

Catherine the Great Authors Her Empire

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Review of: Vera Proskurina, *The Imperial Script of Catherine the Great: Governing with the Literary Pen*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023. xiv + 205p. ISBN: 9798887191768.

The Imperial Script of Catherine the Great represents the natural and necessary sequel to Vera Proskurina's deservedly well-known *Creating the Empress: Politics and Poetry in the Age of Catherine II* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011).¹ While in her earlier work Proskurina explored eighteenth-century Russian political symbolism through poetic portrayals of Empress Catherine II (1729-1796, reigned 1762-1796), *The Imperial Script* applies the same semiotic approach to Catherine's own writings. In a series of aptly chosen and illuminating case studies, Proskurina seeks to chart the relationship between imperial politics and literary culture in Catherine's Russia. The result is a masterful display of literary detective work and an essential point of reference for all future work on Catherine.

In a short introduction, Proskurina poses the overarching question that unites the study: how can literature enact imperial politics? Proskurina sketches out a nexus of themes that structure her analysis and posits a direct link between geopolitical aims and literary style. Catherine sought to redraw the map of civilization on the minds of her contemporaries (to borrow Larry Wolff's enduring formulation):² to place Russia squarely within Europe, Catherine needed to reimagine Russian space as the territory of culture, where enlightened behavioral norms were enforced and national identity firmly grounded in Enlightenment political concepts and classicizing historical narratives. According to Proskurina, Catherine undertook this reinscription of Russian geography by depicting and instructing her empire in the literary mode of humor. Identifying laughter in its many guises both as a primary weapon of Enlightenment didacticism and a marker of belonging to a civilized community, Proskurina affirms that Catherine's writings adopted light-hearted literary play as the language through which she translated Russian culture and power into the European sphere. The subsequent case studies trace a roughly chronological arc, following Catherine's shifting tactics as she applied this method in response to the varying political circumstances of her long and complex reign.

Examining Catherine's French-language *Antidote* (1770), written in response to Jean-Baptiste Chappe d'Auteroche's *Journey into Siberia, Made by Order of the King of France* (1768), the first case study reveals an extraordinary mirroring effect in the empress's rebuttal of a French attempt to write Russia out of Europe. Reading Chappe's

¹ Both books appeared in Russian before being translated and reworked into English: Vera Proskurina, *Imperiia pera Ekateriny II: Literatura kak politika* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017); Vera Proskurina, *Mify imperii: Literatura i vlast' v epokhu Ekateriny II* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006).

² Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Journey as an attack inspired by the Russophobic French royal administration at the start of the Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774), Catherine recognized Chappé's strategies of equating all of Russia with its Siberian backwaters and adapting Montesquieu's climate theory to affirm the physical inability of Russians to develop culturally and politically. Likewise framed with reference to Montesquieu and Rousseau, Catherine's retort evinced the reality of Russian cultural change above all through her invented authorial persona: a young Europeanized Russian nobleman who could attest that the inhabitants of the Siberian city of Tobol'sk found the French abbé himself to be an ignorant, inadequately civilized boor. Humor here largely takes the form of irony as the empress turns the tables on French pretenses to cultural and political superiority. The chapter concludes with an insightful coda piecing together the political contexts of Nikolai Novikov's *The Wallet* (*Кошелек*, 1774) to prove that—contrary to traditional Soviet assumptions about Novikov's opposition to Catherine in this period—the short-lived journal may well have been directed by the court to assail France through the lens of Gallomaniac culture, only to change tack when the political winds reversed and France became less inimical to Russian imperial power.

In Proskurina's second chapter, the geographical opposition is no longer between Europe and its wild, barbarian hinterland, but rather between urban centers that symbolically express the drama of the civilizing process. Persuasively asserting the unity of Catherine's six comedies written in 1772 as a cycle, Proskurina explains how the empress opposed St. Petersburg as a source of normative conduct and civic order to Moscow as an anti-Enlightenment realm of ignorance, prejudice, plague, and insurrection. Catherine resolved the dichotomy through another game of authorial persona and geographical sleight of hand: she claimed that the plays were written in Iaroslavl' by a fictional playwright taking refuge from the Moscow plague of 1770-1772. After Iaroslavl's partial destruction by fire in 1768, Catherine's radical plan for rebuilding intended to replace the demolished old city with a rational, classicist utopia. Her plays enacted the same process through literature: satirical laughter aimed to demolish the old city of Moscow and its recalcitrant inhabitants, replacing them with a new, re-educated population. The gentleness of this method that eschewed real violence and destruction was meant to exhibit imperial power as an enlightened force.

In Proskurina's subsequent examination of *The Tale of Prince Khlor* (1781) and *The Tale of Prince Fevei* (1782), court politics form the bridge connecting the real political geography of Europe with the allegorical oriental landscape of Catherine's fairy tales. Meticulously identifying the prototypes for Catherine's personified character types, Proskurina treats the texts as operating on two levels: underneath Prince Khlor's quest for virtue, she discerns a dramatization of the court struggles surrounding the journey across Europe that Catherine forced the future emperor Paul and his wife Maria Fedorovna to undertake in 1781-1782. If the character of the Lazy Murza, who tries to prevent Khlor from traveling, is leading statesman Nikita Panin, who opposed the trip and above all its orientation towards Vienna rather than Berlin, and Grumbler, the husband of the happy sultanness, is a composite of Catherine's deposed husband Peter III and Paul himself, then *The Tale of Prince Khlor* argues that the perfect Russia—represented by the rose without thorns—can be found only under the guidance of Catherine-Felitsa and her son Reason, in alliance with Austria and without the Masonic ties with which the Prussian leadership hoped to bind Paul. While in Proskurina's account the two levels of the story—the didactic allegory and the encoding of court

politics—never fully map one onto the other, she suggests how productive the interplay between personal allusion and moral instruction could be, giving rise both to G. R. Derzhavin’s famous ode “Felitsa” (1782, published 1783) and to the fairy tale *Khlor’s* geographic embodiment in the dacha built for the future emperor Alexander I near Pavlovsk. The culture of laughter lurks in the combination of a playful tale with allusive satire of the empress’s entourage, while Catherine’s political allegory exudes confidence in her mastery of European politics and in the success of her approach to ruling Russia.

The geographical theme is occluded in the fourth chapter; instead, Proskurina unveils both the interpersonal tensions and the divergent theories of culture, politics, and public discourse that underlay the famous conflict between Catherine and playwright Denis Fonvizin. Proskurina debunks Soviet mythologizations of the “Questions and Answers with the Addition of a Preface” published in the *Interlocutor of Lovers of the Russian Word* in 1783 as the autocrat’s enraged repression of Fonvizin’s bold act of opposition. Instead, she shows the text—consisting of Catherine’s responses to Fonvizin’s questionnaire about the shape of Russian politics—to have arisen from a misunderstanding: Catherine believed the questions’ author to be Empress Elizabeth’s former favorite, I. I. Shuvalov, whom she viewed as a mere intrigant and hold-over from a previous reign. This confusion reinforced the mismatch between the intellectual frameworks within which Fonvizin and Catherine wrote. Whereas Fonvizin wanted to generate debate in the sphere of public opinion about the legal basis of enlightened monarchy, Catherine saw the *Interlocutor* and her own contributions to it as advertising newly enlightened court society as proof of Russia’s place in the civilized world. Where Fonvizin contested the political, social, and economic structures of the empire, Catherine kept the discussion in the sphere of culture, arguing that Russian customs made systematic reform impossible and therefore required the court to lead the way in modelling new behavioral norms. History replaced geography as Catherine highlighted shifts in the modalities of laughter at the Russian court, contrasting the barbaric buffoonery of Peter the Great with her own gentle teasing in the style of salon banter. This dismissal of Peter the Great’s achievements proved all the more relevant when Catherine finally discovered the identity of the questioner: Fonvizin’s idealization of the Petrine era, embodied in his hero Starodum, was thoroughly antithetical to Catherine’s affirmation that only her own reign had fully attained European cultural standards.

Struggles over the locus of cultural and political power within the empire remain central in the fifth chapter, which revisits Catherine’s anti-Masonic writings of the mid-1780s. Proskurina elucidates a conflict that began in 1779 and unfolded throughout the 1780s: Catherine experienced Freemasonry as culturally and intellectually alienating for a child of the High Enlightenment and resented the Masons’ work as wrenching social initiative from the monarchy. In turn, Masons rejected the empress after failing to win her over. Against this background, Proskurina affirms the strategic and structural unity of Catherine’s anti-Masonic trilogy of comedies (1785-1786) while distinguishing the primary arguments of each. *The Deceiver* creates a negative image of Freemasonry by conflating the movement as a whole with its supposedly most menacing manifestation—the Illuminati; at the same time, Catherine’s play uses humor to deflate the movement’s pretensions. *The Deceived* offers Russian nobles infatuated with Freemasonry a dignified way out by treating them as victims of deception; imperial power thus is presented as humane in welcoming back those who have erred. Finally, *The Siberian Shaman* attacks fake healings as antithetical to true Enlightenment. A nice feature of this chapter are the

connections made to previous case studies: Proskurina highlights the subtle continuation of Catherine's literary interactions with Nikolai Novikov even as the journalist and the empress found themselves leaders of the two opposing sides of the conflict. Her analysis perceptively illustrates how *The Siberian Shaman* continues Catherine's mirroring response to Chappe d'Auteroche: inverting Chappe's association of Siberian shamans with Russian barbarism, Catherine made her shaman a marker of Europe's redescent into ignorance.

While the theme of laughter vanishes in the sixth chapter, the concluding study of Catherine's late historical dramas addresses more directly than any other the book's central question about the relationship between *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*. Proskurina analyzes Catherine's representations of the early leaders of Rus' as political pageants enacting the so-called Greek Project, which aimed to chase the Ottoman Empire from Europe and to replace its European dominions with Russian vassal states led by Catherine's grandson Constantine and possibly by her partner Grigorii Potemkin. Both staged spectacles and real imperial policies appear as masquerades: the same magic that turns annexed Crimea into Tauric Chersonese governs the resurrection of Greek drama and music onstage. By appropriating the cultural and historical heritage of Kyivan Rus', Byzantium, and Ancient Greece, the empress once again reinvents the geography of her empire, linking it directly to the cradle of European civilization as she reorients her northern empire southward towards the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Arriving at the end of *The Imperial Script*, this reader found herself wanting more: more of Proskurina's virtuoso displays of historical sleuthing, but also more conceptualization to flesh out the book's conclusions and put its detailed analysis into dialogue with the broader field of Enlightenment studies. Proskurina's remarkable ability to overturn assumptions through painstaking reinterpretation of textual allusions is on full show; along the way, her source material offers helpful reminders of the wealth and importance of nineteenth-century scholarship on the Catherine era.³ However, Proskurina treats her semiotic approach to culture as self-evident, providing few methodological reflections to contextualize her work. The absence of a conclusion to the book is keenly felt: the book ends with Catherine's political and authorial "vanity" in imagining the Greek Project's future success—hardly an argument for the significance of her writings. Proskurina's answer to her own crucial question about how literature can enact imperial power therefore remains largely implicit. Her treatment of texts as codes representing very specific political or interpersonal situations tends to underemphasize ideas and reduce literature to a realm of petty powerplays. Yet it is precisely on the level of ideas and literary culture that Catherine's writing can be genuinely understood as a phenomenon of the Enlightenment and made relevant to larger scholarly conversations about the intellectual life of the period. Proskurina begins by asserting the superiority of Catherine's literary corpus over that of King Frederick the Great of Prussia, but the comparison deserves further contemplation, since Frederick's performance as an eighteenth-century philosopher-king provided a key inspiration for Catherine's own

³ Regarding this all-too-frequently forgotten body of historical work, see Andrew Kahn's essay, "The Theme of Enlightenment in Russian Historiography, 1860-1900," in *Inventions of Enlightenment Since 1800: Concepts of Lumières, Enlightenment and Aufklärung*, eds. Nicholas Cronk and Élisabeth Décultot, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), 155-84.

combination of expansionist power with the empire of the pen.⁴ Likewise, engagement with the growing body of research on classical reception in eighteenth-century Russia could have bolstered Proskurina's account of Catherinian *translatio studii*.⁵

Proskurina's book is an irreplaceable resource for future research on Catherine II, furnishing a treasure-trove of interpretive keys and historically grounded reality checks for any scholar approaching the empress's writings. In the ever-expanding subfield of studies on Catherine and her legacy, and for all those interested in Russia's evolving political culture and eighteenth-century literary history, Proskurina's book is a must-read.

⁴ Derek Beales, "Philosophical Kingship and Enlightened Despotism," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 497-524; Jan Kusber, "In der Konkurrenz um Ruhm: Katharina II. und Friedrich II.," in *Friedrich II. und das östliche Europa: Deutsch-polnisch-russische Reflexionen*, ed. Olga Kurilo (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2013), 185-205; Andreas Pečar, *Autorität durch Autorschaft? Friedrich II. als Militärschriftsteller* (Halle an der Saale: Universitätsverlag Halle-Wittenberg, 2013); Avi Lifschitz, ed., and Angela Scholar, trans., *Frederick the Great's Philosophical Writings* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁵ The work of Zara Martirosova Torlone immediately comes to mind: *Vergil in Russia: National Identity and Classical Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); *Russia and the Classics: Poetry's Foreign Muse* (London: Duckworth, 2009).