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CREATING THE EMPRESS: POLITICS AND POETRY IN THE AGE OF CATHERINE II ,
By Ayse Dietrich*, Published by: Academic Studies Press, Boston. Written by Vera Proshkurina.
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The book contains an Introduction, eight chapters, bibliography and index. In the Introduction the author describes her intention to discuss the relationship between political and literary symbolism in the creation of the imperial image of Catherine II, and investigates the interactions of politics, poetry, royal ceremonies, and the arts. The book introduces all the cultural aspects of Catherine's persona, symbolic representation of her ascent to throne, her politics and her legitimacy in the literary works of Karamzin, Sumarokov, Derzhavin, Maikov, Lomonosov, Petrov and Krylov.

Chapter one, "Coup D'état as Cross Dressing" introduces eighteenth century Russia which, despite the fact that the Russian Church denied women the right to be anointed sovereign and equated the tsar with Christ (considering him to be an incarnation of divine rule), was mostly ruled by female monarchs. The Orthodox Church assigned women the task of producing a male heir and considered them to be dependent, subordinate creatures.

Therefore, for female monarchs to gain acceptance they had to exhibit masculine behavior. Catherine, in her *Memoirs*, began establishing and projecting an image of herself as Emperor, emphasizing her masculine traits by dressing as a man when riding horses and even wearing the uniforms of one of the Guards regiments.

Catherine was depicted by both Russian and European poets in odes which highlighted the masculine spirit of her rule and endowed her with characteristics of the first Roman emperor Augustus. She was also compared to the legendary Carthaginian queen Dido, for being both a foreign, female monarch, and for strengthening her country by expansionism and the enlightenment of the people.

The chapter also describes how she wearied of the political connotations of cross-dressing and eventually returned to her early customs, such as bringing back masquerade performances in the last years of her reign.

In chapter two, “Astraea’s coming to the Russian Throne”, like Baehr^[1], Proskurina associates Catherine’s persona with ancient Greek goddess-queen Astraea, and the use image of the Astraea image was an indication of Russia’s adaptation to European imperial traditions in an effort to place Russian monarchs among the distinguished heirs of the Roman emperors.

The chapter also discusses Catherine’s relationship with the Masons. Catherine initially tolerated Russian freemasonry since the Masons revered Astraea as a mystic protector. Later, when her political persecutions and imprisonments began when she considered them a threat due to both their growing spiritual and economic influence, and her son Pavel Petrovich’s becoming a Mason himself.

In chapter three, “Catherine the Healer”, Proskurina discusses the image of Catherine presenting herself as the savior of the nation during an epidemic, like the European monarchs who were believed to have magical and healing qualities. The author shows how she tried to stop the spread of disease, what measures she took to protect her subjects; and presents her as more civilized and gentle in dealing with the resolution of the crises than Peter I.

The next chapter, chapter four, “Toppling the Bronze Horseman”, talks about the specifics of the foundation myth of Saint Petersburg, established by Peter I, a city which came to symbolize secularism and westernization. During the first years of Catherine II’s reign, despite her stated loyalty to Peter’s legacy, the myth of St. Petersburg became subtle. It was said that under Catherine’s rule, Russia and the city gained a soul, while under Peter the city only obtained its physical existence. As a result, sculptors began to depict Catherine as Pygmalion. In a variant of this comparison, Peter I was seen as the sculptor of a rough, unshaped Russia like Prometheus, the creator of mankind, but it was Catherine who animated Russia like Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, art and magic.

Chapter five, “The War in Greek Garb” describes how war was regarded as a necessary condition for the empire’s existence. The chapter continues with the descriptions of the Russian victories over the Ottomans which became the topic of Mikhail Lomonosov’s military odes. In his odes dedicated to Catherine’s wars and her victories Voltaire created an entire mythology of war. Voltaire enthusiastically supported Catherine’s imperial strategy, viewed her as a messianic figure, comparing her to the ancient goddess Pallas whose spear and shield protected Europe from its eternal enemy. During the war Catherine corresponded with Voltaire and exchanged ideas about her political strategies. However, Voltaire’s odes on Catherine’s wars are somewhat ironic; he compares them to a crusade, yet rejects the notion that her wars had any religious basis, and then goes on to describe her as an open-minded intellectual with an atheistic character. He never describes this war as a holy war of Christians against Muslims, a common theme in Russian military odes. His odes to Catherine present her imperial wars as the liberation of oppressed nations and the restoration law, science and the arts brought about by the enlightened ruler. In addition, the chapter includes military odes by Vasilii Petrov and Mikhail Kheraskov which depict the war with the Ottomans as a historical clash between Christians and Muslims; and Alexander Sumarokov’s odes which depicted the war with the Ottomans against an apocalyptic background. Finally, the chapter examines Pavel Patemkin’s poem which implies that the Russian military campaign was a sacred war, as well as and the emergence of

Greek paradigms in Russian political and poetic discourse; and distinctive characteristics of his literary genres and aesthetic views.

In chapter six, the author discusses the new cultural strategy, and symbolism of power that was developed during the Catherine's reign to consolidate the nation and its gentry who enjoyed tranquility and freedom from the tsar's abusive power, and to soften the image of the sovereign who had mercilessly repressed the Pugachev rebellion. Events and festivities at the Russian court were all designed to celebrate the victory over the Ottomans and the peaceful annexation of the Crimea. The new era was seen as a renaissance of science, art and literature, contemporary poems contained motifs of happiness, celebration and excitement. The author particularly focuses on the Derzhavin's odes. Derzhavin wrote a series of odes devoted to Catherine, disguised in these works as Felitsa. The odes contain references to Catherine's works, her personal life and events, and she is depicted as being in a civilized, happy and unified society. Catherine was quite pleased to identify herself with Derzhavin's playful ode Felitsa, with its image of a kind, witty, and liberal-minded empress who allows her subjects to disapprove of her. Catherine's tolerant attitude toward laughter presented here reflected one of the main characteristics of a person of the Enlightenment. At the end of her chapter, the author describes the amusing style (*zabavnyj slog*) of Derzhavin as being a stylistic revolution in Russian literary history which depicted both Catherine's new image, as well as provided her a new mirror where she saw her true image in its reflection.

Chapter seven is devoted to the ode *To Fortune* where Derzhavin ridicules recent European political events and diplomatic affairs and depicts modern times as a mad carnival. In his view of Europe just prior to the French Revolution, absurdity reigns, and kings are engaged in inappropriate dealings. Catherine, on the other hand, is occupied with noble and enlightened activities, and is the only one capable of restoring rationality and justice. Derzhavin also complains in this ode about injustice, the unjust accusations levelled at him, and his loss of social status. He claims that he followed the rules of his and her (Felitsa's) mutual game, but, as a result, he was fired from his post and taken to court, a clear indication of their backwardness and lack of taste. The poet jokingly asks his former protector, the empress to grant him a new portion of happiness, judge him on the basis of the new and mutually accepted esthetics, and to dismiss all the accusations against him, and restore his social status. According to Yakov Grot, like Felitsa, Fortune also represents Catherine. The ode remained unpublished during Catherine's lifetime, and was only published after her death.

The final chapter, chapter eight, is devoted to literary magazines and the journalistic activities under pressure "from above", Ivan Krylov's journalistic experience and his relationship with the authorities. His first journal radically criticized the situation in the late period of Catherine regime. As a result, he was forced by the government to reduce the level of criticism, and after several months, the magazine was pressured to stop publication and Krylov resigned from all journalistic activity. The satirical atmosphere inspired by the French Revolution began to be restricted through censorship which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of magazine writers and editors. The same chapter also discusses the fabulist Krylov who was inspired by the models of French libertinage, the Russian La Fontaine whose fables and poems clearly show the "naughty, cheeky, bawdy" character of late eighteenth century French libertinism. Among the most characteristic features of a typical French libertine of this century were freethinking, an anti-clerical outlook and a Bohemian behavior. His writings display an atheistic outlook, a tendency to oppose any compliance with the authorities and freethinking. However, they did not agitate for any kind of revolt against the monarchy.

Krylov's stylistic and linguistic game was based on erotic argot and the jargon of French libertines. His strategy was to avoid direct political accusations, focus on personal features and not ridicule the blunders of high politics. As a result, his literary libertinage did not threaten Catherine's absolute power, so she did not rush to act against the writer, since both young Krylov and the empress knew the language of this game and both were raised on the same literary tradition.

In summary, *CREATING THE EMPRESS: Politics and Poetry in the Age of Catherine II* provides a complete picture of the imperial image of Catherine II, all cultural aspects of her persona, symbolic representation of her ascent to throne, her politics and her legitimacy in the literary works of Karamzin, Sumarokov, Derzhavin, Maikov, Lomonosov, Petrov and Krylov. It is a well-written source to study the era of Catherine II and her politics as they were reflected in contemporary literature, and provides an excellent starting point for comparing how later Russian rulers and their actions were depicted in literature. In particular, this book would be a valuable source for researchers and students of Russian literature and history.

^[1]Baehr, S.L., *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*, Stanford University, Stanford, California, 1991, pp.39.

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