

# CATHERINE II AND HER PLAYS

(Catalina II y sus obras)

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## ABSTRACT

Catherine II produced a fairly large number of plays in which she satirized particular vices and included a moderate number of moral teachings. However, in many of them Catherine was primarily occupied with amorous pursuits. Her so-called French plays are weak, full of gossip and ridiculing. Catherine also addressed the problem of education, but in most cases this was reduced to crude criticism, particularly of the masonry, fairly popular then in Russia. Although she was technically the head of the Orthodox church, there are almost no religious references in her plays. However, she was very concerned in her plays with proclaiming the elevated status of the monarch.

*Keywords:* Catherine II, theater, education, Orthodoxy.

## RESUMEN

Catalina II produjo un número bastante grande de obras de teatro en la que satirizaba vicios particulares e incluía un número moderado de enseñanzas morales. Sin embargo, en muchos de ellos Catalina estuvo ocupada principalmente en sus obras de teatro de actividades amorosas. Sus llamadas obras francesas son flojas, están llenas de chismes y de situaciones ridículas. Catalina también abordó el problema de la educación, pero en la mayoría de los casos esto se redujo a una crítica cruda, sobre todo de la masonería bastante popular entonces en Rusia. A pesar de que técnicamente era la jefa de la Iglesia ortodoxa, casi no hay referencias religiosas en sus obras de teatro. Sin embargo, era una persona muy particular en sus obras a la hora de establecer el elevado estatus del monarca.

*Palabras clave:* Catalina II, teatro, educación, ortodoxia.

Catherine II, empress of Russia, wrote some 30 plays, librettos, and translations in Russian and French in fairly quick succession first in 1772-1773 and then in 1786-1890. According to a statement attributed to her, she thought very highly about her role in the development of the Russian theater: "Theatre is a national school, it should constantly be under my supervision; I am the senior teacher in this school and I am responsible before God for mores of my people."<sup>1</sup> She did say that one reason why she wrote comedies was that she wanted to "lift up the national theater."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is interesting to look at the content of her plays to see what she wanted to teach. This

1. Арапов (1861: 113).

2. A letter to Grimm, 8 April 1785 (Екатерина II 1878: 328). Other reasons: it is amusing and "to drub the visionaries who have begun to raise their heads." Cf. amusement as the only reason, p. 384.

is also important because Catherine was first and foremost a political figure, an empress of a large empire that was being aggressively expanded under her rule, so the views reflected in her plays are also an avenue to her mind as an imperial figure.

## 1. COMEDIES

Catherine's theatrical productions are fairly uniform in respect to content. These are primarily comedies revolving around amorous vicissitudes of at least one couple that wants to get married; however, some obstacles arise that need to be overcome. In that respect the end can frequently be guessed very early on in the play and the audience just has to sit through some adventures that have a predictable outcome.

In *The questioner*, right at the beginning we learn that Vestoliub (*vest'* – news/gossip, *liubit'* – to love) is a stupid man, constantly asking silly questions; Kraftin (*Kraft* – strength) is good, modest, reasonable, with good manners. Although Vzdornoi (*vzdor* – nonsense) promised Christina to Vestoliub since he was rich (1.232),<sup>3</sup> we know that she will be united with Vestoliub. And she was, a *deus ex machina* solution helped, since Kraftin just got good inheritance. Incidentally, by guile, Vestoliub signed promise of marriage with Marem'iana, Christina's aunt, thinking it was with Christina (243).

In *An unexpected adventure*, right in the first scene we learn that Prokofii serves an impoverished lieutenant Kottov who is a guest in the house of the rich Filipov; Kottov loves Mariamna, Filipov's only daughter, and is sure her father would not allow them to marry. Also, Prokofii loves Mavra, Mariamna's servant. The spectator has to sit through three verbose acts to see the foregone conclusion that the two marriages will take place. Although *An unexpected adventure* was meant to be a comedy, one person, Olimpiada, gets badly hurt in the process (and so does Filipov, but he brought it upon himself).

The first scene of *The invisible woman* opens with a little lovers' quarrel between Sergei and Taisa (3.95/1:1), and it can be safely guessed that by the last scene they will be united in marriage. In the third scene, his father expresses his opposition to the union of Sergei with Taisa and at the beginning of the second act, he agrees with Umkin who wants Sergei to marry Soskin's sister (apparently, the invisible woman from the title since neither Sergei nor his father saw her even though the father pushed for the marriage). At that point, the viewer can be certain that this plan will not succeed and has to endure the verbiage of the five acts to see that happen.

*What kind of tricks?* gets predictable when it becomes clear that Tverdina wants bookish Sophia to marry Goltin; Sophia doesn't (3.168/2:2) and she has a soft spot for Vokitov and vice versa. Of course, Tverdina eventually allows for the marriage of Sophia and Vokitov (202/5:2). There is a lot of chatter in between, not always with any connection with the main plot. It may be because, except for a courting story, Catherine also wanted to include some satire on the court of her youth.<sup>4</sup>

3. References are made to Екатерина II (1901-1908); 2:2 – act 2 scene 2.

4. Tverdina could represent the empress Elizabeth, Sophia would be Catherine herself (whose name was

For two acts the play *Dranov and [his] neighbors* is going nowhere. Then, a mention is made that Roptikov wants to marry Aksiniia (3.282/3:1), with which Aksiniia agrees (282/3:2), but her mother Vorotkinova disapproves because of some alleged misdeeds of Roptikov. She even enlists Abtenov, by, basically, bribing him, to write a complaint against Roptikov (292/4:8). However, rather abruptly, Vorotkinova sees her mistake in misjudging Roptikov and, in the last act, permits him to marry Aksiniia. In between, there is a lot of unrelated gossip, a lot of outraged remarks of thin-skinned egos who were not treated as they expected.

In *The ridiculous lover* coauthored by Catherine,<sup>5</sup> De Bonaccords want to find a husband for Isabelle. They also consider foreign suitors. Isabelle is interested in Valcourt, who was once rich and had a distinguished military record. A happy ending is inevitable.

The conclusion of the opera *Thedul/Fedul with children* is also clear from the beginning: father wants to marry a widow, his 15 children are opposed to it, but, of course, they finally accept her.

A more interesting comedy is *It is intended one way and done another way* in that it has a rather noncomedic start: Rekhova (*riche* – rich (cf. 4.172)) is mourning the death of her “husband, friend, faithful lover” (3.209/1:3) and is sure that she will spend her life in mourning her beloved husband. Bredilova (*bredit'* – to rant) appears on the scene with her son Prokofii (212/1:6) with the design, as we can guess, that Prokofii would marry Rekhova – which soon becomes obvious (229/3:1), and the reader can immediately guess that nothing will come of it. When Tiavkin (*tiavkat'* – to bark) proposes his two brothers as possible suitors for Rekhova (231/3:3), the result is the same. However, Rekhova's aunt, Bodina, calls on Rekhova's neighbor Bonov to visit Rekhova for company (211/1:5), but the role of Bonov is limited to consolation and good company alone. Bonov (*bon* – good) brings his relative Dobrin (*dobryi* – good) who loved Rekhova even when she was still married (233/3:8). The reader can guess the conclusion. Sure enough, Rekhova says cautiously ‘yes’ in the last scene (261/5:10). She intended to remain a widow and it came out another way.

Also the comedy *Mrs. Vestnikova with family* is funny to some extent only by portraying silly figures of Daughter and her father; Tratov (*trata* – loss/waste) asks Vestnikova (*vest'* – news/gossip) for permission to marry her Daughter, but he meant Daughter-in-Law, not Daughter, not knowing that Daughter-in-Law was already married. Of course, Tratov ends up empty handed and thus unhappy and Daughter-in-Law remains under the thumb of her mother-in-law. Would she mind to leave with Tratov who tenderly loved her? A solution that would involve an extramarital affair would not be quite suitable for the Russian scene, not then.

Catherine's preoccupation with amorous elements in her plays extends to her attempts at translations of foreign plays.

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originally Sophia), and Goltin would be Grand Duke Peter, her husband; see Fleischhacker (1978: 150-151).

5. It was coauthored with the Prince de Ligne, who authored an opera and four plays, so, “he did not need a collaboration to get the proverb [which was the theme of the play] to the successful end. We can really find an explanation [of this collaboration] only in his infinite gallantry” (Hyart 1987: 92).

Only the first five scenes of Catherine's translation of *The partition, a free translation from Calderón de la Barca*, are preserved. The original title is *El escondido y la tapada*; however, Catherine used a French translation of the play, entitled *La cloison*,<sup>6</sup> hence the Russian title. The French translation is a greatly modified version of the original. Catherine abbreviated the French translation using short dialogues but followed its plot: Sevin/Don César pursues Pulkheria/Isabella, who does not want him, so, for a consolation, he pursues Serafima/Celia whose brother is favored by Pulkheria (3.390/1:1). He receives a letter from Serafima for a tête-à-tête. He agrees to come hoping to be able to also see Pulkheria!

There are also only five scenes preserved of Catherine's *Free translation, from English* which is a translation of Richard Sheridan's *The school for scandal* (1777). It is a lot of malicious gossip guided by the principle expressed by Pustobaeva/Sneerwell: "How can one speak with wit without mixing in [the conversation] some sharpness; sometimes it is about [our] neighbor, but how that can be called malicious? Perhaps, it'll goad someone, but how can it [the conversation] be without it?" (3.385/1:4; in the original: "There's no possibility of being witty without a little ill nature. The malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick"). Catherine did not get to confusing developments of the who-with-whom parts of the play.

*The merry wives of Windsor* is all based on the unsavory desires of Falstaff, so Catherine's adaptation followed the original storyline in her *That's how it is to have a basket and linen*; however, she trimmed the original by removing subplots and entire scenes and by simplifying monologues.<sup>7</sup> She was, however, dissatisfied with the way Shakespeare concluded his *Timon of Athens*. As she expressed it in *The ridiculous lover*, in Milton and Shakespeare, there is "a lot of hardness and of sadness in the character" (4.102), so Catherine felt obligated to moderate a bit this hardness and sadness. Therefore, in her adaptation, *The spendthrift*, she followed Shakespeare's play until her act 5 by showing Tratov/Timon ruined by his generosity and helpfulness to others, but when he asked for help, everyone turned his back on him, so he withdrew to solitude in a cave (in a forest, in Catherine's version). In a scene in the forest Tratov's friend Openka/Apemantus encouraged Tratov to get married to Amenaida who just passed by (3.343/5:3). Tratov was apparently convinced by Openka, since he said to Bragin/Alcibiades, who was also there, that he would get married if he found "a good heart and morals, faithfulness, honesty, and friendship united with beauty," to which Bragin responded that he would not oppose his marriage with his sister Amenaida should she be willing – and here the manuscript ends. None of the possibility of marriage is in the original which goes in the opposite direction where Tratov's hatred of humanity only grows and the play ends

6. Calderón de la Barca 1770. English titles that have been used for this play: *The hidden lover and the veiled lady*; *Fortune mends*; *From bad to worse*; *Keep your own secret*.

7. All these abbreviations and simplifications evoked a remark that Catherine did not allow her characters to reflect on anything: "faster! always faster! It seems that she wanted to lead a dramatic action like a war campaign. ... She cuts, trims and the unfortunate comedy becomes similar to the pruned trees that by the savant barbarism of a gardener became columns on which birds cannot rest any longer" (Lirondelle 1912: 40). For a list of Catherine's omissions and modifications see Simmons (1932: 794-798; O'Malley 2006: 123-139).

with his death. Catherine may have thought about a happy ending in which this hatred would be dissolved in a happy marriage, a rather un-Shakespearian solution.<sup>8</sup> What Catherine might have wanted to convey was that marriage would be a good cure for misanthropy, or, more generally, marriage is a saving grace when times are hard and the spirit is low. How serious was Catherine about this solution? Considering the fact that after the early demise of her husband she never got married, maybe she was not quite serious about proposing such a solution. Or – considering a series of lovers she went through – maybe, to some extent she was: love is the best cure, not necessarily in marriage, but she certainly could not end a play proposing that Tratov should take Amenaïda as a lover.

Drastically changing the ending of *Timon* was not an isolated incident. Catherine was dissatisfied with the tragic conclusion of Voltaire's *Tancred*, so that, on her orders, in the Hermitage, the play concludes with the marriage of Tancred with Amenaïd, after saving her, instead of dying in front of her. "Surely it was better that way?"<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, she was not in such modifications alone: Sumarokov in his version of *Hamlet* used this kind of solution by marrying Hamlet with Ophelia.

There are in all these plays a few characters that satirize particular vices such as lust (Polkadov/Falstaff), bullishness (most parents), vengefulness (e.g., Vorotnikova in *Dranov and [his] neighbors*), stupidity (e.g., Vestoliub in *The questioner*), condescension (e.g., Vestnikova), and the like. There are a few marginal moral messages, such as "one can control oneself with reason" (*An unexpected adventure* 3.7/1:1); "patience overcomes everything" (3.16/1:1); "each man tries to be happy" (3.62/3:3); "moderation in all frequently brings some good" (*The invisible woman* 3.135/4:8); "when a man makes a mistake, then his first thought should be how to correct this mistake" (3.143/5:6); there is no happiness without friendship that is based on mutual trust, which requires time to develop; passion and inclination supported by good-heartedness, honesty, modesty, and lenience bring human happiness (*It is intended one way* 3.260/5:10); spiritual satisfaction consists in doing good to people expecting no reward (*Dranov and [his] neighbors* 3.275/2:4). Only in *The invisible woman* is there a character that can be considered a personification of conscience, Dobrov, always a moderating voice, a lesser version of Starodum from Fonvizin's *The minor* (1781). However, all these moral messages are clearly of secondary importance in comparison to the main concern in amorous pursuits, amorous quiproquos, amorous disappointments, hopes, and reconciliations, and in all of it, more in a technique of pursuit and conquest rather than in the sentiment of love. As such, these plays are simple amusements for high society and middle class (after all, peasants did not frequent theaters), with possibly an accompanying moral message aimed against the depicted vices.

8. This conclusion is a sign of impertinence and just the modification of the ending "introduced on behalf of the audience that likes that things 'end well' ... would be enough to condemn Catherine" (Lirondelle 1912: 51).

9. Troyat 1978: 253.

## 2. FRENCH PLAYS

In 1787-1788, Catherine and her closest circle amused themselves by writing plays that illustrate some proverbs. Catherine suspended her role of the teacher of the national theatre since all the plays, including the ones she authored, were designed for this circle alone. The plays produced by this group, all written in French, had been published first anonymously in 1789 (Екатерина II 1789). The publication was not designed for public distribution. It was a private publication to be distributed, as recorded by Khrapovitskii, by Catherine herself (4.247); according to Catherine, only 30 copies had been printed (4.248). After Catherine's death, the plays were republished in 1799 (Екатерина II 1799). The second edition includes most of the plays from the first edition and, importantly, it indicates the authorship of particular plays: Count Louis-Philippe de Ségur, French ambassador to Russia (1785-89); Count Ludwig von Cobenzl, Austrian minister; Count Charles-Joseph de Ligne, Austrian general, Baron d'Etat, French attaché, Ivan Shuvalov, high chamberlain, Count Aleksandr S. Stroganov, senator; Mlle E. Aufrène, daughter of actor Jean Aufrène; and Count Aleksandr M. Dmitriev-Mamonov, Catherine's favorite at that time (1786-89).

In *The flatterer and the flattered*, Renard flatters de Corbec, which causes de Corbec to be all worked up about his own perfection (4.23). De Corbec denigrates his beautiful wife in front of Renard and leaves her crying with Renard (26); he starts to flatter her and although it is clear that he wanted to take advantage of the situation, he abruptly leaves. De Corbec sends him a gift and when Renard comes, he says that all of it was an illustration of [Aesop/La Fontaine's] fable on the crow and the fox. The salacious subtext is that de Corbec's wife would be the counterpart of the cheese from the fable. This is a heavy-handed treatment since almost immediately it is clear that the play is a variation of Aesop's fable considering the names of the figures: Renard (= fox) and de Corbec (*corbeau* – crow). Making the allusion a part of the play makes the play rather pointless.

In *There is nothing bad without good*, Maigret's nephew is a widower and Maigret is looking for a wife for him. Mme Richard's daughter Rosalie is ready to get married to get out from under the heavy thumb of her mother (4.56). At that point, considering the usual predictability of Catherine's plots, the viewer could suspect that all dialogues will lead to the marriage of Rosalie and Maigret's nephew – but no, she does not want to marry Maigret's nephew (57) since she likes the son of her neighbor. No matter. The proposal was Maigret's idea, not his nephew's, motivated by the fact that Rosalie was the closest neighbor among girls that Maigret considered as possible matches for his nephew, so, there will be no regret because of refusal. This makes for a very anticlimactic ending, and the entire play becomes pointless.

In *The rage for proverbs*, Marton's mistress Rosalie occupies herself all night with proverbs and asks everyone for them. Dandee would like to marry her. Tantine teaches Rosalie some rules, like to faint only in public (73), say *ze* instead of *je*, to be “an accomplished young woman” (4.74). Rosalie acts upon these advices (79), but this serves no purpose. Dandee promised to bring some proverbs to Rosalie but did not, and attempts of Jasmin, Marton's servant, to create some of them were not satisfactory (81), so, having no proverbs and possibly being put off a bit by Rosalie's histrionics,

he left. As Marton stated toward the end, “I’m stupefied. This end does not square at all with the beginning” (84). Being stupefied is quite right.

The conclusion of *The carefree* Catherine coauthored with Alexandre Mamonov can be seen just by reading the cast. The cast includes Mlle Sans-Souci and Complaisant, promised to her (4.190). It is a smooth sailing for the two: they love one another; mother gives her permission for their marriage and so does the father. However, their presence in the play is very weak, almost imperceptible, although it is the main thread of the play. It is all well summarized by Madame Sans-Souci’s complaint to her husband: “How is it possible to constantly talk about things that have no tail, no head, and do nothing else but laugh and joke?” (203/2:3). No tail, no head indeed.

In *Voyages of Mr. Bontems*, Crispin brags that he traveled with his master Bontems in places where there is a day at night and night during the day (4.37), where stones serve as food, and the like (38). Crispin tells about Bontems’ alleged military exploits on land (40) and on the sea (41). Then Bontems’ father appears with IOUs that came from different countries, Bontems’ gambling debts (43).

These French one-act plays of Catherine all appear to be pointless. Most of these plays consist of disconnected scenes of gossip, busy-bodding, petty squabbles, ridiculing one another, finding faults everywhere. Plots are very weak and include mainly a presentation of an array of various characters, exaggerated and caricatural in many cases. A charitable interpretation is that because these plays were designed for presentation only in the closest circle, they include inside jokes recognizable to the members of this circle alone, poking fun at some personalities in the court, ridiculing their foibles and habits. For instance, the exaggerated naval exploits told by Crispin appear to be an allusion to Charles XIII, who was an admiral in the 1788 war with Russia (cf. a remark made by Khrapovitskii, 4.45). Also, the principal figure of *The carefree* is “nothing else but a true portrait of a Courtier of the Empress” (4.253), but even in 1799, possible allusions were largely unknown. As we read in the preface to *Théâtre de l’Hermitage*, “some Roles that appear to be exaggerated and many pleasantries in which no salt can be seen should contain spicy allusions [understandable] only to the Society; but we have no information to allow us to explain them” (4.253). By mocking foibles of people known to an inner circle of confidants, these French moralizing plays turn into high-brow gossip and elevated ridiculing of people: elevated, since the art of Melpomene is being used, but the result is just the same as in the case of two servants laughing in the washing room at their fellow servants and, more rewardingly, at their masters and mistresses. Catherine’s circle including the empress herself did it in French.

### 3. EDUCATION

Arguably the most important concern that Catherine wanted to address in her plays was education. She pointed to its importance by ridiculing incompetence, gullibility, ignorance, superstition, and clinging to old habits and old ways.

The main plot of the *Nameday of Mrs. Vorchalkina* is, small surprise, the problem of getting married. Talarikin loves Christina, but her mother, Vorchalkina (*vorchat’* – to growl), wants to give her to a rogue, Spesov (3.80/3:3). The reader can be certain

now that Talarikin will be the lucky suitor. However, in the process of getting there, Gerkulov (*Gerkulii* – Hercules) and Spesov (*spesivyi* – haughty) spread a rumor that getting married will be prohibited for ten years, whereby they wanted to speed up the decision of Vorchalkina (2:2, 4). The plot revolves on Vorchalkina's gullibility, although she was in very good company in believing this rumor. The ruse is, of course, revealed and the rogues are driven off from Vorchalkina's home, which along with the marital happy ending indicated that, as the closing words appear to suggest, "virtue was rewarded" (114/5:12; 157/5:10). In any event, had Vorchalkina had more sense, had she known more about legal matters and the workings of the government, she would not have fallen so easily into the trap of bad news.

The times and customs required that a child receive parental permission to get married, which is a problem present in many plays of the age, but it was very strongly accentuated in Catherine's plays. In Catherine's plays parents strongly stress their parental rights in that respect and it may be even said that the more ignorant and backward they are, the more they are clinging to this right. And so does Vorchalkina by saying that Christina's feelings and inclinations toward a particular suitor don't matter; therefore, "she is my daughter and she'll marry whomever I want her to marry" (1.83/3:6). Probably the strongest expression of this sentiment was given in *Dranov and [his] neighbors* in the words of Vorotkinova to her daughter Aksiniia: I am your mother, you are supposed to endure my anger; you should think the way I want you to (3.282/3:1). Catherine herself was a subject of such a treatment being married off to childish Peter. By psychoanalyzing her it may be stated that this experience scarred her to the extent that she never got married and simply went through a series of lovers.<sup>10</sup> It appears that justification given by Olimpiada, Christina's sister, about not getting married is very much Catherine's own: why be married? "it seems to me, it's *impoli* to marry one [suitor]; it is, word for word, like saying to other *adoreteurs* that you are unworthy of this honor and I don't want to insult the entire world" (1.102,152/5:1).

Gullibility and ignorance become major topics of three plays, *The deceived*, *The deceiver*, and *The Siberian shaman*. Although amorous aspects are included, they are of secondary importance. In these plays, Catherine plays the role of an educator-in-chief.

In *The deceiver*, Kalifalkzherston pretends to be able to double the size of diamonds (1:2), to speak with invisible Alexander the Great who during his lifetime visited him (1:3) and gullible Samblin believed him. Kalifalkzherston promised Dodin to win for him Samblin's daughter Sophia (1:4). He was also able to cure an imaginary illness of Samblina, which was pronounced to be a miracle (2:3). He promised Samblin to multiply Samblin's riches by cooking money and small diamonds (4:8, 5:4), but he fled with diamonds he got from Samblin for such a cooking (5:3); however, Dodin captured him (5:4), whereby he won over Sophia (5:6). The last words spoken by Dodin are addressed to the audience: "Such a deception is not new in the world, I think ... it only takes up different forms in [different] times – this I give you for your consideration.

10. As she wrote to her former lover Potemkin about her taking lovers, "God knows that [I did it] not because of debauchery to which I have no inclination and if I married in my youth a husband whom I could love, I would always be faithful to him" (12.698).



Reasonable is among us, who does not always follow [his] inclination according to fashion” (1.286/5:7).

Concerning the fashion mentioned by Catherine, the reference is to Cagliostro,<sup>11</sup> who five years before she wrote her play was in Russia for half a year.<sup>12</sup> He came to Petersburg under the pretense of having been a doctor and a colonel of the Spanish army.<sup>13</sup> He left Petersburg in April 1780. He was a charlatan on a European scale and duped many people also in Petersburg. In France “he is said to have summoned the shades of Socrates, Alexander, and Montaigne who sat at the table and supped with the company,” when asked, he was also able to procure “an interview with the shade of that celebrated queen,” i.e., with Cleopatra.<sup>14</sup> In 1776, he was imprisoned in London for stealing a necklace which was entrusted to him since he claimed that he could increase the size of diamonds. In 1785 he was imprisoned for his involvement in the disappearance of a diamond necklace of Marie-Antoinette.<sup>15</sup> He also claimed, for instance, that he could produce gold, which Ivan Elagin, who was in 1766-1779 a director of court theaters and orchestras, believed.<sup>16</sup> In the process, Cagliostro extorted from him several thousand rubles.<sup>17</sup> And Elagin was not alone in falling into his snares.

Catherine did not intend to mock Cagliostro alone and those duped by him. According to the servant Maria, her master knows some people, very hush hush, who are “Mif... mish... mid... myt... miar... mart... marty... I almost said *martyshki* [monkeys]” (1.250/1:1). Among these people the outlandishly named Kalifalkzherston represents Cagliostro. Catherine meant Martinists, which was a common name given in Russia to masons. This identification is not quite justified. Saint-Martin himself had no interest in masonry.<sup>18</sup> Also, his peculiar theories found no supporters among masons. The only mason who was to some extent influenced by Saint-Martin was Elagin.<sup>19</sup> Cagliostro was an outright criminal. By putting him on equal footing with masons, Catherine not-so-subtly suggested that masons are – at least could be, criminals, but certainly that they were ignoramuses if they could take seriously claims made by Cagliostro.

The subject of duping people by outlandish views continues in *The deceived*. There are obligatory marriage pursuits, which, of course, end successfully (even three of them: Taisa and Vokitov, Sofia and Gribin, and servants Praskov'ia and Tef). Radotov (*radoter* – to talk drivell) recently changed his behavior. He now uses statements like “I wrapped myself in the cloak of indifference” or “do not stir passions” (1:4). He cooks gold, diamonds, he apparently makes metals from dew, he wants to see specters, and

11. The *Deceiver* is about Cagliostro, as she wrote to Zimmerman (Екатерина II 1906: 19); in her eyes, Cagliostro was “a beast ... that does not know how to read nor how to write and who is completely ignorant,” as she wrote to Grimm (Екатерина II 1878: 362).

12. Зотов 1875: 51.

13. Зотов 1875: 64.

14. Mrs. Crowe 1847: 68.

15. Funck-Brentano 1901; Frantz Funck-Brentano 1902: 49, 51, 120; Trowbridge 1910: chs. 1, 6; Beckman 2014.

16. Пекарский 1869: 78.

17. Дризен 1893: 138.

18. Waite 1901: 67.

19. For some traces of this influence, see Пекарский 1869: 110.

he dabbles in “the old cabbalistic rubbish” by doing numerology with his new Jewish teacher (1.307/2:8, 4:5). Taisa, his daughter, apparently affected by her father, believes that a butterfly/moth is a soul that had to purify itself in the fire of a lamp (312/3:2). This was done by the influence of Protolk (*protolkat’* – to push through) and Bebin (bébé – baby; bébête – fool), whom Radotov considered to be virtuous (5:2). Protolk and others want to secretly establish schools and hospitals and thus they want to win over rich people who would fund all of it (5:1). However, Protolk and Bebin stole Radotov’s money and money entrusted to him (5:5). Radotov was deceived by their words in which they stressed the importance of virtue (5:7) and he explicitly admitted his gullibility (337/5:13). This points in the direction of masons for whom virtue was of preeminent value. They even swore to conduct virtuous living, which did not quite signify leading the life of a Stoic by being indifferent to passions, but it was about battling negative passions which could harm them and others. However, a virtuous life had also been required of everyone for a long time by “the law established here” and with suspicion should be treated someone who claims that he has “other and better virtues” (1.334/5:7). That is, any claim for a virtuous life that does not accord to the virtues prescribed by the law should be ruled out and by being suspect, this new virtue is really a vice, deceptively misnamed as virtue. There was one more reason to go against secret societies such as masons. Besides, Catherine did not find masonic claims concerning a virtuous life to be sincere. After a mocking description of the masonic process of inception by showing it through the eyes of servants, who saw blindfolded Bragin (*braga* – homebrewed beer) being accepted to the secret group, which they found childish and funny like blindman’s buff (1.321/4:2), Bragin “got drunk until he lost consciousness” (1.327/4:8), hardly a virtuous behavior. Masonic avenues leading to virtuous life are also, in Catherine’s eyes, erroneous. When Radotov says that he found happiness in “inner quietude to observe what is hidden before our eyes,” he is hinting at the principle of self-knowledge which was so very important for masons as a way to get to the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of God to be as useful to others as possible. In Catherine’s caricatural representation, this amounted to elevating one’s desires over everything else, turning one’s eyes away from this world and “turning one’s sight to oneself alone” (1.297/1:6), whereby self-examination was reduced to mere egoism and egocentrism, hardly a virtue. Catherine, the head of the Orthodox church that she was, did not notice that self-knowledge was also part of the Orthodox teaching as advocated, for example, by her own court preacher.<sup>20</sup>

It is true that some masons were interested in alchemy, but it needs to be remembered that chemistry is a descendant of alchemy. On the other hand, Russians masons had very little interest in alchemy and, at times, it was even rejected.<sup>21</sup> They were also interested in the Kabbalah as explicitly manifested in lectures given by Johann Schwarz and by notes left by Elagin. However, Protolk and Bebin are ordinary thieves who used some lofty language to get Radotov’s confidence. Their purpose was not a virtuous life, but stealing Radotov’s money. By her play, Catherine appears to have suggested that this is

20. Митрополит Платон 1765: 1.§7b, 1.§2.

21. Lopukhin 1789: sec. 3.2.

what masonry is: extorting money from dupes; their talk of virtue is just a smokescreen. But there is a way out of this predicament, and what else if not Catherine herself. In the last words of the play, Britiagin says, “By the reasoning of each age will those who follow judge it... Generally, only these centuries are ascribed praise that distinguish themselves from others by common sense, not by ravings... supervision is without a doubt in the hands of the authorities... we should thank Providence that we live in times when gentle means of correction are chosen” (1.340/5:15). If the treatment of Novikov (never mind Matseevich, Pugachev, Radishchev, and many others) was gentle it is difficult to see what would be harsh methods that Providence would send to Russia to keep those who Catherine disliked on the straight path.

*The Siberian shaman* is really a variation on the same theme as *The deceived* and, in particular, as *The deceiver*. This time, the deceiver is not domestic but exotic coming from Siberia. He has the strange name of Amban-Lai, behaves strangely, talks weirdly, pronounces apparently profound things, such as: “What occupies me? ... Silence ... to reach non-existence” (1.366/2:5). He is considered to be a healer and able to communicate with the dead, but this is all a sham: Prokofii reports that Lai “cheated a merchant’s widow out of her money and promised her that he would show her husband for real; and to that end for two days in a row he brought her some bearded men in disguise whom, being frightened, she took for her dead lover; but today this deception has been exposed” – he was arrested (1.396/5:2).

The shaman is addressed as “Amban-Lai of hundred and forty degrees” (1.360/2:2). This is because “shamans learn by degrees... this one has passed hundred and forty degrees... they have rules for each of them to gradually reach the state of bliss” (363/2:3). This is an obvious reference to masonic degrees. Different orders have different numbers of degrees, the Scottish Rite probably having the highest number of degrees, namely 33. Catherine clearly was poking fun at the concept of degrees by having her shaman reach degree 140.<sup>22</sup> By putting on equal level footing Russian masonry and Siberian shamanism Catherine apparently not only denigrated masonry by equaling it to the rites of primitive societies, which, actually, made her satire less believable,<sup>23</sup> but maybe also wanted to show where in her opinion masonry belonged: in Siberia.

Thus, masons, just like any other ignoramuses, require proper reeducation and sometimes life itself provides it: after experiencing a theft or any other swindle, it is difficult to believe in the veracity even of the most lofty statements of the perpetrators. Masons, the way Catherine viewed them and wanted the public to see them as well, are hypocrites who use their teachings to gain the trust of people and take an advantage of them at an opportune moment. Therefore, there is no reason to analyze their teachings – and Catherine did just that limiting herself to mockery<sup>24</sup> and subtle threats: straighten out or else – and the else came quite soon, as Novikov experienced.

22. “He made us [Catherine] laugh aloud” to see him reach “such a high level of intellectual beatitude,” letter to Grimm, 24 Sept. 1786 (Екатерина II 1878: 384).

23. “The identification of masons with shamanism, cannot, of course be considered successful ... whereby the gravity of her accusations was considerably weakened” (Семека 1902: 393).

24. This includes a rather sophomoric parody given in her short pamphlet, *Secret of the anti-absurd society, discovered by a nonmember* (1780) (5.345-352).

#### 4. RELIGION

There are almost no religious references in Catherine's plays. The very few references to God are only in stock phrases such as "thank God," "God knows," and the like. However, when one character said that it is better to submit oneself to God's will than to call a doctor in case of illness (*Nameday of Mrs. Vorchalkina* 1.85/3:8), the belief in God is presented as a sign of backwardness and ignorance. A mention of a church service is inconsequential, e.g., Vorchalkina said that she did not see her betrothed before church, i.e., before the wedding (*Nameday of Mrs. Vorchalkina* 1.63/3:6); religious life simply does not exist in the world depicted by Catherine's plays. Very few Biblical references are downplayed: "being and laws teach us not to do to others what we would want to be done to us" (*An unexpected adventure* 3.53/2:9); what being and what laws? When Folly says to Lustucru "I'll make you supper in the stomach of a whale" (*The Lustucru* 4.141), this sounds very much like a mockery of the Jonah story. It is interesting that in her adoption of *The merry wives of Windsor* Catherine expunged the many religious allusions and statements.<sup>25</sup> The religious side of life does not exist in Catherine's theatrical productions, which is curious considering that Russia was steeped in religion and, more curiously yet, because she was the head of the Russian Orthodox church. This title meant something to her since she twice made somewhat stern admonition to, out of all people, Voltaire as the head (*chef*) of the church.<sup>26</sup> And yet, the Orthodox church appears nowhere in the plays.

The only play in which religion becomes an important topic is *Oh times*, the first play Catherine wrote. It is modeled on Gellert's *The prayer sister* with the touch of Molière. Actually, it is not religion as such that is the subject, but its appearance. It is, of course, about getting married. Nepustov wants to convince Khanzhakhina that her granddaughter Christina should marry his friend Molokososov (*moloko* – milk, *sosat'* – to suck). Of course, he succeeds. As usual, the names give away the personalities of the characters. The main Tartuffian character of the play is Khanzhakhina (*khanzha* – hypocrite) who puts on an appearance of religiosity to use it for her sanctimonious and disdainful behavior. As characterized by overly rational servant Mavra, "He who looks for virtue in lengthy prayers and in external habits and rites will not leave my mistress without praise. She strictly observes holy days; she goes to morning mass every day; always lights a candle before holiday; doesn't eat meat at fasting time, and has on a wool dress... Don't think that it is out of stinginess... and she hates all who do not follow her rules. She cannot stand today's customs and luxuries; but she likes and praises the old days and the times when she was fifteen years old: thank God, over fifty years have passed since then" (1.8/1:1). Khanzhakhina is counterweighted by Nepustov (*ne pustoi* – not empty/vain), who said that "it is good to pray: but there are other duties in our life which we are sacredly obligated to fulfill" (1.5/1:1). Also, "as to today's luxuries, I also don't like them, and I'll strongly agree with her on it; just like her I also respect old-fashioned sincerity. Commendable, very commendable is the

25. O'Malley 2006: 135-136.

26. Letters from Sept. 11, 1773 and Jan. 7, 1774 (Екатерина II 2006: 207, 287, 292).

ancient loyalty of friendship and so is a firm keeping of a given word so that there would not be any shame in not keeping it! In this I am with her of the same opinion. Pity, truly pity that today no one is ashamed of anything and many young men when telling lies and deceiving their creditors and many young ladies acting impertinently and unseemly toward their husbands hardly ever even blush” (1.8/1:1). However, the play dwells on Khanzhakhina whose foibles are enhanced by her two unsavory friends, Vestnikova and Chudikhina (*chudnoi* – odd/funny; *chudnyi* – wonderful), one exceedingly gossipy, the other superstitious to the extreme. By openly laughing at these superstitions, Nepustov and Molokososov endanger the latter’s prospect, but bribing can go a long way: a gift of a ring to greedy Chudikhina persuades her to persuade Khanzhakhina to give the awaited permission of marriage. The play ends with Mavra’s message to the audience: “Here’s how our age is passing! We condemn everyone, we estimate everyone, we ridicule and slander everyone. But we don’t see that we ourselves deserve ridiculing and slandering. When our prejudices take in us the place of common sense, then our own vices are hidden from us and only the mistakes of another are visible: we see a speck in the eye of a neighbor, but in our own we don’t see the beam” (1.41-42/3:7). Catherine could count on the audience to see a reference here to the Sermon on the Mount. She also used another Gospel truth, “mercy and love of one’s neighbor are our duties as prescribed for us by the law” (1.11/1:2). Catherine hardly meant here the Old Testament law, although the love of neighbor is commended there (Lev. 19:18). She rather meant some generic natural law, some law of nature, the law of civilized societies that happens to be also expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, so that it would be unnecessary to refer explicitly to this sermon. The Enlightenment law would suffice, even for the head of the Orthodox church.

Catherine was very proud of her new-found call as a playwright since in *Nameday of Mrs. Vorchalkina*, Talarikin saw recently a comedy in which the author (Catherine herself, that is) wanted to show on the scene three vices through three women: one was stingy, one impulsively gossipy, and one superstitious. The audience laughed a lot. Talarikin laughed at the vices, not at people, and assumed that others did laugh for the same reason (1.62/1:7). This expresses Catherine’s comedic principle to ridicule vices, not particular personages, which she disputed at length with Novikov. Catherine herself raised a doubt through Dremov who said that if someone sees a fool on the scene, being himself a fool, he would not see in the play his mirror image but an image of someone else (63/1:7). Talarikin disagreed, but it can be claimed that Dremov is in the majority of those of whom the moral message will be lost since they will see it as applicable to others, not to themselves. Considering Catherine’s French plays, she was not quite stringent about observing her own principle being ready to ridicule particular people. Also, ridiculing hypocrisy she was guilty of this herself since she admitted that she observed Orthodox rites just for show (12.150, 419).

## 5. IMAGE OF A MONARCH

Unsurprisingly, the question of who a ruler should be was important for tsarina Catherine, and she directly addressed this issue at least in her three historical plays. In all of them, she largely followed the *Russian chronicle*.

*From the life of Ryurik* presents an elder Gostomysl' who, being troubled over disagreements between elders, wants three princes from Varangians, his grandsons, sons of his daughter, and queen Umila, the wife of king Liudbrat, to come and rule. "Disagreements, self-will, whims, and disorder" caused trouble for Gostomysl'. "Problems are overcome by reason and courage" (2.232/2:10) – "by reason and courage," a phrase that unites an Enlightenment principle with a knightly virtue.<sup>27</sup> Known problems caused by enemies are not as dangerous as the hidden ones caused by the envious (2.232/2:10). Catherine's play sends envoy Trian to Ryurik and the envoy uses the phrase directly taken from Nestor's chronicle: "Our land is great and rich there is no order in it. Come to [княжить/reign and] rule over us" (233/2:11). There is a slight modification: Catherine omits "reign and."<sup>28</sup> If nothing else, this can be a giveaway for the reason why the play was written: like Ryurik was called from a foreign country to set order in Novgorod, so Catherine was called from the West, as she phrased it, "to save the Empire from an obvious destruction".<sup>29</sup> However, she was not called to reign (*kniashit'*) as a mere *kniiaz'*, a prince (or rather *kniashna*, a princess) but as a *tsaritsa* (the feminine of *tsar* derived from *Caesar*), an empress.<sup>30</sup> However, when Catherine's Ryurik gives advice: "Who un hypocritically cares for the usefulness of his works, he gladly listens to advices. Loving the truth, I'd honor it even if it were not pleasant to me" (242/4:3) – it is not an advice which Catherine was willing herself to follow. In this, she would follow another precept found in a fragment of her play: "What is good in theater is not always good in society" (*Marton, Lise* 4.175).

The opera *The beginning of Oleg's reign*, written in 1786, right before the war with Turkey (1787-1791), can be seen as pointing to Catherine's aggressive plans to take Constantinople. Because Ryurik's son Igor was young, before his death, Ryurik appointed his relative Oleg as a regent. Oleg's reign was quite successful. He waged a war against Constantinople which ended with a peace treaty with the Byzantine emperor Leo who agreed to pay tribute to Oleg. The play ends with Leo and Oleg watching in hippodrome Euripides' *Alcestis*, after which Oleg leaves Igor's shield so that "the future generations see it here," to which Leo responds, "for all times you'll be considered wise and courageous" (304/5:4); "wise and courageous" just like "by reason and courage" points to a monarch who is enlightened and fearless – none other than Catherine herself. What Oleg accomplished, Catherine wants at least the same, if not more, namely making Constantinople part of Russia just as she had recently done with Crimea (1783). In fact,

27. Incidentally, in her historical notes Catherine saw Russians before Ryurik as characterized by "reason and courage" (8.13; 9.233, 237).

28. The same omission is in her historical notes (8.24, 9.236). The original Slavonic phrase is "да поидете княжити володѣть" от "владѣти и княжити."

29. Екатерина II 1766: 3. Also, cf. Всеволодский-Гернгросс 1977: 326.

30. It is thus correct to say that the play is "a glorification of the Russian autocracy" (Serczyk 1974: 235).

she even proposed the division of Turkey in which process the Greek empire would be restored with her grandson Constantine at its head.<sup>31</sup>

There is also another motivation that Catherine wants to enlist in her imperial ambitions – religion. At the first blush, somewhat incongruously, the character of Oskold/Askold is used in the play. Envoys from Kiev came to complain about Oskold. Catherine’s story about him is that during his visit in Constantinople, he probably accepted their “law and rites” since he does not participate in Kiev’s rites and disdains local priests (2.269/1:3). Oskold admits that he was “filled with truth” and “no power can pull out sacredness of faith from the soul from the heart and from my thinking; unperishable wreath awaits me in eternity” (275/2:7). He is arrested, but then he escapes. This simply means that Constantinople is a Christian city and as such it does not belong to the Ottoman empire, and Catherine, the head of the Orthodox church, has the right to claim the city for Russia. Interestingly, after Oskold’s escape to Ugrians, Oleg said about him, “a foreigner in an unknown nation can hardly be safe: either he won’t induce trust or respect from this nation or he himself will not have [trust] in this nation” (278/2:11). That would also be a subtle claim that Catherine, a German princess that she was, is not a foreigner and she is not in an unknown nation. Surely, constant praise heaped upon her clearly indicated to everyone that she did induce trust or respect from this nation.

The third installment of historical dramas was *Igor*, although it remained unfinished. It picks up where the *Oleg* left off with the return of Oleg from Constantinople, his death, and then the rule of Igor. At one point, Asmund, tutor of Sviatoslav, Igor’s son, gives advice to Igor: “do your work in orderly fashion and with diligence; pursue boldly and firmly his mind and wishes for common good and, if there is no contradiction between them, for personal gain; in this, be merciful, just, and gracious; you’ll see that all obstacles, outward and inner, will disappear from before you like wax from the heat of fire” (3.410-411/2:5). The advice sounded good to Catherine when given to other rulers, but she hardly followed the principle of mercy, justice, and grace to make obstacles melt like wax.

Catherine also presented an image of a monarch in her operas based on Russian folklore. In the *Fevei*, prince Fevei wants to go abroad, but royal parents want him to stay, which is made possible by the arrival of queen Danna who is ready to marry Fevei. At one scene, Fevei exercises a royal authority of forgiveness – too soon. As his royal parent admonished him, “only I can forgive or punish; [Fevei,] you are my beloved son, but I am a continuator and guardian of the tsarist rule” (2.360). Catherine’s son Pavel, whose claim to the throne was stronger than Catherine’s (his father was a tsar, Catherine was just a foreign princess), has to wait for his turn. A similar message of filial obedience in the royal family is conveyed in *Novgorod’s hero Boeslaevich*. Boeslaevich is extremely strong, but he fears only his mother Amelfa. Novgorodians want to drive him out from the city, but he was able to stand his ground and eventually people accept him as a ruler. Still, he wants his mother’s blessing before he accepts their offer. There is no room here for usurpation of power.

31. Екатерина II 1869: xviii, xx, 156, to which Joseph II assented, p. 172.

The last aspect of Catherine's theatrical production was the most important, the fact that she was an empress first and foremost. What she wanted to project in her plays and operas was an image of a monarch and, thereby, also an image of the subjects. And from that perspective her literary work is of some interest.<sup>32</sup> It was seldom praised for its literary value by those who did not depend on her. The courtiers, of course, kept on assuring her that hardly anything better had been created. She wrote that one reason for her writing was to amuse herself. And the plays which can be categorized as purely amusing are the least interesting as original creations, such as her "smiling comedies," *Courageous and brave hero Akhrideich*, or *Fable about a woeful hero Kosometovich* (this *Fable* may be considered noteworthy as Catherine's over-the-top mockery of her royal cousin Gustav III).

Catherine was a moralist, but as empress, she considered herself to be above moral rules. When Dremov says to Spesov "everyone should state their opinion; no one takes away from man this freedom. And so you have no reason to be angry with me that I do not agree with your opinion, nor I with you that you are not of the same mind with me" (*Nameday of Mrs. Vorchalkina* 1.77/2:7, 137), we know that Catherine did not apply this rule to herself: the opinion of an empress trumps any other opinion and woe to those who think otherwise. In the same play, Gerkulov beat Firlifushkov with a stick, a courtier beat a courtier, something unheard-of. As she commented in her letter in Novikov's *Zhivopisets*, critics should find in this scene "to what people expose themselves for not controlling their words and idleness" (5.314): watch your words when you speak or write about the empress – or a stick will be applied to you. When *The vestibule of a well-known boyar* concludes with the statement that only those people should be helped who deserve it (1.178), we know that Catherine does not have to abide by that rule: consider her numerous lovers who ended up with high ranks, medals, estates, and costly gifts for bedroom favors – unless the definition of deserving will be seen from a skewed monarchical perspective. Her desire was expressed by Velerech in the unfinished play *Vrun*: "My desire is that the Autocratrice be famous, the Empire strong, commanders competent, rulers honorable and educated, judges just, citizens and our nation the happiest in the world" (3.351/1:2), where emphasis is placed on the position of the autocratrice.

It is interesting that nowhere in her plays Catherine did use a theological argument to justify the monarchical authority. In the numerous odes written to Russian monarchs, including Catherine, numerous poets, even the best of them, stressed the fact that the monarchical power comes from God and is a reflection of divine power on earth. Even ecclesiastical figures used this argument, to mention only Prokopovich early on in the century or metropolitan Platon whose sermons in Catherine's court fill several volumes. Not Catherine, the head of the Orthodox church. There is only one passing remark

32. As expressed by a historian of Russian literature, Catherine's "Russian writings would not be at all noteworthy if their author had not been the Empress. Catherine's passion for writing was not accompanied by the requisite talent. There can be no two opinions about that. Not only was she not gifted, she did not even have great ability. Extensive practice enabled her, in the end, to write a tolerable playlet, no more. Her work rarely meets the standard even of the average literary output of the time" (Gukovskii 1972: 68).



in her unfinished *Igor* when the choir sings to Bulgarian princess Faida who lost her family: “Put your trust in Providence that will not leave you” (3.413/2:7). Very generic and very general since it is about having trust in the possibility of a problem being solved rather than to the princely status of Faida. This shows how important – or rather unimportant – religion was in Catherine’s life and thought.

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