Complexities of Decorated Royal Letters

Letters were normally the only available means of direct communication between rulers in the seventeenth century. When writing beyond Europe and Scandinavia the English king was always addressing a person he had never met and whose protocols he was familiar with only through having read ambassadorial reports. Japanese and Chinese court etiquette was very much a mystery in London. With Russia’s ceremonial, however, it was different. Accounts of merchants and ambassadors described the tsar’s court relating stories of fabulous gold and silver serving dishes at the royal banquets, courtiers wearing robes adorned with precious pearls, and colorful Persian carpets everywhere warming the cold stone and wood floors of the tsar’s receiving rooms. Generally, however, despite the richness described in the accounts and the knowledge of Russian love for things decorative, problems of distance, language, and unfamiliarity remained to be reckoned with by the secretaries of state responsible for drafting the king’s letters. The form of the letters was dictated by precedent; knowledge of language and customs was provided as well as could be by the small community in London who had been to the places in question.¹

Decorated royal letters to foreign rulers from the time of the Middle Ages had served two purposes. They conveyed at once the personal messages of the king of England and the governmental business of the English crown; and with respect to each component they bore the arms of the dynasty and carried the emblems of state. They were, in a sense, an example of the aesthetic of public and private theorized by modern Renaissance scholars.² To historians, however, the importance of the letters lies in their nature as official documents wherein titles, salutations, and closings denoted empire, indicated familial relationships, and underscored policies.

In the beginning of the century James I and Charles I generally paid for the preparation and sending of their royal letters through the treasurers of

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¹ Many early accounts of travel in Russia are printed in Rude and Barbarous Kingdom, ed. Berry and Crummy. Giles Fletcher, for example, ambassador to Russia in 1588, on his return wrote a book Of the Russe Common Wealth, or Maner of Governement of the Russe Emperour, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth and published in 1591. For a bibliography of other early accounts, see Poe, Foreign Descriptions of Muscovy, An Analytic Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources.

² Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, p. 18.
their Households, Sir William Uvedale and Sir Thomas Edmonds. Charles II did the same later through Sir Edward Griffin. Under Oliver Cromwell costs for government letters (which were not decorated) were charged to the general Treasury as part of the state budget but that system was as short lived as the Commonwealth itself and with the Restoration of the crown payment returned to the Household, a throw back to earlier years and personal monarchy. The fact that the budget for the King’s letters came from the Crown and not the Treasury reveals the centrality of the king’s part in foreign affairs even beyond the formal diplomatic channels of regular diplomacy.

As England’s commerce increased during the sixteenth century the Crown and the trading companies developed a symbiotic relationship. Merchants looked for royal support in their quest for privileges in foreign parts both East and West. The Crown in turn depended heavily on the merchants’ knowledge of languages and societies in order to forge new diplomatic relations and formal alliances that would ultimately mean wealth and empire for England. New markets were essential for English products, particularly cloth. That Charles I could write to the tsar saying that the commodities our merchants bring are not ‘superfluous’ or ‘excessive’ to “exhaust your wealth or corrupt the manners of your subjects” but “of more use and benefit” than those gotten elsewhere, indicates how much the King and his Secretaries understood the meaning of trade and markets (Charles I [18]). It was quickly apparent that such knowledge was necessary if commercial relationships were to blossom. This became a complex diplomatic problem in the beginning of the seventeenth century, particularly with regard to the Far East.

Language and Translation

Royal letters provide not only records of accounts of actions and transactions between rulers and states but they also convey something of the spirit that existed between correspondents. For the contemporaries, understanding the tone as well as the content of the letters depended on the fluency and accuracy of the translations made in the courts of those who received them, be they in Moscow, Istanbul, Edo or elsewhere. It was requisite that the translation not only be letter-perfect but also rendered with a sophisticated understanding of the nuances of language and the social customs of the society and government in question. Merchants were the only ones at the time who had the broad experience that brought with it this understanding. They were often called upon and worked closely with the secretaries of state advising about alliances of friendship and the negotiating of commercial agreements.