London, 1993), 11—16. See also: G. S. Knabe, *Russkaia antichnost'* (Moscow, 2000).

In Europe, the Amazons always served as a vehicle for the development of a whole series of paradigms of *translatio imperii*. This Latin term refers to the transfer or translation (*translatio*) from one civilization to another. In the Middle Ages, both political and cultural legitimacy were thought to have been passed down from classical antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome) to modern day (i.e. medieval) Europe. Both England and France would later seek to prove their superior claims to cultural and political legitimacy by asserting their direct lineage to the glory that was Rome.

The most important steps in laying claim to the transfer were 1) establishing links with ancient Emperors or heroes (ranging from a direct attempt to create genealogical ties to more symbolic/metaphoric parallels and 2) the translation of the major ancient epics into native languages. The Russian Empress cultivated the allegorical and metaphorical linking of her image to antiquity and ordered Petrov to translate Virgil's *Aeneid*.

According to this myth, the female warriors descended from Area, the god of war, and had established their kingdom on the slopes of the Caucasus, in Thrace,⁴⁶ or in Scythia (the latter was regarded as the old territory of the modern Crimea, and Catherine's future appropriation of the legendary place would also be associated with ancient mythology). The most important part of the legend was the story that courageous Amazons managed to send a legion headed by their queen Penthesilea to help the Trojans. The Greeks won, Troy fell, and Achilles killed Penthesilea. However, according to myth and to Virgil's interpretation, Troy was "translated" to Italy (to Latium) by Trojan fugitives guided by Aeneas. The Roman Empire was interpreted as Troy was reborn. Later, European monarchs, one by one, would claim their rights to the noble Trojan lineage. The ideology of *translation imperii* became the most relevant component of imperial strategy (in France, this ideology was taken up by Henry IV and reached its apogee with Louis XIV).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ According to legends, an Amazon state also took place among Slavs in Bohemia. Their chief Libussa (680–738) "left a posterity which was represented in the proud house of the Hapsburgs" (G. C. Rothery, *The Amazons in Antiquity and Modern Times* (London, 1910), 104.

⁴⁷ Frances A. Yates. *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, 108–109;