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An Imperial Letter Writing Network—Catherine the Great

1. Introduction

Catherine the Great (1729-1796), the German-born empress of Russia who usurped her husband's throne in 1762 and who subsequently ruled for thirty-four years as one of the eighteenth century's renowned 'enlightened monarchs', was also one of the century's most exceptional letter-writers. The political and the epistolary were inextricably intertwined in her lifelong pursuit of the greatness that her epithet has enduringly granted her. Catherine was neither the first monarch nor the only female ruler to be well known for her letters: Catherine's correspondence with Voltaire was anticipated and surpassed in extent and intensity by Voltaire's with Frederick II of Prussia (Mervaud 1985), while, a century earlier, Queen Christina of Sweden famously corresponded with scholars and men of letters like René Descartes. But, unlike Christina or Frederick, who were often abrupt and impulsive in their interactions with others, Catherine had exceptional control of her epistolary persona, rendering her letters complex and highly literary documents through her subtle manipulations of voice and form. Politeness and charm were arts by which Catherine built her network, seeking to win over supporters and demonstrate that her supposedly backward empire was in fact a civilised nation. Few letter-writers, royal or not, have been so politically astute at each strategic juncture while nonetheless writing with an eye to posterity. Composed in French, Russian, and German, Catherine's letters are a unique record of the encounter between eighteenth-century political and epistolary cultures: an intelligent self-educated woman bred on court intrigues and Enlightenment philosophy, Catherine combined her imperial ambitions with letter-writing and networking skills closely attuned to new markets for reputation and celebrity.

2. The Problem of Corpus

Catherine the Great's epistolary output has been severely understudied and often only partially understood. Although her letters have frequently been mined for facts by historians, very little attention has been paid to her use of the epistolary form or to her overarching epistolary strategies until the past few years (Rubin-Detlev forthcoming 2019). Her

interactions with the French *philosophes* are the most studied, yet only the correspondence with Voltaire has been covered in any depth by scholars (Griffiths 1988; Wilberger 1976; Wolff 1994 and 1997; Rubin-Detlev 2011). Of her Russian correspondences, only that with her most charismatic and powerful lover, Grigory Potemkin, has been celebrated with a densely-annotated modern Russian edition, a Russian-language scholarly study of the later years of the exchange, and an English translation (Potemkin 1997; Eliseeva 1997; Potemkin 2005).

The reasons for this relative neglect can be found first of all in the difficulty of accessing the letters. Catherine's letters have never been published in a single scholarly edition. Most letters preserved in Russia have been published, but letters especially in Western collections continue to be rediscovered. Other than recent modern editions of Catherine's exchanges with Voltaire, Potemkin, the prince de Ligne, Gustav III, and Friedrich Melchior Grimm, most letters were published in a range of nineteenth-century Russian journals, such as *Russkij archiv* [*Russian Archive*, 1863-1917] and *Russkaja starina* [*Russian Antiquity*, 1870-1918]. These hundreds of small journal publications consist often of only a few letters addressed to a single correspondent, most frequently without the replies. A bibliography of all of Catherine's works published in Russia is a helpful resource (Babich, Babich, and Lapteva 2004), but accessing the letters still requires not only knowledge of Russian, but also the dedication to locate and sift through a multiplicity of sources. This dispersion can obscure the connections between letters and prevent even Catherine's most dedicated biographers from gaining a general overview of her epistolary activity.

The size of the corpus remains to be determined, due largely to the lack of a complete edition and exacerbated by the particular difficulties of identifying a 'letter' by an individual in Catherine's position. Current estimates place the number at about 8,000 surviving letters. However, the limits of the epistolary form are blurred particularly in Catherine's work as empress: some orders to subordinates, written in essentially epistolary form (with salutation and signature), bore legal weight and could even be printed in collections of laws; other types of letters, such as condolences and awards, were sometimes but far from always formulaic and composed by secretaries; and, on the other end of the spectrum, scribbled notes of a few words requesting funds or information may or may not count as letters and could swell Catherine's corpus by thousands. At the same time, Catherine's authorship of her letters has often been unjustly contested, and extravagant stories have circulated for centuries accusing her of ineptitude in all her languages. In fact, the surviving drafts, the observations of her secretaries, and the comments made in the letters themselves prove that Catherine

incontestably authored the vast majority of her letters: she personally drafted letters to everyone from Voltaire to Frederick the Great to the Russian Senate, asking for others' advice on both form and content when she considered a letter to be particularly sensitive and/or public. These consultations often turned out to be mostly an opportunity for showing off her epistolary mastery before an additional reader. Her usage in French, Russian, and German can at times be idiosyncratic, but she wrote fluently and idiomatically in all three, consciously manipulating style and register for rhetorical effect.

3. Chronology and Character of Catherine's Correspondence Networks

The years before Catherine's accession to the throne in 1762 can be considered the time of her apprenticeship. Her first known letter, a formal social missive to a family friend, dates from 1742, when Catherine was twelve (Biester 1797, 300). In 1743, the year before she travelled to Russia to marry the heir to the imperial throne, she engaged in a three-way correspondence between herself, her mother, and a Swedish diplomat, Count Adolf Henning Gyllenborg; here Catherine already displayed her vivacity and intellect, alluding to Voltaire and lightly touching on women's freedom or lack thereof (Amburger 1933). Once married, she was initially forbidden by the reigning Empress Elizabeth to write letters or even to have pens and paper in her possession, due to fears that she would maintain illicit ties with Prussia. As she recounts in her memoirs, she nonetheless soon found means of corresponding secretly with her mother, in the first instance by tearing pages out of a book to write two messages carried by a diplomat and knight of Malta, Michele Enrico Sagramoso (Pypin 1907, volume 12, 124-126, 257-258). As her relationship with her husband rapidly grew strained, she began to spend her time reading widely, learning to navigate court intrigue, and discovering the power and possibilities of the epistolary form. She experimented with the love letter in a self-consciously artificial epistolary flirtation with a courtier, Count Zakhar Černyšev (Černyšev 1881). Her most important surviving correspondence of this time is with the English ambassador Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams: exchanged almost daily in 1756-1757, their letters show Catherine acquiring the courtly and diplomatic arts of dissimulation and double-edged speech, but also beginning to entertain the possibility of supplanting her husband as Russia's next ruler (Hanbury-Williams 1909).

After usurping the Russian throne in June 1762, Catherine immediately struck up correspondences that could assist with her ambition not just to keep her throne, but also to render her reign glorious and historically significant. Using the letter to project images of

herself and her nation that could contribute to the practical needs of rule, Catherine networked skilfully, allowing her epistolary ties to evolve with the circumstances. Her reign can be subdivided temporally according to her changing networks and priorities; her many types of correspondence include inter-monarchical, international cultural, Russian governmental, and intimate exchanges.

In the 1760s and 1770s, Catherine sought to tap into extant international networks while, at home, her exchanges with advisors were important sources of information and support. Inter-monarchical correspondences in the eighteenth century were integral to official partnerships: allied rulers exchanged autograph letters as a matter of etiquette and a channel for high-level negotiations. In 1764, Russia formed an alliance with Prussia, but the two nations were often at diplomatic cross-purposes and their relations somewhat tense: Catherine's correspondence with Frederick the Great is characterised by exorbitant flattery from the king, reflecting his deep-seated conviction that vanity was Catherine's prime motive, and by somewhat dismissive and yet expressive responses from Catherine. Answering a request for a treaty with a shipment of fruit, or employing a theatrical metaphor to refuse to halt her conquests against the Ottomans, Catherine pointedly saw through Frederick's purportedly admiring flourishes (Sbornik 1867, volume 20). In these years she put still greater epistolary effort into another kind of international networking: winning over the French intellectuals and socialites who could influence both European public opinion and government ministers who circulated in the salons of Paris. Corresponding with D'Alembert, Voltaire, the salon hostess Marie-Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin, briefly with Marmontel, and then with Diderot (her letters to him sadly do not survive), Catherine advertised herself as an advocate of religious toleration, an active and generous patron, and a legislator eager to draw on the latest political theory (D'Alembert 1887; Voltaire 1968, volumes 26-45; Sbornik 1867, volume 1; Marmontel 1974, volume 1, 169, 227-228; Diderot 1955, volumes 13-15). Within Russia, meanwhile, Catherine acted with her typical pragmatism, displaying her policy of resourcefully using the individuals and materials at hand: she joked in folksy language with the somewhat unsophisticated governor of Moscow, Petr Saltykov; she consulted with her most powerful minister, Nikita Panin, on everything from foreign correspondence and suppressing assassination plots to her son's education and her court festivities; and she exchanged hundreds of letters with Jakov Sievers, the governor of Novgorod, Tver', and Pskov, to draw on his expertise as she devised major legislation overhauling provincial government structures in 1775 (Saltykov 1886; Panin 1863; Blum 1857). In the intimate domain, her most famous amorous correspondence, that with Grigory Potemkin, began at the end of 1773,

when she sent him a letter summoning him back from fighting against the Ottoman Empire. Her love notes can be coy, exigent, and humorous, and they abound in affectionate nicknames from “My Cossack” to “My Golden Pheasant” (Potemkin 1997). Potemkin rapidly became her single most important advisor in matters private and public, a role mediated, like their affair, by notes carried from room to room, when they were together in the palace, or by longer letters dispatched across vast stretches of territory, when he was acting as her deputy and general far from St Petersburg.

The start of the 1780s marked a major turning point in Catherine’s international networking and epistolary habits. In 1781, she formed a secret alliance with Joseph II of the Austrian Empire, completely overturning the Russian diplomatic system. On Catherine’s initiative, the alliance was ratified by an exchange of personal letters between the two monarchs: ticklish points of rank and etiquette made a normal treaty impossible, but employing the letter form allowed the empress and the emperor to interact with seeming equality (Joseph 1869; Madariaga 1959, 124). At the same moment, she similarly transformed her international cultural networks, since the network of the French *philosophes* that she had joined in the 1760s no longer existed after the death of Voltaire in 1778. To a certain extent, the letter would seem to have been less fundamental to her presence on the European cultural scene following her discovery of German literature: unlike the Parisians, the Berlin Enlightenment could not be charmed through displays of Francophone epistolary finesse, so Catherine instead had her plays, pamphlets, and history of Russia published by the prominent bookseller Friedrich Nicolai. Yet in reality Catherine’s epistolary activity simply changed shape: rather than participate in other people’s networks, she created her own, centred on her court at St Petersburg. Carried on as before in French, but with the occasional passage in German, her new correspondences reproduced some of the functions of her old exchanges but also met new needs. Her communications with the Swiss-German doctor Johann Georg Zimmermann fulfilled a similar role to those with Voltaire: she used Zimmermann to plant favourable news stories and reviews of her work in German newspapers, but also to recruit doctors for Russian service (Zimmermann 1906; Röhling 1978). The salon-style displays of wit that filled the letters to Geoffrin were reinvented in Catherine’s correspondence with Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne, a Belgian aristocrat in Austrian employ who moved in elite circles across Europe (Ligne 2013). Meanwhile, Catherine’s letters to a German expatriate living in Paris, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, reflected a change in her approach to the epistolary form: whereas her other letters to cultural figures were frequently intended to be read aloud to others but not published, this exchange

rapidly became private, with only select passages intended for limited sharing. Sending long diary-like letters every three months, Catherine made Grimm her primary cultural agent in Europe while at the same time revealing with great literary flair her views on political and cultural events (Sbornik 1867, volume 23; Grimm 2016). Within Russia, a series of ever-younger lovers received affectionate love-notes, while the correspondence with Potemkin transmuted into her most important internal political exchange. By letter, Catherine and Potemkin discussed plans for annexing Crimea and developing the newly-acquired southern provinces of the empire. When Catherine famously toured those regions in 1787, she sent epistolary reports back to the governor of Moscow, Petr Eropkin, so that they would be read to other officials, furnishing them with the desired official account of the journey (Eropkin 1808).

The final years of Catherine's life, from the late 1780s until her death in 1796, are normally portrayed in the historiography as a period of reaction and decline, in which she is thought to have lost control of affairs and sunken under the pernicious influence of her last favourite, Platon Zubov. Her epistolary output from these years, although less abundant than before, shows on the contrary that she was still very active and intent on using her letters to achieve her aims. Wars against Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, as well as armed campaigns to achieve dominance in Poland, kept Catherine's troops busy, but she herself wrote letters in hopes of organising armed action against another menace, the French Revolution. The most interesting of her royal correspondences in the first years of the Revolution is that with her cousin, Gustav III of Sweden. Since the late 1770s the two had maintained a seemingly intimate "clandestine" correspondence, but Catherine's jokes and politeness served mainly to repulse her younger relative's attempts to discuss more serious political plans. Finally, when their correspondence resumed after an interruption caused by the Russo-Swedish War of 1788-1790, Catherine allowed politics to come to the fore; seeing an opportunity to profit from Gustav's rather rash, ambitious character, she encouraged his plans to lead an expedition against Revolutionary France (Gustav 1998). Simultaneously, she wrote to the French émigré princes, the Prussians, and the Austrians to push them to attack (d'Artois 1893; Leopold 1874). Within Russia, meanwhile, the exhortatory function of her letters targeted her own generals: she still displayed in the 1790s her life-long ability to convince faltering military leaders of her confidence in them, inspiring them to fight their way back to victory against the Swedes and the Ottomans. Her cultural correspondences were reduced to her exchanges with de Ligne and Grimm, as chaos in Europe generated suspicion on all sides and deprived her of her former opportunities for patronage and intellectual

exchange. In the intimate domain, the death of Potemkin in 1791 was a heavy blow, depriving her of the long-standing epistolary and personal support he had provided. Despite all these setbacks, her tone in her letters remained defiant to the end: she was finally preparing, just before her death, to send her own troops to undertake the major military campaign she considered necessary to restore order in Europe and to establish once more her status as one of history's great rulers.

4. Letter Culture and Use of the Epistolary Form

When Catherine came to the throne in 1762, there was essentially no letter culture in Russia. Although an epistolary manual was one of the first two books published in 1708 in the new secular script promulgated by the reforming tsar Peter the Great, it took more than half a century before Russian authors began to cultivate the familiar letter as part of their literary practice. Letters were generally dry official documents, used for conducting business or conveying information without specific attention to epistolary form. Catherine's reign, however, saw the first new epistolary manuals published in Russia since Peter the Great, and Catherine herself, in 1808, was the first Russian (albeit of German descent) to have her genuine letters included in a Russian epistolary manual.

It is clear, therefore, that Catherine was not participating in a specifically Russian epistolary culture, but rather that she was adopting and making her own a pan-European culture in which she had trained since her youth. She was, like her European counterparts, immersed in examples of epistolary writing. In her youth, for instance, Catherine read Mme de Sévigné and copied out letters from the correspondence of Sévigné's cousin, Bussy-Rabutin; she was aware of the letters of Cicero and especially familiar with those of Voltaire, both as his direct correspondent and as a third-party reader when his letters circulated in Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*.

The most distinctive and captivating feature of Catherine's epistolary practice is her creation of a personal voice, very much in tune with the tastes of her century and yet uniquely and forcefully her own. Throughout her reign, the letter was a sphere in which she sought to charm her addressees and win their support: addressing Voltaire, a local governor in Russia, or a fellow monarch, her typical strategy was to give them a sense of apparent intimacy with power and of shared cultural values as cultured Europeans. Drawing on the stylistic resources of the gallant letter developed in seventeenth-century France, she presented herself as jovial and engaging, enjoyed a motley style scattered with proverbs and anecdotes, but always kept

her emotions firmly in check. She entertained her readers by littering her letters with subtle references not only to the erudite sources that, if used to excess, would have characterised her as a pedant, but also to the popular literature of her day, from Voltaire to comic opera. Yet her letters were not only meant to enchant: she formed epistolary ties precisely in order to assert herself when necessary, and outwardly polite but cutting comments could make crystal-clear the demands she placed on her correspondents. Equally, Catherine used the letter to paint a regal, powerful image of herself as a monarch worthy of posterity's admiration, a reformer, conqueror, and patron of the arts. While her approach to the letter was broadly consistent across her varied exchanges, she also masterfully tailored her tone and content to suit her addressees, devising a particular jargon and set of common references for each that only they could share.

It is this personable and personalised tone that distinguishes Catherine's letters from her writings in other genres and that renders them her literary masterpieces. Although Catherine composed multiple versions of her fascinating memoirs, some two dozen plays, polemical pamphlets, a history of Russia, fairy tales for children, and a substantial work of political theory, in these works, often published semi-anonymously, Catherine could not display her uniquely charismatic mix of power, cultivated politeness, and good cheer, which allowed her to triumph in court conversation and in letters. In 1769, with her journal *All Sorts* she sparked a new fashion in Russia for satirical journalism on the model of the English *Spectator*. Here and in her later writings for the journal of the Russian Academy, the *Interlocutor of Lovers of the Russian Word* (1783), Catherine employed the epistolary form, writing in a number of fictional personae as 'readers' and 'contributors' to the journals (Pypin 1907, volume 5, 279-329). These Russian-language letters contain some of Catherine's typical epistolary traits, such as a taste for antiphrasis and humour, but lack the complexity of her real letters, in which she often interwove multiple personae and multiple aims in dense rhetorical constructions. Only her memoirs compare with her letters precisely because they share the stylistic characteristics and authorial persona of her letters, with different versions addressed to different members of her court.

An important aspect of Catherine's epistolary success, therefore, was her accurate sense of audience: she wrote her letters not for the broad public readership of print, but for the narrow public of Europe's intellectual, political, and social elites. She began all her lasting correspondences with an explicit ban on printing her letters during her lifetime, but she permitted and expected individuals like Geoffrin, Voltaire, Grimm, Zimmermann, and the prince de Ligne to read aloud and very occasionally to share copies of passages from her

letters. Her charming yet regal style was designed to flatter and enthral these privileged readers by giving them an even greater sense of distinction and offering a tantalising glimpse into the halls of imperial power. Catherine was, however, far from oblivious to the new possibilities of celebrity in an ever more mediatised age: she expected many of her distinguished addressees to make public statements in her favour, and she intended a very select set of her own letters to be made public. Her epistolary praise of Jean-François Marmontel's banned philosophical novel, *Bélisaire*, and her letter to the entire French nobility exiled to Germany in October 1791, were public gestures of support for persecuted individuals and were designed to humiliate the French regime.

5. Future research

Catherine was an empress who networked by letter, who employed both the charming style of the *ancien régime* aristocrat and the modern market for celebrity in order to direct international politics and to generate a grand historical image of herself. As such, she was a unique participant in and representative of the letter culture of eighteenth-century Europe. Scholarship therefore requires not only a complete critical edition of Catherine's letters, but also the tools to analyse them within the broader networks and epistolary practices of the Enlightenment. In the future, digital technology will make possible new advances in our understanding of her remarkable corpus; to this end, a project is currently underway at the University of Oxford to catalogue all of Catherine's known letters and put all currently published letters into a single searchable database (Rubin-Detlev and Kahn forthcoming 2019). With such resources, old myths that have previously vilified her or belittled her intellectual capacities will finally be dispelled, and her language use, her engagement with a whole range of intellectual sources, and her active interventions in every domain of governance and culture will be analysable with far greater subtlety than ever before. At the same time, it is important to bring Catherine the letter-writer to the attention of the general reader by means of translation and public engagement (Kahn and Rubin-Detlev 2018). An object of fascination since her accession to the throne, Catherine is celebrated regularly in print biographies and on screen, where she has been played by the likes of Catherine Zeta-Jones and Helen Mirren. Whereas the focus in these portrayals is often on her sex life, her letters refocus attention on her mind, on her skill as a ruler and writer, and on the remarkable and ever-evolving imperial letter-writing network she built in the course of her thirty-four-year reign.