

THE (DIS)EMPOWERED PEOPLE: KINGSHIP, REVOLT AND THE ORIGINS OF RUSSIAN TRAGIC DRAMA¹

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Tragedy as a literary genre and theatrical form was introduced to Russia around 1750 by Aleksandr Sumarokov (1717–1777), a dramatist and stage director active at the courts of Empresses Elizabeth (r. 1741–1761) and Catherine II (r. 1762–1796). In Petersburg, as in other European capitals, theatrical performances were a central element of what Grigorii Gukovskii called the “spectacle of the imperial court” [Гуковский 1936: 12–13]. Richard Wortman elaborates on this concept in his by now standard work, “Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy”. While theater always provided a convenient metaphor for all kinds of political representation, actual theatrical practices were in fact commonly appropriated by early modern courts. By the eighteenth century, court theaters were firmly established across Europe as one of the crucial institutions of absolutist “culture of power” and shared a relatively uniform language of political representation, disseminated by travelling companies and individual professionals, as well as through print media. Since the late 1730s, and especially after the ascension of Elizabeth in 1742, Western-type court theater gradually set foot in Russia, as foreign (French, Italian, and German) companies were hired or invited to perform at court².

Sumarokov’s dramas emerged from the pan-European idiom of court theater and drew upon the political theatrics of the court, ultimately functioning as a political medium. In one of the best accounts of the political underpinnings of Russian classicist tragedy, Vsevolod Vsevolodskii-Gerngross draws attention to the fact that throughout the eighteenth century, tragedy was both poorly

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² On the early history of Russian court theater, see [Всеволодский-Гернгросс 2003; Волков 1953; Старикова 2003–2011; Корндорф 2011].

performed and poorly received outside the capitals, where it was “cultivated by the Russian aristocracy”, a limited social group centered around the court and more adequately identifiable as the “court society”, or the political class of state servitors. With the tastes and interests of this group in mind, dramatic writers starting with Sumarokov developed an idiom of political allegory and allusion, which simultaneously expressed and masked the concerns of court society and the tensions permeating its social existence. Specific political allusions, which we might or might not discern in individual dramatic texts, are thus only symptomatic of more fundamental structures of political thinking that were both revealed and shaped by tragedy — a genre adopted in Russia precisely because, as Vsevolodskii-Gerngross argues, it was specifically tailored to negotiate “the problematic relationship between the aristocracy and the monarchy”³ [Всеволодский-Гернгросс 2003: 107–109]. Building on this argument and reenhancing it with a comparative perspective on early modern drama and its political resonances, this paper will explore the fundamental affinity between the poetics of neoclassical tragedy, both in theory and practice, and the discursive mechanics of power in autocratic Russia.

Drama and the Poetics of Autocracy

Laying the ground for his analysis of Russian political symbolism, Wortman asks why Russia’s rulers, “who disposed of a formidable administration and army”, would require “demonstrative displays”, and argues that such presentations, “by ‘acting on the imagination’, tied servitors to the throne as much as the prerequisites and emoluments they received from state service. To understand the persistence of absolute monarchy in Russia and the abiding loyalty of the nobility, we must examine the ways that <...> feelings were evoked and sustained” [Wortman 1995: 3–4].

Poetics of theater, considered since the times of Aristotle to be a perfect medium for the manipulation of collective emotion, provided a paradigm for absolutist exercise of power, and students of European cultural history (and tragedy in particular) have amply explored this parallel [Apostolidès 1985; Greenblatt 1988: 62–65; Wikander 1993]. Indeed, Aristotelian concepts which shaped tragedy as a genre — pity and fear, guilt, justice and punishment —

³ For a valuable discussion of the political and historical underpinnings of Sumarokov’s tragedies see also [Касаткина 1955: 213–261]. On the “political dialogue” between eighteenth-century Russian rulers and the elites, reflected in the literary production of the time, including plays, see [Whittaker 2003].

were easily realigned to reflect the collective experience of absolutist polities. Accordingly, as Stephen Orgel concludes in his pioneering account of early modern court theatrics, “Dramas at court were not entertainments in the simple and dismissive sense we usually apply to the word. They were expressions of the age’s most profound assumptions about the monarchy” [Orgel 1975: 8; Marin 2005: 264–266]. This was certainly true of Sumarokov’s tragedies which are all set in royal residences (*v kniazheskom dome, v tsarskom dome*) populated by “tsars, princes and magnates” [Гуковский 1998: 135]. Abbé d’Aubignac’s *La pratique du théâtre* (1657), one of the most influential European neoclassical theatrical treatises conceived under the auspices of France’s famous first minister Cardinal Richelieu, expressly inscribed drama, and tragedy in particular, into a vision of state-sanctioned public spectacle. Aubignac suggested that the success of a play depended on its conformity to the collective sensibilities of the public understood as an audience of subjects representative of the political nation and reinforced by their theatrical experience in an emotionally charged loyalty to the crown:

Thus the Athenians delighted to see upon their Theatre the Cruelties of Kings <...> because the State in which they liv’d being Popular, they lov’d to be perswaded that Monarchy was always Tyrannical <...> Whereas quite contrary among us, the respect and love which we have for our Princes, cannot endure that we should entertain the Public with such Spectacles of horror; we are not willing to believe that Kings are wicked, nor that their Subjects, though with same appearance of ill usage, ought to Rebel against their Power: or touch their Persons, no not in Effigie; and I do not believe that upon our Stage a Poet could cause a Tyrant to be murder’d with any applause, except he had very cautiously laid the thing: As for Example, that the Tyrant were and Usurper, and the right Heir should appear, and be own’d by the People, who should take that occasion to revenge the injuries that had suffered from a Tyrant⁴ [D’Aubignac 1968: 70].

Despite his absolutist stance and the apparently non-political focus of his work, Aubignac does not shy away from addressing the most prominent threats to the monarchical order, imbedded in its own structure, — tyranny and revolt. Expressing faith in the stability of the French monarchy, he nevertheless links the “respect and love” inspired by sovereigns to a precarious dynamic of illusion: modern subjects are expected to willingly ignore the flaws of kings and evidence of their abusive power, while the tempting notions of popular preroga-

⁴ For the original see the recent critical edition: [D’Aubignac 2001: 119–120]. On d’Aubignac see an insightful study of the political agendas behind the shaping of neoclassical theatrical practices [Blocker 2009].

tive, disputed but backed by the influential example of ancient republicanism, still loom in accepted discourse. Similar issues are raised in Louis Riccoboni's *Dissertation sur la Tragedie Moderne* (1730):

Among the Greeks, the People having a great Share in the Government, nothing interested them so much as the Revolutions of Kingdoms: They were pleased to see the Passions drawn in such a manner as to occasion them, and to hear the Theatre adopt political Maxims. <...> The French, contented with their happy Government, through a long Succession of Years under the wise Direction of their Princes, are less touched with Pictures resembling the Intrigues of Ambition: They with Joy behold Love and Jealousy keep Possession of their Stage <...> Why may they not make their Princes represent Dramatic Heroes, as the English have done? [Riccoboni 1741: 329–330]; cf. [Riccoboni 1730: 1, 314–315].

If the predilection of French audiences for amorous themes was a reliable sign of the voluntary withdrawal of the people from the political sphere and their concession of power to the monarchy, then absolutist order had to be fragile: the public interest in the ruin of the powerful and “intrigues of ambition” might have been weakened but certainly was not extinguished, as canonical seventeenth-century plays such as Corneille's *Nicomède* (1650) and Racine's *Britannicus* (1669), among others, attest. Riccoboni's own sympathy for English-type political drama emphasizes the relevance of tragedy as a medium where royal power is (re-)negotiated, and the community of subjects, consigned to passivity by absolutist political theory, reclaim their indubitable and threatening power over their rulers. In her important study, Hélène Merlin-Kajman draws attention to an episode in *Nicomède*, where a popular revolt against an unworthy king is triggered by a perceived threat to Nicomède, the esteemed and valorous heir apparent. The rebels kill two henchmen involved in an intrigue against the prince, and continue to rage [V, 4]:

Le peuple par leur mort pourrait s'être adouci;
 Mais un dessein formé ne tombe pas ainsi:
 Il suit toujours son but jusqu'à ce qu'il l'emporte;
 Le premier sang versé rend sa fureur plus forte;
 Il l'amorce, il l'acharne, il en éteint l'horreur,
 Et ne lui laisse plus ni pitié ni terreur.

The peoples rage no further might pretend
 But form'd designs have seldom such an end,
 They press as what they have contriv'd before
 The first bloodshed opens the way to more.
 Fleshes, and hardens, does all horror chase
 And unto fear or pitty leaves no place.

Nicomède's appearance appeases the mutinous subjects, and he restores their obedience to the lawful king his father [V, 9]:

Tout est calme, seigneur: un moment de ma vue
 A soudain apaisé la populace émue.
 All's quiet sir, my sight did soon asswage
 The peoples fury and has balmed their rage.

[Corneille 1963: 538–540; Corneille 1671: 48, 54]

As Merlin-Kajman notes, during the revolt the populace is freed from the constraints of pity and fear, the two emotions that according to Aristotle had to be inspired and manipulated by a tragedy in order to achieve catharsis, a “purgation” or “purification of passions” (66–67). In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Aristotle's enigmatic doctrine and its diverging interpretations famously provided the groundwork for dramatic theory, including Corneille's own *Trois Discours sur la poésie dramatique* (*Three Discourses on Dramatic Poetry*, 1660). In *Nicomède*, the emotional mechanics of tragedy summarized in the notion of *catharsis* are identified with the workings of royal authority which brings about the restitution of the disciplining affects of pity and fear among rebellious subjects, and is itself construed as a fundamentally theatrical phenomenon. At the same time the theatrical paradigm secured a privileged role for the political nation, the audience of the spectacle of monarchy and the ultimate judge of its success, on and off stage.

The discourse on theater developed on the crossroads of Aristotelian theory and theatrical practice by Aubignac, Corneille, Riccoboni and the likes, saw the collective attitudes of the public as the most important measure of dramatic writing. At the same time it suggested that monarchy depended on a voluntary concession of power by the subjects in an act of semi-aesthetic illusion, “suspension of disbelief”. In *Nicomède* the rebellious “people” is invested with the power to judge the prince's performance, while their uprising cannot be dismissed as illegitimate, as it is aroused by real crimes and fuelled by loyalty to a future king; in fact, the rebels save the day and secure the tragedy's happy ending. Their instantaneous submission to Nicomède, a reinstatement of monarchical order, is driven by *admiration*, — an emotion introduced by Corneille as a core element of his poetics in the *Examen de Nicomède*, and calculated to unite the theatrical audience of the play with the politically self-conscious subjects on stage. Tragedy could function as a ritualized reenactment of the original compact between monarchy and its subjects, and it is this role that it came to play in 18th-century Russia.

While no systematic treatises on drama were translated or composed in Russia at that time, an interesting case of an explicitly political reading of literary and dramatic poetics is found in John Barclay's neo-Latin novel *Argenis*, published in 1751 on royal orders in Trediakovskii's Russian translation as *Argenida*. At one point the author explains through his alter ego, the courtly writer Nicopompus, the idea of his novel, conceived as a royalist remedy against the disasters of political chaos. A crisis of monarchy, with "the people disobedient to the prince, to both their ruins", can be resolved with the help of fictional representation and its manipulative effects. To this end, Nicopompus designs "a stately fable, in manner of a history" which will attract the curiosity of the politically active public who will be conducted to acknowledge their errors at the same time as they "love my book above any stage-play or spectacle on the theatre".

Although Barclay seems to dismiss theater as a diversion lacking the political gravity appropriate for his novel, it in fact serves as a model for his vision of political didactics which heavily relies on classical discussions of theatrical poetics. It was drama that Horace referred to in his famous precept that Barclay elaborates upon: "Who can blend usefulness and sweetness wins every / Vote, at once delighting and teaching the reader" (Trediakovskii quoted those verses in the preface to his translation). He further bases his techniques of enticement on a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* emphasizing the link between the tragic emotions of pity and fear, and poetic justice: "I will stir up pity, fear, and horror <...> I will figure vices and virtues, and each of them shall have his reward". Finally, Barclay resorts to a theatrical simile in order to express his idea of an edifying effect:

<...> they shall meet with themselves and find in the glass held before them, the show and merit of their own fame. It will perchance make them ashamed longer to play those parts upon the stage of this life, for which they must confess themselves justly taxed in a fable.

The conventional concept of "the stage of this life", which makes drama the perfect mirror of political existence, serves in Barclay's rendering to align its chaotic developments with a certain vision of state order. Identifying "Rebellion" with "irreligion", he overtly links divine justice — both in fiction and outside it — to the royalist cause, doomed to triumph over aristocratic faction. Consequently, the didactic encouragement of "virtues" aims for the reinstatement of the traditional hierarchy of unconditional rule and obedience, undermined by the "vices" of political actors:

How much better had it been (I speak the plainlier amongst my friends) for the King to look back upon his Ancestors, and to prevent mischiefs by the example either of their wiser resolutions, or their errors, then after the wound received, to stand in need of physique? But these Traitors now up against him, what title, what colour will they find for their Rebellion, which hath not been long before infamous by the like troubles? <...> I will discover, how the King hath done amiss: and what anchor the history of former times doth yet offer him in his now near ship-wrack. Then will I take off the mask from the factious subjects, that the people may know them: what they are like to hope, what to fear: by what means they may be reclaimed to virtue, and by what means continuing obstinate, they may be cut off [Barclay 2004: 1, 333, 337]; cf. [Барклай 1751: 1, 416–417].

While individual rulers and their actions are not exempt from criticism, the moralizing effects of fiction help revive and renegotiate the absolutist compact between monarchy and its subjects, devoid of any constitutional limitations on royal power; in Lev Pumpianskii's terms, *Argenis* contained "a complete code of absolutist morals" [Пумпянский 2001: 6]. Literary reminders of "wiser resolutions" of historical kings as well as their "errors" are seen as crucial for the healthy functioning of monarchy as an institution and its dignity in the eyes of its subjects. Revealing the dramatic overtones of Barclay's poetics of political fiction, Aleksandr Karin in his 1760 epistle used a similar argument to describe the genre of tragedy, locating it in the spaces of royal power:

Трагедия пример Влѣдыкам и Князьям,
 Как должно сыскивать им путь в безсмертной храм.
 В ином там славится щедрота иль геройство,
 В другом, в владении восставил что спокойство.
 В ином правдивой суд или великой дух:
 Описан всякаго по мере вид заслуг:
 Иного бедствия представлены злощастны,
 Или в желаніях успехи как нещастны. <...>

(Tragedy gives an example to sovereigns and princes how they should find their way into the temple of immortality. One is famed for his liberality or valor, another for having restored peace in his realm, yet another for his justice or magnanimity. The merits of each are dutifully listed, as well as the misfortunes of others or their misguided wishes <...>) [Карин 1761: 11].

Denying subjects any direct political rights, Barclay quite importantly recognizes their role as the audience of the "public spectacles" of political action, fictional or not. "The people" (and he certainly means the political class), in its double role as a nation of subjects and the readership of the novel, are the ulti-

mate judges of emotional techniques employed in order to persuade them to identify virtue with obedience and accept the sweeping denunciation of political resistance. Since the novel's readers are themselves guilty of "credulity" towards the rebels and have assumed shameful roles on "the stage of this life", it is only through the effects of fictional representation that they can be refashioned as worthy subjects and reminded of their duty. This was in fact the expressly recognized goal of drama. Following Horace who in his *Ars poetica* (twice translated into Russian in 1752–1755) stated that dramatic art had to rely on the knowledge of "What's required of a senator or a judge in office, / What's the role of a general in war", Riccoboni wrote in his dedication of the treatise *De la réformation du théâtre* to Empress Elizabeth that the establishment of a Russian national theater would allow her "teach the youth a sensible morality, suited to fashion wise politicians, courageous soldiers, magistrates upright and zealous in state service" [Riccoboni 1743: VIII].

Indeed, from its very beginnings Russian tragedy explored and reaffirmed the outlines of political order. As early as 1716 the Hannoverian diplomat Friedrich Christian Weber described in his famous account of Petrine Russia, *Das veränderte Russland*, a performance of a tragedy personally written and staged for Peter the Great by his sister, Princess Natalia. The play's "Subject related to one of the late Rebellions in Russia, represented under disguised Names", and it concluded "with a Moral, reflecting on the Horrors of Rebellion, and the unhappy Events it commonly issues in". In the following lines Weber linked the performative practices newly imported to Russia to the "a blind Obedience among these People towards their superiors" [Weber 1722: 189–190]. The same themes were reiterated in Sumarokov's neoclassical dramas: all of his tragedies, written between the 1740s and the 1770s, dealt with conspiracies and revolts — successful, abortive or only fearfully anticipated⁵.

Gamlet (1748): The drama of coup d'état

In his discussion of dramatic plots acceptable in a monarchy d'Aubignac evokes stage representations of revolt, simultaneously forbidding and allowing them in case "the right Heir should appear, and be own'd by the People, who should take that occasion to revenge the injuries that had suffered from a Tyrant" [D'Aubignac 1968: 70]. His vision of a dramatic poetics fully subjected to

⁵ On the importance of revolt for Sumarokov's tragedies, see [Гуковский 1998: 137–138; Касаткина 1955: 223]. On palace revolutions in eighteenth-century Russia, see the recent comprehensive study: [Курукин 2003], specifically linking this issue to Sumarokov's dramatic practice [Ibid.: 345].

absolutist orthodoxy is put to the test through the introduction of a paradox which alone seems to be able to provide a positive source of theatrical interest among prohibitive politically orthodox regulations: a legitimate revolt. This paradox can indeed be central for a vision of royal power which associates it with dramatic performance. In his seminal study of early modern tragedy Walter Benjamin links it to a vision of sovereignty as originating in extraordinary displays of power in a “state of exception” beyond any law, a vision revived in Carl Schmitt’s influential readings of early modern political theory. In his *Prince*, well known in eighteenth-century Russia, Machiavelli suggests that a ruler should not shy away from forceful if questionable actions:

mankind in general form their judgment rather from appearances than realities: all men have eyes, but not many have the gift of penetration: every one sees your exterior, but few can discern what you have in your heart; and those few dare not oppose the voice of the multitude, who have the Majesty of their Prince on their side <...> Let it then be the chief care of a Prince to preserve himself and his State: the means which he uses for that purpose, whatsoever they are, will always be esteemed honourable, and applauded by every one: for the opinion of the Vulgar is always determined by appearances and the issue of things <...> [Machiavelli 1762: 632]⁶.

Machiavelli derives power from political theatrics which is not limited to lies and fabrications: efficacious political action judged by its success, “the issue of things”, can itself provide for its own legitimacy. A forceful act — easily identified as the conquest of power, *The Prince*’s most important subject — erases for a spectacular moment the boundary between reality and its representation: the ruler’s public actions simultaneously establish his domination and produce narratives of legitimacy made possible by the public’s need to consider any authority “honourable”. Political order hinges, then, on the ability of the collective political imagination to inscribe royal violence into publicly accepted fictions. It is this aesthetic complicity between ruler and subjects which provides a blueprint for theater as an institution of monarchy, and specifically for tragic stagings of royal authority.

This pattern was also central for Empress Elizabeth’s “scenario of power” originating in the coup d’état which brought her to the throne in November 1741. The coup itself followed a profoundly theatrical logic [Pogosjan 2008]. On the night of the coup Elizabeth walked into the barracks of the Preobrazhenskii guards regiment. According to a contemporary account, “she appeared before the soldiers, a sword in her hand, and told them in a few words that they

⁶ On the implications of this fragment for a “theatrical” understating of power see [Koschorke 2007: 156–157]. On the knowledge of Machiavelli in eighteenth-century Russia, see [Юсим 1998: 77–136].

saw in her a legitimate empress and those who loved her had to follow her immediately". Given that Peter the Great's succession abolished all rights of inheritance, Elizabeth's claim to power had no legal ground but mainly depended on her performance of the role assumed that night. Her performance was a success; the French ambassador marquis de la Chétardie, who enjoyed Elizabeth's favor and had first-hand knowledge of the events at court, reported that Elizabeth's conduct toward her visitors the next day "succeeded in winning her everyone's hearts" [SIRIO 96: 654, 648].

Apparently, Elizabeth relied on the same patterns of theatricality of royal charisma that were explored and exposed in Corneille's *Nicomède*. Appearing in person before armed guards, Elizabeth claimed the same immediately theatrical power over her future subjects that befitted a true heir (or heiress) and secured her charismatic authority over the head of the lawful but unworthy ruler. In 1760, the anniversary of Elizabeth's ascension was celebrated with a performance of Metastasio's opera *Siroe, Re di Persia* (1725) which adapted Corneille's portrayal of the imperious heir apparent in the face of popular revolt which simultaneously shakes political order and establishes his personal power. If Corneille's prince magnanimously cedes this power to his weak-spirited father, in *Siroe* he is called upon to accept the crown, and is honored with an apotheosis projected in the Russian performance onto the coup of 1741 [Метастазіо 1760].

A similar scenario underlies Sumarokov's second tragedy, *Gamlet* (1748), a remake of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provided with a happy ending and transformed into a veiled celebration of Elizabeth's coup. Sumarokov's prince leads a successful popular revolt against Klavdii (Claudius): "Все здешне жительство на помощь мне предстало <...> Единодушно все на трон меня желали" ("All of the citizens did rally to support me <...> all expressed the wish to crown me king of Denmark") [V, 5] [Сумароков 1787: 116; Sumarokov 1970: 132]⁷. Marcus Levitt in his valuable essay on the play criticizes the "common Russian view" which stresses the "political message of Sumarokov's plays" so that "some commentators have seen in [*Gamlet*] an allegorical defense of Empress Elizabeth's ascension to the throne" [Levitt 2009: 95–96]. However, this reading of the play, first suggested by Vsevolodskii-Gerngross [Всеволодский-Гернгросс 2003: 110–112], can hardly be ignored in its historical discussion.

⁷ I will quote the Russian and English texts of *Gamlet* from these editions, with page numbers in parentheses and correcting the translation when necessary. I also consult Maksim Amelin's republication of the play which takes into account Sumarokov's list of corrections to the original edition: *Novaia Iumost'*. 2003, № 4.

Conceived with an eye for possible performances at court, *Gamlet* could not have avoided allusions to the palace revolution of November 1741 which brought Elizabeth to Russia's throne and was revived in public memory through yearly celebrations of the empress' "ascension day." In fact, the idiom of political allegory which aligns *Gamlet* with Elizabeth's ceremonial "scenarios of power" does not appear as superficial or straightforward as it is usually assumed. On the contrary, it challenges our assumptions of royal and authorial control over meaning and message, as it ventilates what Stephen Greenblatt defines as "paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions of authority" [Greenblatt 1988: 65].

Reenacting in his tragedy the "theatrical" conception of royal power dependent on the approval of the public, Sumarokov evokes dramatic poetics as a mode of representation which relies on and fosters a fascination for forceful if questionable action. The paradoxical situation of legitimate revolt, recommended by d'Aubignac and staged by Sumarokov, necessarily calls into question and suspends the seemingly stable conditions of legitimacy. Aubignac's line of argument reveals the crux of the uneasy early modern understanding of monarchy: even a tyrant has a legitimate claim to obedience, "for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" (Rom. 13: 1–2). In Shakespeare's Denmark, as Margreta de Grazia shows in her compelling study of *Hamlet*, "Claudius is the legitimate king; as far is known to the court, he has committed no legal offence in ascending to the throne", and Hamlet himself never accuses him of usurpation [De Grazia 2007: 87–88]. Similar to his Shakespearean counterpart, Sumarokov's Klavdii, also guilty of murder and usurpation, appropriates the language of legitimacy as he responds to the remorseful Gertruda who impels him to abdicate and hope for a pardon from the nation [II, 2]:

Кому прощать Царя? народ в его руках.
 Он Бог, не человек, в подверженных странах.
 Когда кому даны порфира и корона,
 Тому вся правда власть, и нет ему закона [78].
 Who's to forgive the king? The nation's in his hands.
 He is not man but God through all the realm he rules.
 Whoever gains the crown and the imperial purple
 Knows no law but his own, his voice alone is justice [102].

Royal prerogatives evoked by Claudius are quite real: an absolute monarch is not bound by law and cannot be judged or punished by his subjects. In Sumarokov's play — much more clearly than in Shakespeare's — defiled and distorted

certitudes of absolutist orthodoxy fail to contain resentment against Claudius both on stage and in the audience; in their stead, however, this failure unleashes the overtly destructive energies of political violence. The defeated Polonius is not legally wrong when he condemns Gamlet's triumph as mutiny [V, 4]:

Всходи взносись на трон высокой,
 Когда тебе твоя неправда помогла,
 И дерзостны сердца против Царя зажгла [110–111].

Go, ascend the throne of Denmark,
 If your injustice has helped you gain your end,
 And has inflamed the hearts of traitors to the king [127].

Fantasies of revolt were anything but irrelevant or harmless in Russia of the 1740s. In 1740, still during Empress Anna's reign, Artemii Volynskii was publicly executed on false charges of conspiracy: allegedly he harbored a dynastic claim to the Russian throne and planned to provoke a popular revolt in order to overthrow the empress, marry the princess Elizabeth and seize Russia's throne [Курукин: 356]. In this fictitious scenario forged by the collective imagination of the Russian court, Volynskii assumed a role very much similar to Sumarokov's Gamlet, who leads a popular revolt in order to claim his dynastic rights.

Another fiction of this kind surfaced in 1748, the year when *Gamlet* was published. At that time Sumarokov served as a high-ranking officer in the *leib-companiia*, a privileged unit of royal bodyguards formed from the soldiers involved in the palace revolution of 1741 and directly supervised by the Elizabeth's favorite, count Aleksei Razumovskii. Sometime during this year, Sumarokov's fellow guardsman Stepanov, possibly the poet's acquaintance if not his subordinate, as he was stationed at the doors of the royal chambers witnessed the empress enter with Razumovskii and received an order to leave the porch. In his own words, reported to the Secret Chancery and confirmed and expanded by Stepanov himself during ensuing interrogations, he heard the floor boarding creak and "reckoned that the most gracious lady is committing fornication with Razumovskii", so that he started trembling and considered bursting into the room and stabbing Razumovskii with his bayonet. Afterwards he planned to explain to the empress that he had stabbed her lover because "he commits fornication with your imperial majesty" and was hopeful that she would not have him punished. In one version of the story, he did not execute his plan because he was scared, in another because he was relieved by the next watch. Evgenii Anisimov, who recounts this case in his study of political prosecution in eighteenth-century Russia, is right to conclude that Stepanov was frightened by the "contradiction, horrifying for a man of his time, between the

sacred, taboo status of the empress' persona, and the blasphemy of her trivial sexual intercourse with one of her subjects. Stepanov's intentions clearly affirm that he considered the empress' coition with a subject as an assault, an act of violence, and wished to defend the empress in accordance with the statutes and his oath, as he thought he was expected to when stationed at the doors of the royal bedroom" [АНИСИМОВ 1999: 64–65].

Stepanov's fantasy clearly parallels the plot of both *Hamlets* and draws on the deeply rooted political mythology which permeates them. Identifying sexual possession of the royal female body with the desecration of the monarchy, he follows the same logic as Hamlet himself in censuring Gertrude's lustful cohabitation with Claudius. Indeed, as de Grazia shows, in the world of Shakespeare's play, Gertrude's sexuality is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the body politic. Claudius addresses her as his "imperial jointress", a term which identifies her "as what joins him to the empire and the empire to him". The term alludes to "a legal *jointure*, an estate settled on a wife which reverts back to her in the event of her husband's death <...> What man the 'imperial jointress' chooses to conjoin with, then, would be of paramount concern for the empire <...> Union to her in marriage would settle the realm on her husband" [De Grazia 2007: 105]. This legal pattern is even more obvious in Sumarokov than it is in Shakespeare; the Russian Klavdii is not of royal birth, as Gertruda (Gertrude) admits to her son: "На царский одр, на трон раба я вознесла, / Чтоб лучше я твое наследие пасла" [I, 3: 66]; "Onto the kingly bed, onto the throne I've raised / A slave so that I might better guard your inheritance" [93]). She reiterates this admission in a speech which exhorts Klavdii to repent and abdicate and condemns their marriage in terms reminiscent of Stepanov, up to the shaking walls of the royal bedroom [II, 2]:

Любовь произвело во мне твое злодейство!
 Супружество мое с тобой прелюбодейство. <...>
 Как честь мою любовь сквернейша поглотила,
 А я тебя на трон Монаршеский пустила!
 О как тогда, о как не шел на землю гром,
 И с нами не упал наш оскверненный дом!
 Как стены наших сих чертогов не тряслися!
 И как мы в таковом грехе с тобой спаслися! [76]

My love was fashioned when you wrought your greatest evil,
 Our marriage is nothing but adultery <...>
 When love profane won out and overcame my honor,
 When I bestowed the throne upon you,
 Where was the thunder then that should have rocked the earth?

How did our sinful house withstand the wrath of God?
 How did the palace walls that housed our evil-doing
 Shake not, as though our sins were nothing? [100–101].

It is in this perspective that the use of armed force to fend off lovers of the “imperial jointress” can be considered a defense of the royal body and the body politic rather than an attack against them. In fact, Stepanov’s imaginary defense of Elizabeth was not unique but represented a pattern often rehearsed by Russian political imagination of the 1740s. As if to make the analogies with *Hamlet* even more evident, popular rumors designated Grand Duke Peter, Elizabeth’s nephew and proclaimed heir, as the future avenger of her affair with (or even a morganatic marriage to) Razumovskii. It was said, for example, that Elizabeth planned to abdicate, secluding herself in a convent (similar to Sumarokov’s Gertruda) and that her heir Peter would have already stabbed Razumovskii with his sword had not the empress intervened [Семевский 1875: 529–530].

The affinity between both *Hamlets* and the wide-spread fantasies of legitimate revolt apparently shaped by common patterns of political imagination shared across Europe, underscores the drastic differences in the status which these fictions could assume. While Sumarokov’s play was published and staged at court with royal approval, rumors of violence in the royal family were investigated and prosecuted by the Secret Chancery as cases of sedition. Anisimov does not relate what happened to Stepanov, but — as the very fact of his interrogation makes clear — even an intention of an armed intrusion into royal quarters fell under the definition of high treason. The practice of massive and violent prosecution of gossip was informed by a systemic fear of dissent and mutiny of the kind that Sumarokov’s Gamlet reverts to. As contemporaries reiterate time and again, Petersburg soldiery was invigorated by the series of coups where it played the main part, and constantly evoked the possibility of a next revolt. Stepanov’s crime was to evoke the armed subjects’ roles as true judges and true sources of royal power, an admission which could not but put into question its symbolic legitimacy. The same crime, however, was committed on stage by Sumarokov’s Gamlet: instead of justifying his revolt with his indisputable dynastic rights, which would have had at least an appearance of legality, he repeatedly emphasizes the need to punish King Claudius and to “liberate” the country from him — a course of action divinely forbidden to any absolutist subject, even one of royal birth.

In order to consecrate — rather than obliterate — this potentially dangerous contradiction which underlay Elizabeth’s rule, Sumarokov conjures forth the ghost of Gamlet’s nameless father [I, 2]:

Родитель мой в крови предстал передо мною
 И, плача, мне вещал, о сын! любезный сын! <...>
 Отмсти отцову смерть, и мщеньем утуши
 Всегдашню жалобу стениящая души,
 Прими Геройску мысль <...> [63].

My father, all in blood, appeared, I dreamt before me,
 And tearfully called out: "O son, beloved son! <...>
 Avenge your father's death, and with revenge suppress
 The everlasting plaint of my lamenting soul.
 Take up heroic thoughts <...>" [91]

Both in Shakespeare's and in Sumarokov's plays the ghost provides the Prince with a reinvigorating perspective on his intricate dynastic situation. Shakespeare's Denmark, as de Grazia elucidates, is an elective monarchy, which makes it "perfectly legal for the kingdom to pass to a collateral relation rather than the lineal <...> Denmark's elective constitution is crucial to the play's dramatic set-up. It allows for a situation impossible in a primogenitary monarchy: the Prince remains at court in the company of the King who was preferred over him. This is not a comfortable situation for either Prince or King, and for that very reason it provides a tensely dramatic one for the audience" [De Grazia 2007: 87–89].

The legal implications of Hamlet's situation, which we tend to overlook, were probably much more meaningful for Sumarokov and his audience, as they closely resembled Russian court politics. Russia was not legally an elective monarchy but it came close to functioning like one in the aftermath of Peter the Great's decision to abolish any regulations on the order of succession, leaving it to each subsequent ruler to choose their own heir. Instead of consolidating royal prerogative, this measure made royal succession dependent on the tumultuous struggle of court factions and, in the years 1728–30, the decisions of the Supreme Privy Council. (According to de Grazia, Shakespeare's Claudius was also elected by a Council which he addresses in his first scene.) Elizabeth, by 1741 the only surviving child of Peter and his wife and heir Catherine I, was twice denied the succession rights assured to her by her mother's testament in 1727. After the death of Elizabeth's nephew Peter II in 1730, the Supreme Privy Council passed the crown to her cousin Anna Ioannovna who, in 1740, left the throne to the infant emperor Ivan and his mother Anna Leopoldovna. Although Elizabeth did not have legal grounds to claim more legitimacy than her rivals, she still enjoyed exceptional popularity as the daughter of Peter, comparable in his charisma to King Hamlet. Just as the coup d'état that Shakespeare's Hamlet could not accomplish, Elizabeth's seizure of power was

informed by the tension between the law of the land and the mechanics of personal charisma derived from a deceased royal father.

Indeed, the concept of charisma, personal and inherited, famously developed by Max Weber and closely related to the discussions of royal power by Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt, can prove fruitful for our analysis. It has been shown that it is relevant for an understanding of both Russian court politics of the Petrine age and a reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* [Zitser 2004; Falco 2000]. Weber's famous theory opposes types of rule ("traditional" or "legal") dependent on institutional and symbolic continuity to charismatic authority, which is originally generated by extraordinary qualities of a single leader but then itself undergoes "routinization" when power is passed to a successor. Of the various types of succession listed by Weber, several were simultaneously in play in eighteenth-century Russia. The first was envisaged but never accomplished by Peter the Great: "designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his on successor". The second, "[d]esignation of a successor by the charismatically qualified administrative staff" which "should quite definitely not be interpreted as 'election'", resulted in the appointment of Anna Ioannovna in 1730. Finally, Weber mentions "hereditary charisma" invested in the "kinsmen of the bearers, particularly <...> his closest relatives", and complicated by the necessity "to select the proper heir within the kinship group". This was the case of Elizabeth and her nephew Peter [Weber 1947: 358–366].

Uncertainties of charismatic succession framed the situation of both Hamlets and Elizabeth in 1741. However, contrary to the customary scenario outlined by Weber, the idea of linear succession does not in either of our cases stand for a "routinization" of charisma but rather for its revival. Sumarokov's play, for example, stages the critical moment when hereditary charisma violently asserts itself over other types of legitimacy. Sumarokov's Gamlet accomplishes a double act of revenge and dynastic restoration which escapes Shakespeare's prince. This act is not, however, unrelated to Shakespeare's play where Claudius considers his "legal authority" menaced by Hamlet's charisma [IV, 2]:

He's loved of the distracted multitude,
Who like not in their judgment but their eyes... [292]

As Raphael Falco remarks in his Weberian reading of Shakespeare, "Hamlet has charismatic power with the populace and <...> their bond to him is irrational — which is the meaning of 'distracted' — and therefore dangerous to Claudius' rulership. Claudius fears revolution at this juncture just as much as he worries about his own exposure as a murderer" [Falco 2000: 111]. Indeed, as Falco notes, Weber's claim that "charismatic authority repudiates the past, and is

in this sense a specifically revolutionary force” is further enacted in Shakespeare by the failed revolt of Laertes [IV, 5; 302–303; Falco 2000: 111, 114–115]. In Shakespeare’s play, just as absolutist orthodoxy would have it, charismatic upheaval falls short of legitimacy or power necessary to resolve the crisis brought about by the desecration of dynastic lineage. On the contrary, Sumarokov’s *Gamlet* is able to exploit popular force to renew the monarchic order. Already in the first act Gertruda warns Klavdii [II, 2]:

Ты в ненависти, Князь мой сын любим в народе,
Надежда всех граждан, остаток в царском роде [76].

The prince’s lineage win him the people’s honor.
He is their fondest hope, you are their greatest hatred [101].

Elizabeth’s coup was also made possible by the favor she enjoyed with the populace and the military, and the French envoy Chétardie described her afterwards as a “legitimate heiress to the throne who has captivated the hearts of the whole empire by her charms as much as by the qualities of her spirit” [SIRIO 96: 662]. Accordingly, her first manifesto proclaimed that she only assumed her “legal right” to inherit her “paternal throne” because she had been urged by her “loyal subjects” and, specifically, the “guards regiments” to stop “troubles and perturbations” caused by unable rulers, which would have led to “a great ruin of the whole state” [ПСЗ: 537]. This argument bases Elizabeth’s authority on the same patterns of crisis and action that are outlined by Schmitt and Weber. In Schmitt’s terms, forceful action in a state of exception, is the ultimate origin of power and legitimacy. In Weber’s terms, a ruler’s charisma depends on “proof of charismatic qualification,” possibly “a brilliant display of his authority,” a success attributable to a “gift of grace” which provides him with the “recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma” [Weber 1947: 359–360, 362].

Weber’s analysis of exceptional authority, like Machiavelli’s, reveals its fundamental similarity to theater. Machiavelli grounds a prince’s “esteem” on “extraordinary actions” which keep his subjects “in continual suspense and admiration” [Machiavelli 1762: 662]. According to Weber, a forceful act engenders charismatic authority only inasmuch as it dazzles the spectator subjects and engages public emotion: “The corporate group which is subject to charismatic authority is based on an emotional form of communal relationship” [Weber 1947: 360]. Charisma, then, is mediated by a poetics of represented action, a set of techniques tailored to produce an emotional complicity between ruler-as-actor and his subjects. Theatricality of charisma is exposed when dramatic plots reenact a coup d’état: political action and its representations in drama

build upon the same visions of extraordinary power and share the fundamental tension between truth and fiction. Intensified violence of Sumarokov's *Gamlet* — Gamlet publicly kills their adversaries whereas Elizabeth quietly arrested hers in the middle of the night — directs dramatic interest toward the “physical battle of the leaders” identified by Weber as a basic form of charismatic self-assertion [Weber 1947: 361]. Conversely, the charismatic value of a royal act unfolds in fictions and narratives (manifestos and dramas) which both perpetuate self-serving royal violence and align it with visions of public salvation. To quote Machiavelli once more, “Let it then be the chief care of a Prince to preserve himself and his State: the means which he uses for that purpose, whatsoever they are, will always be esteemed honourable, and applauded by every one” [Machiavelli 1762: 632].

Similarly to Elizabeth's manifesto, Sumarokov's *Gamlet* overtly subordinates absolutist legality to an urge for action which amalgamates Gamlet's familial affair — revenge for his father's murderer — with public interest, the overturn of Klavdii's tyranny. Revolt of a legitimate heir, recommended by d'Aubignac as a topic of absolutist drama, is in fact — both on and off stage — a revolt which constitutes its own legitimacy, as political event and its representation. In 1742 Elizabeth's ascension and its effect on the populace was symbolized by yet another kind of spectacle, fireworks designed to revive the “most vivid joy” experienced, according to the official description, by all loyal subjects when they witnessed as the true heiress to the empire “lays the crown due to [her] upon [herself] through [her] own natural force” (instead of receiving it in regular succession, that is) [Старикова 2005: 416–421]. While Elizabeth's or Gamlet's revolt could hardly be justified by written law, this deficit is compensated by a symbolic pattern validated by the collective political imagination: the inheritance of paternal charisma incorporated by the ghost. In Shakespeare, the Ghost is easily recognized as an omen of political disaster but fails to bring about a resolution of the dynastic crisis. In Sumarokov, the striking dramatic effect associated with this figure is reinterpreted as an indisputable source of poetic justice and political authority.

The effect of this dramatic fiction on the play's audience recreates and intensifies the workings of hereditary charisma in Elizabethan Russia. Elizabeth made a point of publicly cultivating the memory of her father, and in panegyric poetry of the era, the ghost of Peter the Great often appeared to consecrate her coup, reinterpreting a spectacular breach of law as an extraordinary act of providentially sanctioned dynastic continuity. Sumarokov's ghost fulfills a similar function, glorifying a transmission of paternal charisma in an act of violence rather than legal procedure. The ghost uses his dual authority of a royal father

and a divine messenger to proclaim a state of exception which brings about the downfall of a villainous ruler and suspends the divine prohibition of revolt. As a device conjured forth to establish legitimacy for illicit political success, Sumarokov's ghost conflates images and symbolic patterns of charisma with dramatic poetics in a stage metaphor which epitomizes theatricality itself along with its political consequences — a metaphor whose lack of metaphysical or juridical validity is outweighed by its spectacular appeal, the vivid cogency of fiction.

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