Princess Ekaterina Romanova Dashkova (1743–1810) was one of the most colorful and striking figures of the age of Catherine the Great, itself an epoch of oversize personalities. “Catherine the Little,” as Dashkova refers to herself in her memoirs, was, next to the empress Catherine, the most prominent and commented-upon Russian woman of her day. Political activist, author, editor, courtier, first woman head of the Academy of Sciences and founder of the Russian Academy, Dashkova was arguably also Russia’s first modern woman celebrity.¹ Much like Benjamin Franklin, she captured the imagination of the educated world as her country’s de facto cultural ambassador. While Franklin personified home-grown American democracy, Dashkova was emissary for Russia’s special brand of “Enlightened absolutism.”² Dashkova’s main claim to fame was not merely as the extraordinary example of a Russian woman intellectual, but also, and more notoriously, as principle co-conspirator, at the tender age of 19, in the 1762 palace “revolution” that had raised Catherine to the throne and deposed — and dispatched — Peter III.³

¹ See the new biography by Alexander Woronzoff-Dashkoff, *Dashkova: A Life of Influence and Exile* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2008), that appeared subsequent to the writing of this essay.

² This essay first appeared in a volume accompanying the exhibit “The Princess and the Patriot: Ekaterina Dashkova, Benjamin Franklin, and the Age of Enlightenment” at the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Feb. 17 — Dec. 31, 2006, part of the celebration of the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary.

³ Historians still debate Dashkova’s assertion of her key role in Catherine’s coup. Catherine herself — to Dashova’s dismay — disparaged her role immediately following the coup, which may have been for political reasons, insofar as Dashkova hoped to counter the Orlovs’ influence.
A TRIPLE DEFENSE

In contrast to Franklin’s *Autobiography*, a collection of materials begun in mid-career as family history recounted for his son, and fondly recalling a life rich in success and public recognition, Dashkova’s memoir was written near the end of her life as an attempt to rescue her public image from oblivion or worse, misrepresentation. Hers is a purposeful *apologia pro vita sua* presented to the court of posterity and public opinion. When Franklin began writing in 1771, his public and literary persona had already become an institution of American life, and the *Autobiography* offered a succinct restatement of his commonsensical philosophy of life, recounted with a calm and lightly self-deprecating irony. In contrast, when Dashkova took up the pen her celebrity was in almost total eclipse, and her memoir had a much more serious and psychologically weighty goal: to defend her life’s legacy and that of Catherine the Great’s Russia.

That legacy had been called into question almost immediately after Catherine’s death in 1796, which Dashkova described in her memoir as “a blow…which for Russia represented the greatest possible disaster.” (MPD 248). Catherine’s son, the new emperor Paul I, undertook a campaign to rehabilitate the honor of his ignominiously deposed father, stripping Dashkova of her official positions and sending her into exile in northern Russia. Even after her return to court following the accession of Alexander I in 1801, Dashkova was indignant to find “the people surrounding the Emperor…unanimous in disparaging the reign of Catherine II and in instilling in the young monarch that idea that a woman could ever govern an Empire” (MPD 279). This misogynist attitude, which had been codified under Paul in a new law of succession based on male primogeniture, also

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4 E. R. Dashkova, *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*, trans. and ed. Kyril Fitzlyon (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 248. Henceforth references to this edition will be to “MPD,” and will be given in parentheses within the essay. Unfortunately, there still is no fully authoritative version of Dashkova’s memoir, which exists in two basic variants. On the history of the problem, see A. Woronzoff-Dashkoff’s “Afterword” in Dashkova, *The Memoirs*, 284–89, and his “Additions and Notes in Princess Dashkova’s Mon histoire,” *Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia Newsletter* 19 (1991): 15–21. See also the recent composite text that lacks a critical apparatus: *Mon histoire: mémoires d’une femme de lettres russe à l’époque des Lumières*, ed. Alexandre Woronzoff-Dashkoff, Catherine Le Gouis, and Catherine Woronzoff-Dashkoff (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999).
clearly cast its shadow on Dashkova, “one of the first women in Europe to hold governmental office.”

Perhaps just as importantly, Dashkova took up her pen to refute what she referred to as the “flood of pamphlets libeling Catherine II” (MPD 271–72). The eighteenth century had seen the birth of a whole branch of European letters known as “Russica,” as Russia’s place as a test case for Enlightenment ideas became a major subject of debate. Catherine’s detractors, motivated by long-standing political animus, shoveled dirt on the empress’ personal life and on her court. Dashkova was outraged by the “cleverly concocted lies and foul fictions” spread by “certain French writers” who “at the same time undertook to blacken and slander her innocent friend”—that is, Dashkova herself. Any stains on the empress’ “spotless reputation” threatened to tarnish Dashkova’s own.

Dashkova’s memoir is thus a triple defense: it is a vindication of Catherine the Great as a truly “great and enlightened empress”; an affirmation of Russian Enlightenment culture; and, not the least, a justification and clarification of Dashkova’s own historical role. The memoir spans Dashova’s entire life up through the time of writing (1804–5), focusing on: the story of the “revolution” that brought Catherine to the throne; her two extended European

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5 A. Woronzoff-Dashkoff, “Disguise and Gender in Princess Dashkova’s Memoirs,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 33: 1 (1991), 62.
6 The quotation is taken from the memoir’s dedicatory letter to Martha Wilmot, not included in the Fitzlyon translation or 1999 French edition. I cite it from: E. R. Dashkova, *Zapiski; Pis’ma sester M. i K. Vil’mot iz Rossii*, ed. S. S. Dmitriev, comp. G. A. Veselaiia (Moscow: MGU, 1987), 35. See also Dashkova’s mention of these libels in MPD, 51, 62, 91, and 279.

On Dashkova’s autobiography in the broader literary context of “Russica,” see Kelly Herold, “Russian Autobiographical Literature in French: Recovering a Memoiristic Tradition (1770–1830),” (Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1998). On the particular writers Dashkova repudiates, see V. A. Somov, “‘Prezident trekh akademii’: E. R. Dashkova vo frantsuzskoi ‘Rossike’ XVIII veka,” in E. R. *Dashkova i A. S. Pushkin v istorii Rossii*, ed. L. V. Tychinina (Moscow: MGI im. E. R. Dashkovoi, 2000), 39–53. On Russians’ familiarity with Russica, see Somov’s “Frantsuzskaia ‘Rossika’ epokhi prosveshcheniia i russkii chitatel’,” in *Frantsuzskaia kniga v Rossii v XVIII v.: Ocherki istorii*, ed. S. P. Luppov (Leningrad: Nauka, 1986), 173–245. On European debates over Russia’s status, see Dimitri S. von Mohrenschildt, *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France* (1936; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1972); Albert Lortholary, *Le Mirage Russe en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Boivin, [1951]); Isabel de Madariaga, “Catherine and the Philosophes,” in *Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. G. Cross (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1983), pp. 30–52; and Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).
trips; her public life in St. Petersburg; her exile under Paul; and, briefly, her last years. The title of the memoir, Mon histoire, which may mean both “My Story” and “My History,” suggests the merging for Dashkova of the individual and historical narrative. This makes Dashkova’s autobiography a valuable record of the cultural ideal of Enlightenment Russia and turns whatever weakness of memory or historical accuracy there may be in it into an all the more eloquent exercise in self-imaging. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to come to terms with Dashkova’s oversized personality, placing it within the context of the cultural values that she champions in her memoir.

MAKING VIRTUE VISIBLE

We may begin to seek the roots of Dashkova’s strikingly powerful sense of self in the circumstances of her early life as she describes them. On the one hand, Dashkova recounts her overwhelming desire for approbation and love, and on the other, her desperate sense of loneliness and being “wounded by indifference,” sparked by the loss of her mother at age two. “I became serious-minded and studious… Reading soothed me and made me happy…” (MPD 33) The life of the mind and the satisfactions of superior intellect offered a compensation, as she resolved to become “all I could be by my own efforts,… [in a] presumptuous effort to be self-sufficient” (MPD 34). She was attracted in particular to Enlightenment political and educational theory, an arena in which her “relentless curiosity” could be satisfied. Mon histoire offers a sophisticated defense of Enlightened selfhood, as Dashkova constructs and defends a powerful, charismatic, intellectually impressive image of an ideal public self. Struggling to describe the “peculiarities & inextricable varietys” of Dashkova’s contradictory character, Catherine Wilmot concluded that

For my part I think she would most be in her element at the Helm of the State, of Generalissimo of the Army, or Farmer General of the Empire. In fact she was born for business on a large scale which is not irreconcilable with the Life of a Woman who at 18 headed a Revolution & who for 12 years afterwards govern’d an Academy of Arts & Sciences…

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7 The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot, 1803–1808, ed. the Marchioness of Londonderry and H. M. Hyde (London: Macmillan, 1934), 211. By “Farmer General of the Empire” is meant something like a minister of finances, the official in charge of taxes and revenue.
Dashkova fully subscribed to the ideal of her age, defining herself in terms of
the “Great Man.” As the label indicates, the serious, public, role she chose to
emulate was culturally gendered male; indeed the classical Roman heritage
that was one of its main sources preserved a direct etymological linkage
between the male (“vir”) and virtue (“virtus”) itself.8

At the same time, Dashkova’s memoir — by the author’s no less eloquent
testimony — reveals the dark and unhappy underside of the “Great Man.”
Dashkova was by her own admission plagued by constant physical ailments,
as well as by a “deep dejection” and “bitter disappointments” that haunted
her existence — which we might conceptualize as her frustrated “female”
shadow self demanding its due. Dashkova herself senses that the protective
façade of superior intellect is “presumptuous,” and from the very beginning
of her conscious life fears that “my sensibility and weak nerves would ruin
my life by making it impossible to bear the pain of disappointment and
wounded pride…I was beginning to have the foreboding that I would not
be happy in this world.” (MPD 35) Dashkova’s need for approbation, so
poignant for a motherless child, was also, and perhaps even more importantly,
an especially powerful directive of her age: the need to be seen and approved.9

The need for approval is undoubtedly a universal human necessity, yet self-
display — whether in court ceremonial, on the stage, in architecture, urban
planning, landscape gardening, clothing, or the fine arts in general — took on
special prominence as a cultural imperative during Russia’s early modern age.
It offered visible proof of Russia’s imperial grandeur, demanding recognition
of national greatness to vie with that of the West. Beyond its usual function
as a simple marker of power and prestige, visual display also played a key
role in Russian Enlightenment thought and self-consciousness, according to
the conviction that (to put it baldly) virtue must advertise.10 Visibility, and
the visibility of virtue, for example, became an especially important issue in

8 Judith Vowles contrasts Catherine the Great’s ability to reconcile “the claims of worldly
society and the intellectual life” to Dashkova’s rejection of “feminine” social pursuits
(e.g, the life of the salon) in favor of serious “male” interests. See “The ’Feminization’ of
Russian Literature: Women, Language and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Russia,”
in Toby W. Clyman and Diana Greene, eds., Women Writers in Russian Literature
(Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 40–44.

9 Arthur O. Lovejoy, Reflections on Human Nature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press,
1961).

10 This is a main thesis of my forthcoming monograph, whose provisional title is Making
Russian Visible: The Visual Dominant in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature and
Culture. See also the other articles in Part Two of the current collection.
Catherine the Great’s political program, especially in the early part of her reign. Catherine justified her assumption of power by means of her superior Enlightenment credentials: she who was self-evidently best qualified to rule, and most virtuous in promoting the public welfare, deserved to rule. Dashkova, having indissolubly linked her fortune with Catherine, fully ascribed to this political and moral program.

VIRTUE UNDER SEIGE

A useful episode for understanding the drama of Dashkova’s self-presentation is her description of the crisis that followed Catherine’s death. The new emperor Paul ordered her to leave Moscow and retire to her place in the country, where she was instructed to “ponder on the events of the year 1762” and to await his decision on her further fate. Dashkova writes:

I left Moscow on 6 December. My health was reduced to a struggle against death. Every other day I wrote to my brother and other members of my family, who also wrote very regularly to me. Several of them, including my brother, told me that Paul I’s behavior toward me was dictated by what he thought he owed to his father’s memory, but that at his coronation he would change our fate. I shall quote my reply to my brother as one of the many prophecies I have made which have come true:

“You tell me, friend, that after his coronation Paul will leave me alone. You do not know him then. Once a tyrant begins to strike he continues to strike until his victim is totally destroyed. I am expecting persecution to continue unabated, and I resign myself to it in the full submission of a creature to its Creator. The conviction of my own innocence and lack of any bitterness or indignation at his treatment of me personally will, I trust, serve me in place of courage. Come what may, and provided he is not actively malevolent to you and those near and dear to me, I shall do or say nothing that will lower me in my own eyes. Goodbye, my friend, my well-beloved brother. All my love.” (MPD 251)

11 Her famous Instruction (Nakaz) is the most dramatic expression of this view. See Documents of Catherine the Great; The Correspondence with Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767 in the English text of 1768, ed. W. F. Reddaway (1931; New York, Russell & Russell, 1971), and other editions. On Catherine’s quest for visibility, see David M. Griffiths, “To Live Forever: Catherine II, Voltaire, and the Pursuit of Immortality,” in Roger Bartlett et al., eds., Russia and the World of the Eighteenth Century (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1988), 446–468, and Simon Dixon, Catherine the Great (New York: Longman, 2001), chap. 3.

12 Here and below I have changed “Pavel I” to “Paul I.”
Chapter 19. Virtue Must Advertise

Dashkova here stands tall on the stage of history. She presents herself like a heroine of tragic drama or a sentimental novel, a “Great Man” displaying the transparency of her virtue for all to appreciate.\(^{13}\) She describes innocence and virtue pitted against relentless malice, virtue under physical and emotional siege. Her response puts her courage and self-possession into sharp relief. The quoting of the letter both helps Dashkova to establish the documentary nature of the moment — its historical truth — and at the same time reflects her exalted, extremely “literary,” self-image. It is as if she were reciting a tragic monologue, or contemplating herself at a remove, as in a mirror.

While Dashkova’s dramatic stance might seem appropriate considering the real threat from Paul, similar extreme oppositions — a continual struggle between life and death, salvation and destruction, approbation and opprobrium — operate throughout the text. They characterize Dashkova’s understanding of the self as in a constant struggle between absolute virtue and vice whose outcome has highly serious, even metaphysical, consequences. Dashkova presents herself as totally virtuous, and she makes no secret of the pride and self-satisfaction she feels in her virtue. Although her “submission” to God’s will may have something in common with the Russian Orthodox notion of “kenosis,” the “emptying of the self” in imitation of Christ, Dashkova’s language stresses more her adherence to an Enlightenment conviction — strongly echoing classical Stoicism — of righteousness founded on reason and superior self-knowledge. This submission is not humility in the traditional religious sense, born of a sense of sinfulness or guilt, but a defense of pride and self-esteem as an enduring virtue.

THE DENIAL OF THE PERSONAL

What may seem strange, particularly to a modern sensibility, is the extent to which Dashkova and the people of her epoch equated the (good) self with universal and “natural” merit. As in classicist tragedy, the personal or private element, if not in harmony with the demands of family, society, and Nature, is ascribed to the dark side. Conversely, the virtuous self is in perfect accord with

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\(^{13}\) Dashkova herself suggests that “my life could serve a subject for a heartrending novel” (*Zapiski*, 35), and the memoir is punctuated with theatrical terms (tragedy, farce, comedy, the stage, etc.). This sort of reference may perhaps be common in autobiographical writing, but my suggestion is that Dashkova shared the special self-image and discourse about virtue and self-display that were reflected in Russian Classicist literary works, whose very function was to offer Russian society a “school for virtue.”
the absolute and universal. For Dashkova, to be virtuous is to act unselfishly, “disinterestedly,” and conversely, to act in the name of “personal interests” is evil. “Private” merit can only consist of impersonal virtue, and to act in one’s self-interest — selfishly — is to act in an evil way. Altruistic self-sacrifice is the measure of goodness. The following passage, in which Dashkova describes the consolations of pride in the face of suffering, is characteristic:

I never pursued either my personal interests or the criminal elevation of my own family...I...gathered support from the feeling of my own innocence, the purity of my conscience, and a certain moral pride which gave me strength and courage, but which I had never previously suspected in myself and which, after giving the matter much thought, I could only attribute to resignation, a sentiment proper to every rational being. (MPD 263–4)

Dashkova’s “resignation” includes a big dose of self-satisfaction, as she elevates herself to the ranks of “rational beings.”

Dashkova’s English friends Martha and Catherine Wilmot, who convinced Dashkova to write her memoirs, and helped with their actual production, also left several penetrating descriptions of this aspect of her self-image. In speaking of her conspicuous vanity, Martha wrote in a letter to her father that Dashkova’s

establish’d opinion of herself is such that, if I can make you feel what I mean, it is as if she was distinct from herself and look’d at her own acts and deeds and character with a degree of admiration that she never attempts to express the expression of, and that with a sort of artlessness that makes one almost forgive her. Her principles are noble and possess’d of influence which extends to absolute dominion over the happiness...[of] some thousands of Subjects. She invariablyexerts it for their welfare...As a relation she is everything to her family... ¹⁴

Dashkova presumes “a degree of admiration” for herself that is beyond expression, a conviction so absolute as to suggest her being seen “distinct from herself,” as if she were being seen in a mirror or on stage. What, according to Martha, (almost!) keeps this exalted sense of self-worth from being repellent is Dashkova’s “artlessness,” her presumption that image and reality match, the firm conviction that “her principles are noble” and disinterested. Martha shrewdly associates this attitude with Dashkova’s power, both as a landowner (her “absolute dominion” over her serfs — Martha’s italics) and the great influence she exercises over her extended family. Martha senses

¹⁴ The Russian Journals, 55–56.
a clear correlation between Dashkova’s assertion of political power and its justification as something “invariably” exerted for the “welfare” of those under her dominion.  

On the one hand, in an autocratic context, Dashkova’s claim on virtue may be seen as staking a claim on political power. As Safonov describes her predicament, “Dashkova had the courage to be a personality…at a time when only one person in this autocratic country had the right to be a personality — Catherine II.” This is the Dashkova who heroically challenged tyrants, and who stood up for enlightened ideals. On the other hand, as Martha sensed, Dashkova’s uncompromising insistence on her own moral authority itself reflected an uncomfortably authoritarian claim on virtue, which, as we have suggested, stemmed from her exalted altruistic conception of the virtuous self.

DASHKOVA AND FRANKLIN: THE RIGHT TO BE AN ODDITY

Franklin’s *Autobiography* offers both some striking points in common with Dashkova’s memoir as well as some sharp contrasts that help clarify the

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15 Catherine Wilmot likewise commented in a letter to Anna Chetwood that “Three thousand Peasants, ‘my subjects’ (as she calls them) live most happily under her absolute power; and of all the blessed hearted beings that ever existed on that subject she is the most blessed (excepting your Mother)” (*The Russian Journals*, 199).

16 M.M. Safonov, “Ekaterina malaia i ee ‘Zapiski,”’ in *Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova: issledovaniia i materialy*, ed. A.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov et al. Studiorum Slavicorum monumenta, v. 8 (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1996), 21. However, Dashkova did not or would not admit to any contradiction between Catherine’s regime and the moral imperative, although as Safonov’s argument suggests, it was not too far a distance from Dashkova’s “courage to be a personality” to the appearance of revolutionary ferment in subsequent decades.

17 Compare Richard Wortman’s description of Derzhavin’s memoirs: “their most striking characteristic for the historian…is Derzhvin’s ego, his limitless confidence in himself, the wonderful naïve sense that his personal progress and success are identical to the cause of justice and the national well being. This boundless self-certainty, which would be lacking in memoirs of a later era, provides the central unity and verve of the *Zapiski*.” Richard Wortman, “Introduction,” *Peresipska (1794–1816) i “Zapiski*” (1871; Cambridge, Eng.: Oriental Research Partners, 1973), 2–3. Writers’ insistence on equating personal and universal merit was also a central problem in establishing the norms of literary usage, and made literary critical discourse of mid-century Russia notoriously acrimonious. See my discussion in “Slander, Polemic, Criticism: Trediakovskii’s “Letter…Written from a Friend to a Friend” of 1750 and the Problem of Creating Russian Literary Criticism,” chap. 4 in this volume.
problem of virtue and making it public. Franklin shared with Dashkova a lifelong preoccupation with living a virtuous life. Both put virtue at the center of their ideal of the good life, and both framed the issue of being virtuous in terms of the good of society. Like Dashkova, Franklin argued that virtue is not of value merely or primarily for is own sake but as the single path to practical well being. As Franklin put it, “vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the nature of man alone considered.”\textsuperscript{18} No less than Dashkova, Franklin set very high moral standards, as exemplified in the well-known scheme for self-improvement that he laid out in the \textit{Autobiography}. He set forth to train himself in a list of thirteen leading virtues, an undertaking he described as “a bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.”\textsuperscript{19} He found implementation even more arduous than originally imagined. When it came to the last virtue on his list, humility, Franklin admitted that “no one of our natural passions [is] so hard to subdue as pride.” He wrote of its stubborn and paradoxical nature:

Disguise it, struggle with it, beat if down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for, even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.\textsuperscript{20}

Like Dashkova, and many other thinkers of the day, Franklin recognized the ambiguous status of pride (vanity, ambition, the desire for approbation) as a natural impulse that may be directed either to the good or the bad. Like Dashkova, Franklin argues in defense of what we may call good pride, that which produces “good to the possessor and to others that are within his sphere of action.”\textsuperscript{21} At the same time — and unlike Dashkova — he gently ridicules his own autobiographical project as not only offering the model of a life “fit to be imitated” but also as the comforting indulgence of an old man’s weakness. Dashkova never admits such weakness, nor does she admit the blemish of “bad pride” in herself. Franklin, on the other hand, recognizes both the ideal of the virtuous self and the intractable, all-too-human problems

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin}, intro. Lewis Leary (New York: Touchstone, 2004), 74.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Autobiography}, 66.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{The Autobiography}, 75.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Autobiography}, 2.
of its realization. In coming to grips with his “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection,” he notes that

something that pretended to be reason... was every now and then suggesting to me that such extream nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.22

While the “something that pretended to be reason” might gainsay the pursuit of moral perfection, Franklin nevertheless recognizes the drawbacks of the kind of militant “virtue on display” of the kind that Dashkova demands of herself. (And indeed she is constantly on guard against those who ridicule, envy, and hate her.) Where Dashkova insists on strict construction of virtue, and on the complete parity of the inner and outer self, Franklin allows for a degree of dissimulation. He either keeps his “extream nicety as I exacted of myself” to himself or, as he notes with regard to the attempt at exercising humility, allows himself the appearance rather than the reality.23

For Franklin, as for Dashkova, virtue and its recognition were an essentially social phenomena, forged in the crucible of sociability — the self as necessarily mirrored and negotiated through one’s peers. At the same time, we need to keep in mind the significant differences between the social and political contexts in which this sociability operated. Franklin describes the world of opinion-makers in colonial Philadelphia, a world in which he was a major player. Dashkova, on the other hand, struggled to assert herself within the restricted and highly-stratified setting of the court and European high society, and the “absolutist” context of old regime Russia also left its mark on her thinking. On the level of moral theory, Dashkova was a strict

22 The Autobiography, 73.
23 Franklin describes the efforts he made (and the “some violence” required) to control his “natural inclination” to express his opinions in confident and categorical terms, a moderation that with time he says became habitual. See for example his description of the strategy he used for earning public esteem by means of suppressing the natural inclination to demand immediate satisfaction of his pride (The Autobiography, 64). On Franklin’s self-control and phenomenally successful pursuit of approbation, see Edmund S. Morgan, Benjamin Franklin (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), especially chap. 1.
constructionist as regards to virtue, and her journalistic writings promote the virtuous life as a necessary goal. For example, she wrote that “Many consider virtue to be harsh and intolerant to human weaknesses (strogoi i k chelovecheskim slabostiam nesniskhoditelnoiu). True, for people suffering from vice, virtue is insupportable, and they can therefore never be happy; but for those who are able to think and feel, nothing is as pleasant as virtue.”

In sharp contrast to the Pennsylvania democrat, Dashkova was known for her sharp outspokenness, and she often remarks in her memoir upon her inability to restrain and conceal her emotions:

> Nature had not endowed me with the gift of pretence, so essential when dealing with Sovereigns and even more with the people round them. Disgust, contempt, indignation — there they all were, writ large on my countenance whenever I felt them. (MPD 276)

This was more than simply “natural” lack of self-restraint. Dashkova, like a heroine in a classicist tragedy, finds it almost impossible to dissemble before the great and mighty, as something ignoble and immoral.

Martha Wilmot also remarked upon this impulsiveness that was a hallmark of Dashkova’s behavior. She noted in her journal that

> It never enters into her head or heart to disguise any sentiment or impulse..., & therefore you may guess what a privileged sort of Mortal she makes herself! The Truth is sure to come out whether agreeable or disagreeable, & lucky it is she has sensibility & gentleness of Nature, for if she had not she would be a Public Scourge! She is the first by right, rank, sense & habit in every Company; & prerogative becomes such a matter of course that nothing appears extraordinary that she does.

The singularity and idiosyncrasy of Dashkova’s behavior — as with the “degree of admiration” she assumes for herself — is defined by the “privileged sort of Mortal she makes herself,” that is, her claim to set the norm “by right, rank, sense & habit in every Company” — by right of her greater virtue. Martha also attributes Dashkova’s sense of entitlement, of

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24 “O istinnom blagopoluchii,” Sobsednik liubitelei rossiiskogo slova, 3 (1783), 24–34; my citation is from E. R. Dashkova, O smysle slova “vospitanie”: sochinenia, pis’ma, documenty, ed. G. I. Smagina (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2001), 130.

25 The Russian Journals, 196.
expected deference, to her “imperial habits,” i.e., she again underscores the connection Dashkova assumes between political privilege and her superior moral virtue. Elsewhere she also comments on the “singularity” of Dashkova’s behavior in society:

…the compound of contradictions which form Princess D’s character exceed belief. There are times when she is perfectly a Woman of fashion & very elegant in her manners, but she has learnt so little of the art of concealing her feelings, whatever they may be, that she often is settling according to her own fancy the dishes on the table at the moment that the guests are all waiting to eat them & a hundred other singularities which it would be foolish & even wrong to write where they are so thoroughly counteracted by the admirable qualitys of her heart and understanding, by her invariable & comical love of truth (which makes her tell out things that set a large Company staring, twittering, blushing, biting their lips, and betraying a thousand different emotions not one of which she ever remarks), by her Celebrity, her rank & age, all which give her a right to be an Oddity, & Nature has stampt her such in the very fullest sense of the word. 26

Here the “right to be an Oddity” suggests Dashkova’s purposeful cultivation of celebrity, her playing upon the notoriety and special privileged status such behavior implicitly bestowed. In any case, the same basic mechanism is at work, as her idiosyncratic behavior is as balanced or justified by “the admirable qualitys of her heart and understanding, by her invariable & comical love of truth.” Paradoxically, the most marked singularity is founded on the conviction of supra-personal, universally applicable virtue. Whether speaking the truth to Sovereigns at court or guests at table she frames her behavior in a way that highlights this special status. At the same time, she asserts both her independence from, and paradoxical reliance on, public approbation. Her silence in the face of the public reaction (“staring, twittering, blushing, biting their lips, and betraying a thousand different emotions”), which in confronting tyrants signals her moral untouchability, here suggests a game in which she can demonstrate her peculiar claim on social superiority. If in one context such self-positioning could make Dashkova “a Public Scourge” who bravely exposes evil, as Franklin had noted, in other contexts “such extream nicety” when perceived as “a kind of foppery in morals” might also easily invite ridicule. 27

26 The Russian Journals, 360.
27 Indeed Dashkova is highly sensitive to becoming (as she puts it) “dupe of my own conscientious scruples” (MPD 198), which she feels happening quite often.
THE TRAGIC SIDE:
ALLIES AND TRAITORS

Like a heroic “great soul” of classicist tragedy, the protagonist is surrounded by a world that cannot possibly equal or appreciate her. In the confrontation with Emperor Paul Dashkova predicts her imminent maltreatment — “one of the many prophecies I have made which have come true.” She thus expresses both her superior understanding of the world, and, perhaps also on some deeper level, a comprehension that she sets the bar of virtue so high as to virtually invite persecution. Dashkova at one point describes herself as “an unhappy princess over whom a wicked wizard had cast an age-long spell” (MPD 242), and this is an apt characterization of the “tragic” self-image that haunts her from childhood. The absolute terms in which Dashkova frames her life tend to turn the world into a huge conspiracy to frustrate her virtuous strivings. Dashkova casts herself in the role of victim, so pure, innocent, and virtuous that the world cannot help but be eternally deficient and ungrateful. Failure, then, is not only inevitable but serves to confirm virtue, and indeed reinforces the conviction of moral superiority. Hers is a Cassandra-like tragic self-consciousness, trapped in frustrated virtue that is both self-defeating and self-justifying.

As in the episode with Paul, Dashkova sees her life as an exalted moral struggle between good and evil, life and death. In this struggle, only a very chosen few are able to live up to her altruistic standards. One such ally is her husband. His early death in 1764, leaving Dashkova with two young children, while one of those “bitter sorrows” that punctuated her existence, also perhaps helped to solidify his ideal image in Dashkova’s psychic economy.28 Dashkova was 21 at the time of his death and never remarried. She describes their love as unconditional and all-encompassing, and tells a remarkable story of how she made a clandestine night visit to him at her mother-in-law’s while pregnant (he was sick and trying to conceal this from both wife and mother). This episode strangely prefigures her conspiratorial behavior and dedication to Catherine. Dashkova’s relationship with the empress was both the most central and most problematic for defining her self-image. Dashkova’s public self image was intimately connected with Catherine, and as we have seen, was predicated on Catherine as an embodiment of political, moral and cultural ideals. Catherine also played a crucial formative role in Dashkova’s personal

28 And as Fitzlyon notes, they spent much of their short married life apart (MPD, 305).
development. Catherine was an inspiring role model—intellectually brilliant, self-possessed, politically clever and ambitious—and her meteoric career, in which Dashkova took pride in having played a significant part, offered an outlet and powerful vindication of Dashkova’s own role in the public, overwhelmingly male, arena. On the other hand, and starting immediately after Catherine’s elevation to the throne, Dashkova found many things to be desired in the empress. One constant area of friction was Dashkova’s demand for Catherine’s greater recognition of her selfless dedication and merit. Another perhaps related issue was Dashkova’s disapproval of the empresses’ peccadilloes in the private sphere; Dashkova particularly disapproved of Catherine’s taking lovers (“favorites”), something magnified by her early opposition to the political influence of the Orlovs and her sympathy for the Panin party.

DISGUISE, CONCEALMENT, BLINDNESS

With a few exceptions, then, almost none of those people close to Dashkova could fulfill her exalted expectations. Most obviously, and most painfully for Dashkova, were those closest to her—her children. In their adult lives both son and her daughter miserably failed to live up to their mother’s expectations. These disappointments, never fully explained, cast the most ominous shadow over her virtuous self-image. Like the twittering at table, but far more threatening, Dashkova acknowledges, and then purposefully

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29 Dashkova describes “earning the esteem” of the then Grand Duchess Catherine as a turning point in her young life. Catherine, who shared her intellectual passion—Dashkova asserts (surely a hyperbole) that she was the only other woman of her day “who did any serious reading”—captured her “heart and mind,” satisfying the emptiness that her privileged home education had failed to fill (MPD 35–6; cf. 32).

30 Like Panin, Dashkova advocated “limited monarchy” (MPD 60), that is, a limitation of Catherine’s autocracy via aristocratic power-sharing, although she did not seem to approve the Swedish model that Panin promoted (see MPD 65 and 67). Dashkova’s political disagreements with Catherine, however, remain obscure and should not be overstated. On Panin’s program, see David L. Ransel, The Politics of Catherinian Russia: The Panin Party (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975). Ransel asserts that Dashkova “suffered from the delusion of having single-handedly organized and carried through the coup d’etat in Catherine’s behalf” and notes that she “on occasion served as focal point” for nobles’ discontent with the empress (112–13).

31 Worzonoff-Dashkoff’s Dashkova: A Life of Influence and Exil, which appeared after this essay was written, explores Dashkova’s family relationships in depth.
ignores, those episodes that reveal the fragility, not to say immanent collapse, of her façade of unqualified virtue:

Criticism and malicious gossip, which I could treat with contempt in the perfect confidence that I was acting as a good mother should, were not, unfortunately, the only sorrow that [the] marriage [of my daughter] brought me. But I am determined to pass over in silence the most bitter of all the unhappy experiences I have had in my life, and shall continue with my narrative. (MPD 143)

...if the sorrows which oppressed my heart were such that I should willingly have concealed them from myself, I could not now reveal them to the general public. (MPD 280)

While Dashkova may be credited with discussing her children in the memoir at all — unusual in the mostly male autobiographical writing of the era — and thus to offer what some see as a validation of the female, private sphere, it seems to me that Dashkova’s image of motherhood belongs primarily to her virtuous, male, public self. As we have seen, Dashkova denied the autonomous value of “private interest,” and she also sees “motherhood” in terms of her disinterested service (to her children and to the public). Dashkova here too asserts her unalloyed virtue in the face of public criticism (“criticism and malicious gossip”) that conspires with her children’s disloyalty to challenge “the perfect confidence that I was acting as a good mother should.” (In later life, the Wilmots — who encouraged her to undertake the memoir — took on the role of surrogate “family,” offering Dashkova the security of unconditional veneration.) Characteristically, Dashkova preserves the image of her transparent virtue by an act of intellectual will — by expressing the wish not to see.

Dashkova’s monolithic ideal of the virtuous self thus constantly threatens to unravel, and, as critics have alleged, there is a basic tension in the memoir between disguise and revelation, a discontinuity among her various “selves”

32 In contrast, Barbara Heldt sees a “blending” of Dashkova’s public and private selves, although she argues that a “balance, the classical symmetry she seeks, is almost never realized at any one time” but emerges “over a lifetime.” See Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 69–71.
33 Characteristically, Dashkova has various prominent public figures giving voice to this view, as when the queen of England announces that “I have always known… that there are few mothers like you.” (MPD 151)
Chapter 19. Virtue Must Advertise

that Dashkova never quite reconciles.\textsuperscript{34} From this perspective, her self-presentation becomes a game of masks, a series of artificial, theatrical poses that do not necessarily cohere into a unified whole. One striking example that also exemplifies her play with gender roles is Dashkova's posture as “a simple old rustic” (MPD 156) whose naïve candor is sharply contrasted to the selfish intrigues of cosmopolitan court life. In contrast to the persona of tragic male virtue, the role of a “Ninette at court” (in reference to Charles Simon Favart’s “Ninette à la Cour, ou Le Caprice Amoureux” [1756], a comedy in two acts punctuated with short musical arias) offered a specifically feminine guise, emphasizing virtue not as serious, intellectual and male, but in terms of pastoral values of simplicity and unspoiled “artlessness.”\textsuperscript{35} If in the tragic role Dashkova was direct and confrontational, this role allowed for comic self-effacement and defensive retreat. At the same time, the role of “Ninette at court” might also be seen as a support for the tragic self, insofar it offered an additional intellectual proof of virtue; here the inability to disguise emotion is motivated not by noble indignation but by innocence and lack of pretense. The fact that in objective terms, Dashkova—a very complex, urban, cosmopolitan woman schooled in high court intrigue, and a princess from one of Russia’s best families—hardly fit the role of a simple country innocent, suggests the weight of the psychological burden that the serious self imposed on her, against which this role offered a measure of protection, and as it were, comic relief.

One moment when Dashkova assumes this kind of mask is when Catherine offers her the position as first woman head of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Catherine’s appointment triggers a minor crisis for Dashkova, who (somewhat uncharacteristically) fears herself unworthy. The two women engage in a peculiar negotiation of Dashkova’s public stature, which hinges

\textsuperscript{34} This is close to the position of A. Woronzoff-Dashkoff (in “Disguise and Gender,” partially repeated in the “Postface” to \textit{Mon histoire}), who foregrounds the concealment and dissimulation in Dashkova’s memoirs, arguing that “Dashkova’s tragedy was that she could not realize her dreams and desires within the accepted norms of eighteenth-century female behavior” (“Disguise and Gender,” 63).

\textsuperscript{35} My attention was drawn to this issue by Lyubov Golburt, “Discourses of the Self in the Eighteenth-Century Russia: E. R. Dashkova’s \textit{Mon Histoire},” delivered at the AATSEEL National Convention, New York, Dec. 28, 2002 (for the abstract see http://www.aatseel.org/program/aatseel/2002/abstracts/Golburt.html, accessed February 23, 2005). Goubert argues that Dashkova’s goal is “to portray herself not as just another court lady, but as a distinct public figure. In addition, pretending to aspire to rustic bliss, Dashkova once again flaunts the conventional, pastoral values for the sake of her autobiographical reliability.”
not only on Dashkova’s qualifications but on how the nomination will reflect on the empresses’ reputation. Catherine concludes on the paradoxical note, typical of a hero narrative, that “your refusal… has only confirmed my opinion that I could not have made a better choice.” (MPD 210) Among the arguments Dashkova puts forward against her nomination is that “God himself, by creating me a woman, had exempted me from accepting the employment of a Director of an Academy of Sciences” (MPD 201) — perhaps the only time in the memoir that Dashkova disparages capability purely on grounds of gender. Dashkova expresses amazement at “the extraordinary step you have just taken in making me *Monsieur le Directeur* of an Academy of Sciences” and warns the empress “that you will soon tire of leading the blind, for indeed I shall be an ignoramus at the head of Science” (MPD 204, my italics). She underscores her ignorance and inability by describing herself as blind. However, all this is but prelude to the resounding success of Dashkova’s powerful, virtuous, intellectual “male” persona, as Dashkova’s presidency takes the Academy to a new level of prosperity and achievement. As one critic has noted, Dashkova “makes protestations of incapacity and modesty, even as she details her capabilities and accomplishments.”36 In the given case Dashkova overcomes her reticence (or the specter of false modesty?) by arranging to be presented to the assembled academicians in her new office by the great mathematician Leonard Euler. Significantly, perhaps, Euler had already by this time become blind. Dashkova thus achieves visibility and prominence despite — or perhaps by virtue of — her own evident weakness and “blindness,” which paradoxically turns out to signal her own status, comparable to that of Euler, as a “great man.”

In general, the guise of “Ninette à la cour” fulfills a similar function, offering a way of defensive retreat from the crushing responsibility that falls on the Great Man, but one that also ultimately validates her greatness.

Indeed, Dashkova ultimately emphasizes the complete transparency of her motives. In a key passage in which Dashkova defends her relationship with Catherine she asserts the total openness — the visible virtue — of her writing:

I want to disguise nothing in this narrative. I shall tell of the little differences that cropped up between Her Majesty and myself, and because I shall hide nothing the reader will see for himself that I never fell into disgrace, as has been claimed by several writers who wanted to harm her interests, and that if the Empress did not do more for me, it was because she had an intimate knowledge of me and was quite aware that every form of self-seeking was entirely alien to my nature.

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36 Vowles, “The ‘Feminization,’” 44.
Besides, my heart remained, in the midst of Court life, so artless, so unspoilt, that I forgave even those who showed black ingratitude, egged on as they were by my all-powerful enemies who managed to turn against me those I had done all I could to help. I have waited forty-two years before venturing to reveal the whole of my experience of human ingratitude, which, however, never made me tired of doing all the good of which I was capable, often at the cost of great financial inconvenience, for my means were more than modest.

This remarkable passage offers a useful summation of the workings of Dashkova’s self-image. On the one hand, she offers herself as totally virtuous, disguising nothing, someone for whom “every form of self-seeking was entirely alien”; her heart is pure, “artless,” “unspoilt” and stoically forgiving. She will tell of the “little differences” she had with the Empress (that is, there were no big ones), and “because I shall hide nothing the reader will see for himself,” and all will be revealed. Yet this mask of stoic virtue and all-forgiveness is immediately undercut by the fact that the entire reason for writing, it emerges, is precisely to get back her own, to set the record straight, to reveal “the whole of my experience of human ingratitude” stored up over the course of forty-two years — that is, from the time of Catherine’s ascension to the throne in 1762 to the time she finished writing in 1805. This second, vehemently self-righteous and hyperbolically defensive posture undercuts the pose of artless simplicity, and forces the reader (especially perhaps a modern critical one) to take her pronouncements with a grain of skepticism. From Dashkova’s perspective, though, the writing of the text is motivated by the conviction that “virtue must advertise” — if only after holding back for forty-two years. Writing a memoir offered a magnificent opportunity to have the last word.