FOOLS IN THE MIRROR
IN CATHERINE THE GREAT'S
IMIANINY GOSPOZHI VORCHALKINOI

"If your face is lopsided, don't blame the mirror."1

Nikolai Gogol' used this proverb to begin his comedy about the power of rumor and intrigue, Revizor (The Inspector General, 1836). Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, used comedy to hold a mirror up to her people, to expose and therefore correct the problems of her society. Over the course of her reign, she wrote over two dozen Russian-language comedies, comic operas, and historical dramas. In one of her comedies, Imianiny gospozhi Vorchalkinoi (Mrs. Grumbler's Name-Day, 1772), wise persons are those who can truly see themselves.

After coming to the throne in 1762, Catherine the Great engaged in a massive effort to reform Russia's legal system, through the convening of a legislative Commission and the composition of her own Nakaz (Instruction, 1767-68). At the same time, she sponsored and participated in a campaign to expand the literary and cultural frontiers of her country. In 1769, she created a new satirical journal, Vsiakaia vsiachina (All Sorts), in the epistolary style of the English Spectator. Although the exact extent of Catherine's authorship of any given letter is unknown, her involvement in the periodical's collective creation is generally accepted. It was perhaps, then, the Empress herself who wrote the following lines in the journal's first sheet regarding potential readers:

For after today they -- it may come to pass -- will not only see themselves from without as in a mirror, but also glimpse their inner virtues sketched out on paper. Oh, how gratified must your pride be on this day, when this new means has been devised to mock the faults of others and to admire yourself.2

In this passage, the journal's writing is compared to a mirror that helps the readers to see themselves "from without" - a beneficial function. But the mirror, as in Gogol', should also not be blamed. And the reader may still be able to angle the mirror so that his or her own faults are unseen, or reflected onto others.

After the closing of Vsiakaia vsiachina, Catherine the Great turned to the theatre, perhaps as a more direct means of gauging her audience's response than in the private realm of the periodical. From 1772 to 1790, Catherine wrote dramatic works in a broad range of styles: neoclassical comedies, historical operas, comic operas, one-act proverbs in French, and even an imitation of Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor. The genres may differ but her aims remained constant. For Catherine, drama was both an expression of Russia's cultural equality with Western Europe and a means to publicly display and address key social and political issues of her day. The stage was an active arena for reform through the Enlightenment strategies of reason and wit. Even the genre of comedy itself, which dominates Catherine's dramatic output, reflects her own vision of her reign: by the end, her characters were justly rewarded or punished, and a happy closure echoed the sense of national well-being she deliberately projected. Her vision of the order and satisfaction under rule by an enlightened despot is reflected in these resolutions.

Catherine wrote a series of five comedies in 1772, which, like Vsiakaia vsiachina, explore contemporary manners through a wide array of exaggerated character perspectives and actions: O vremia! (Oh, These Times!), Gospozha Vestnikova s sem'eiu (Mrs. Tattler and her Family), Voprostitel' (The Questioner), Peredniania znatnago boiarina (A Prominent Nobleman's Entrance Hall), and Imianiny gospozhi Vorzechikinoi (Mrs. Grumbler's Name-Day). Of these comedies, O vremia!, Gospozha Vestnikova, and Imianiny share a similar five-act structure: a crisis averted clears the way for a marriage. (Voprostitel' is a one-joke one-act, and Peredniania znatnago boiarina has a unique progression of petitioners). O vremia!, Catherine's first play, is also her most famous, with many mentions by her contemporaries, several later critical treatments, and two translations into French. Gospozha Vestnikova, see A. N. Пыпин, Sochinenia Imperatritsy Ekateriny II, 12 vols. (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, 1901-07), 5: 279. The title Vsiakaia vsiachina has been translated in many ways, such as All Sorts; Levitt uses Odds and Ends in his translation and commentary.
