

‘WHAT WOULD VOLTAIRE SAY?’:  
VOLTAIRE’S EXCHANGE VALUE IN THE CORRESPONDENCE  
OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

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Christiane Mervaud has demonstrated how, in his correspondence, Voltaire reduced Catherine the Great to an ‘emblème’ and a ‘signe de ralliement’: in his letters she became a symbol of the protection of the arts and the struggle for religious toleration, and, *via* this transformation, her name became a publicity tool for promoting the cause of the *philosophes*.<sup>1</sup> But the complementary question has not yet been asked: what was Voltaire’s emblematic value in Catherine the Great’s correspondence?<sup>2</sup> From her *coup d’État* against her husband in 1762 until her death in 1796, the German-born empress of Russia definitively made Russia a formidable presence in Europe and at the same time made a name for herself as one of the eighteenth century’s ‘enlightened monarchs.’ In addition to her military and political leadership, her legislative efforts, and her literary

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- 1 Christiane Mervaud, ‘Portraits de Catherine II dans la *Correspondance* de Voltaire’, in *Catherine II et l’Europe*, ed. Anita Davidenkoff (Paris, Institut d’études slaves, 1997), pp.163-70, here p.169.
- 2 There have been many scholarly treatments of Voltaire’s image of Catherine and her nation, as well as studies of the Voltaire-Catherine correspondence. These include: Albert Lortholary, *Le Mirage russe en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, Boivin, 1951); Carolyn H. Wilberger, *Voltaire’s Russia: Window on the East, SVEC 164* (1976); David M. Griffiths, ‘To Live Forever: Catherine II, Voltaire and the Pursuit of Immortality’, in *Russia and World of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roger Bartlett *et al.* (Columbus, OH, Slavica, 1988), pp.446-68; Larry Wolff, ‘Addressing Eastern Europe, Part I: Voltaire’s Russia’, in *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.195-234; Larry Wolff, ‘Combat, correspondence and cartography: Voltaire and Catherine across the map of Eastern Europe’, in *Voltaire et ses combats*, ed. Ulla Kölvig and Christiane Mervaud, 2 vols. (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1997), vol.1, pp.241-53; Alexandre Stroev, ‘L’impératrice et le patriarche’, in *Voltaire Catherine II : Correspondance 1763-1778* (Paris, Non Lieu, 2006), pp.7-29; Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, ‘La correspondance de Voltaire et Catherine II : un jeu de rôle littéraire’, *Revue Voltaire* 11 (2011), pp.237-56. Andrei Zorin has explored the degree to which Voltaire did and did not contribute to the development of the ideology and symbolism associated with Catherine’s ‘Greek project’ in *Kormya dvuglavogo orla... Literatura i gosudarstvennaya ideologiya v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII-pervoi treti XIX veka* (Moscow, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), pp.33-64. However, no study has hitherto been published on Voltaire’s appearances in Catherine’s correspondence as a whole.

endeavours in various genres, Catherine wrote thousands of letters to fellow monarchs, to men and women of letters, to lovers, to diplomats, generals, and statesmen. While her exchanges with cultural figures like Voltaire are the most famous, she showed remarkable skill in using the epistolary art to exercise her power in all domains. Amongst her correspondents were heads of state who, like Catherine, were highly attuned to the cultural and political trends of their day and who, also like Catherine, have accordingly gone down in history as 'enlightened monarchs.' The ways that they use the name of Voltaire, the emblematic figure of the Enlightenment, in their exchanges amongst one another helpfully puts into perhaps unexpected perspective the reception of his persona and works by the crowned individuals for whom he often wrote. Catherine's exchanges with these most elite correspondents suggest that while Voltaire achieved his aim of becoming a presence in the life of kings, it was not always as an independent actor, but rather as a symbol of the literary culture through which diplomatic business could be done.

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Catherine and her correspondents did not engage in extensive discussion of Voltaire's ideas or personality, but rather traded allusions to Voltaire and his works that served their own purposes. Often ignoring the *philosophe's* ideas and typically at cross-purposes with Voltaire's own attempts at diplomatic action, Catherine and her princely correspondents in particular turned Voltaire into an emblem of cultured, literary sociability. Exchanging his texts and allusions to them, Catherine and her correspondents could carry out diplomacy in situations where the normal official channels of communication were blocked or inadequate for their purposes. All the participants in these exchanges had had personal interactions with Voltaire in one way or another: writing to one of the patriarch's correspondents about him was always a flattering nod to that marker of cultural superiority. Three stages in the evolution of Voltaire as a token for circulation in epistolary diplomacy can be discerned in Catherine's correspondence as a whole. During Voltaire's lifetime, Catherine and her princely correspondents, who were at that very time also interacting with the writer himself, used his works as a topic of epistolary conversation whereby they could make diplomatic points while appearing to talk only about literary and sociable entertainments. Then, after Voltaire's death, younger heads of state sought to curry favour with Catherine by taking part in this literary game: they flattered her by alluding to her interactions with the most famous figure in their shared elite culture. By exhibiting their skill at dressing diplomacy up as cultivated conversation, these crowned writers sought to form political ties with an empress known for her mastery of those arts. Finally, during the first years of the French Revolution, Catherine and her correspondents once again re-invented Voltaire as an emblem: they ventriloquised his endorsement of their

cultural superiority as a justification of their power and status in the face of the Revolutionary threat.

During Voltaire's lifetime, Catherine, Frederick the Great, and his brother Prince Henry of Prussia formed a cluster of princely letter writers who had personally interacted with Voltaire either in person, on paper, or both, and who prided themselves on keeping up-to-date on his works as they appeared, especially when they themselves were the works' subjects and addressees. In 1770 and 1771, Russia and Prussia were officially allies, which by treaty obliged Frederick the Great to subsidise Catherine's war against the Ottoman Empire and the Polish confederates. Voltaire took the opportunity to preach a philosophical crusade: he hoped to see the 'enlightened' rulers join forces to chase the Turks from Europe, especially from Greece, and to establish religious toleration in Poland.<sup>3</sup> But both Catherine and Frederick played little heed to Voltaire's exhortations because they both knew the diplomatic reality underneath the ostensible alliance: Frederick in fact had policy aims quite opposed Catherine's.<sup>4</sup> Their epistolary manoeuvres in writing to one another through and about Voltaire therefore had little to do with Voltaire's objectives in writing to and on behalf of these monarchs. Frederick's main goals were to force Catherine to make peace as fast as possible in order to prevent her from keeping the territory that her armies had conquered, and, in 1771, to get as big a slice of Poland as he could.<sup>5</sup> He employed every method he could devise to pressure his supposed ally into making peace: direct offers of mediation, intimidation by encouraging the Austrians to accumulate troops on their borders, and copious amounts of flattery. In the winter of 1770-71, Frederick's brother Henry visited St Petersburg, with a mission to flatter Catherine and to sound her out on the prospects for peace and for a partition of Poland. While Henry was in St Petersburg, Catherine showed to the prince a copy of Voltaire's *Épître au roi de la Chine*, which the author had sent to both Catherine and Frederick.<sup>6</sup>

3 Christiane Mervaud, *Voltaire et Frédéric II : une dramaturgie des lumières (1736-1778)*, SVEC 234 (1985), pp.408-409.

4 The two monarchs both told Voltaire as much in their letters. Catherine presented her resolution to fight on her own as another proof of her nation's strength: 'Je fais grand cas de l'amitié du Roy de Prusse, mais j'espère que je n'aurés pas besoin des cinquante mille homes que Vous voulés qu'il me done contre Moustafa' (31 March 1770 [OS], D16286). Frederick, however, was rather bitterer in his irony against his correspondent, pretending to be the true *philosophe* amongst them all: 'L'impératrice de Russie peut guerroyer à son aise [...]. Pour moi, qui crains les censures philosophiques et qui crains de commettre un crime de lèse-philosophie et l'excommunication encyclopédique, je me tiens en repos' (24 May 1770 [NS], D16362).

5 Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (London, Phoenix, 2002), pp.217-25.

6 Catherine to Voltaire, 23 January 1771 (OS), D16999: 'L'épître à mon rival est charmante, j'en ai d'abord fait part au Prince H[enry d]e Prusse à qui elle a fait un égale plaisir.'

Essentially a literary polemic, but containing a complimentary reference to Russian victories against the Ottomans, Voltaire's text offered the royals a point of cultural convergence where diplomatic disagreements could be addressed in a seemingly neutral, purely literary form. Accordingly, one of Henry's first gambits upon his return to Prussia was to send to Catherine a copy of the *Vers de l'empereur de la Chine*, Frederick's response to Voltaire's *Épître*. Frederick echoed Voltaire's praise for Catherine, but he modified it to send an unambiguous message about the necessity for a swift peace: 'Elle va constamment de victoire en victoire, / Et son grand cœur préfère, au comble des succès, / À ses lauriers sanglants l'olive de la paix.'<sup>7</sup> Under the cover of the Enlightenment's preference for peace over war in a literary dialogue with Voltaire, Frederick reminded Catherine of his purely diplomatic concerns. Catherine, however, perceived his strategy: without commenting on the demand for peace, she merely thanked, *via* Henry, the 'empereur de la Chine qui dans ses beaux vers me dit autant de choses flatteuses.'<sup>8</sup>

But the game was far from out: still convinced that he could get anything he wanted from Catherine if he flattered and entertained her enough, Frederick passed to his brother for conveyance to St Petersburg a copy of his fictional *Lettre du pape Clément XIV au mufti Osman Mola*.<sup>9</sup> Published alongside an introductory and equally fictional *Lettre de monsieur Nicolini à Monsieur Francouloni, procureur de S. Marc*, this letter transfigured the general drift of Frederick's foreign policy into an unlikely epistolary commerce: the imaginary letter from the pope to the Muslim religious leader purported to reveal that the Ottoman war was merely a cover for the pope's machinations in Poland. Frederick thus shifted his readers' attention back from the Ottoman war to Poland, just as he hoped to redirect Catherine's attention away from southern conquests and towards a Polish partition.<sup>10</sup> Catherine responded to Frederick with a fictional letter of her own, a reply from the Ottoman mufti to the pope which has sadly been lost. Frederick's answer to his brother's communication of the text shows, though, that he read Catherine's fictional letter for its real-

7 See the edition of both works, *Épître au roi de la Chine sur son recueil de vers qu'il a fait imprimer*, ed. Basil Guy and John R. Iverson, *OCV*, vol. 71c (2013), pp. 347-410 (here p. 406).

8 Catherine to Henry, 12/23 March 1771, in *Briefwechsel zwischen Heinrich Prinz von Preußen und Katharina II. von Rußland*, ed. R. Krauel (Berlin, Alexander Duncker, 1903), p. 49.

9 Frederick to Henry, 12 April 1771 (NS): 'je me réjouis, mon cher frère, de voir votre correspondance si bien établie avec cette Impératrice. Je vous prie de la cultiver avec soin, et s'il ne s'agit [que] de vous fournir quelques morceaux qui puissent l'amuser, je vous enverrai, mon cher frère, dans quelques jours une lettre du Pape au Mufti, qu'on suppose être écrite, il y a deux ans, assez raisonnablement ridicule pour amuser là-bas.' (*Politische Correspondenz Friedrich's des Großen*, ed. Johann Gustav Droysen *et al.*, 46 vols., Berlin, Duncker and Humblot, 1879-1939, vol. 31, p. 86, n. 19830).

10 *Lettre de monsieur Nicolini à monsieur Francouloni, procureur de S. Marc*, Cologne ([n.p.], 1771).

world diplomatic content: 'La réponse du Mufti dit bien des choses ; on y voit la façon de penser de l'Impératrice et la grande sensation que le succès de ses troupes a fait sur son esprit, en même temps la préférence qu'elle tâche d'attribuer à la religion grecque sur la catholique, quoique en effet je crois qu'elle en a très peu.'<sup>11</sup> Although Voltaire never saw Catherine's text, this entire indirect negotiation unfolded as a Voltairean game of irony and humour targeting the intolerance and barbarity of the Ottomans and of the pope in fictional but topical mock letters. Voltaire's style stood as a common cultural reference point that facilitated diplomacy through epistolary literature.

This exchange *via* Voltairean allusions was all the more necessary because it replaced official correspondence between the two monarchs for the entire first half of the year 1771: between February and August of this year, no letters were exchanged between Frederick and Catherine, despite the impending partition of Poland at the start of 1772. Frederick read and commented on the correspondence between Henry and Catherine, and it was his only means of personal access to Catherine outside diplomatic channels during these tense months. Even once the Polish deal was done, the two nations remained at odds. It is accordingly quite indicative that the highest density of references to Voltaire in the Henry-Catherine correspondence occurs precisely in 1771-72: discussion of Voltaire and his works remained a means of sublimating diplomatic tensions, maintaining apparently friendly ties, and yet sending political messages all the same. It was not necessary to write imitations of Voltaire: as the two correspondents bantered back and forth and exchanged one allusion for another, the texts that the correspondents chose to mention, or not to mention, said enough. Apparently basing his choice of text on his brother's assessment of Catherine's feigned preference for Orthodoxy, Henry next alluded to Voltaire's *Sermon du papa Nicolas Charisteski*, written in the voice of an enlightened Orthodox priest: 'Si je ne savais que Vous recevez, Madame, tous les ouvrages de Voltaire, j'aurais eu l'honneur d'envoyer à V. M. I. un sermon de sa composition [...] La St. église catholique qui se ligue avec les usurpateurs qui ont versé le sang des derniers des Constantins, n'est pas ménagé [*sic*].'<sup>12</sup> While not missing the chance for a nod to Catherine's prestigious relations with Voltaire, Henry followed his brother's policy line in interpreting the text, highlighting the absurdity of Polish Catholics allying themselves with the Ottomans as a means of dissociating the two issues. But he also sought to court

11 Frederick to Henry, 14 July 1771 (NS), in *Politische Correspondenz Friedrich's des Großen*, vol. 31, p. 246 (n. 20037).

12 Henry to Catherine, 21 June 1771 (NS), in *Briefwechsel zwischen Heinrich Prinz von Preußen und Katharina II. von Rußland*, pp. 57-58; *Sermon du papa Nicolas Charisteski*, ed. Michel Mervaud, *OCV*, vol. 73 (2004), pp. 291-312.

Catherine's favour by immediately shifting the discussion away from policy and toward Catherine's social life: he concluded his comments by supplying praise for the 'esprit' and 'attachement' of her favourite Grigory Orlov, whom Voltaire had neglected to mention the *Sermon*. By turning Voltaire's text into an occasion for society chatter, Henry tried to keep his nation on good terms with Russia despite their differences of policy.

In her reply, Catherine countered with an allusion to a text that Henry had manifestly chosen not to mention: the *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie*. This text, more so than the *Sermon*, made the case for Catherine's ability to enact Enlightenment by fighting the Ottomans, concluding as it did: 'Achève, Catherine, et rends tes ennemis, / Le Grand Turc, et les sots, éclairés et soumis'. Voltaire had intended it as a tool for binding his two crowned correspondents together: the epistle in praise of Catherine quoted a verse from Frederick's *Épître à mon frère*, which the then crown prince had sent to Voltaire in 1738 and which already borrowed two slightly modified verses from Voltaire's *Henriade*.<sup>13</sup> With this ploy, Voltaire set out to create a dialogue and even consensus between the two great rulers of his age. In asserting that 'Ce grand homme [Frederick] a raison. Les exemples d'un roi / Feraient oublier Dieu, la nature et la loi,' Voltaire argued that his two royal correspondents should both choose instead to bring Enlightenment by example and, if necessary, by conquest.<sup>14</sup> Voltaire used his pistolary network to try to connect the monarchs as well: he sent the *Épître* to Frederick only three days after he sent it to Catherine.<sup>15</sup> But, for the Prussians, encouragement to pursue her conquests was the last message that Catherine should be hearing, so they themselves pretended not to hear it. Frederick replied to Voltaire coolly, repeating his usual view that Catherine thrived on flattery: 'Votre impératrice sera sans doute flattée de l'*Épître* que vous lui adressez.'<sup>16</sup> Henry indubitably knew about the *Épître* from his brother: his choice not to mention it in his letters again followed his brother's frigid attitude toward the epistle. As for Catherine, it seems she could not wait to remind Henry of it:

13 *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie*, ed. John Pappas and Andrew Kahn, *OCV*, vol.73 (2004), pp.435-50; Frederick the Great, 'Épître I. À mon frère de Prusse', in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, ed. Johann D.E. Preuss, 30 vols. (Berlin, Decker, 1846-1856), vol.10, pp.61-67 (here pp.63, 66); Frederick to Voltaire, 22 November 1738 (NS), D1663. From Voltaire's *Épître*: 'Un grand homme du temps a dit dans un beau livre : / "Quand Auguste buvait, la Pologne était ivre"' (p.447). The original reads 'Lorsqu'Auguste...'; Voltaire cites the original in a footnote (p.450). The *Épître à mon frère* includes the lines, 'Mais surtout des héros évitez la faiblesse, / Fuyez d'un tendre amour l'amorce enchanteresse' (p.66), which come from Canto 1, lines 261-62, of Voltaire's *Henriade*: 'Surtout des plus grands cœurs évitez la faiblesse, / Fuyez d'un doux poison l'amorce enchanteresse' (ed. Owen R. Taylor, *OCV*, vol.2, 1970, p.379).

14 *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie*, p.447.

15 Voltaire to Frederick, 1 March 1771 (NS), D17052. Voltaire had sent the poem to Catherine on 27 February (NS), D17045.

16 Frederick to Voltaire, 19 March 1771 (NS), D17099.

'Voltaire m'a envoyé le sermon, [...] il m'a aussi fait parvenir une épître en vers qui est très plaisante, mais que je n'ai osée [*sic*] envoyer à V. A. R., quoique j'en aie été tentée plusieurs [*sic*] fois.'<sup>17</sup> No further commentary on the *Épître* was needed: Catherine knew perfectly well that Henry had seen it; she presented it as simply an entertainment, something 'plaisant' that belonged in their apparently neutral sphere of literary sociability; and yet her point about her upper hand in the domains of both military strength and public-relations support was clear. The superficially polite opposition between the two correspondents stands out clearly in Henry's reply: he took Catherine's ostensible non-revelation of the text as an excuse again not to mention the *Épître* at all. Instead, he turned Voltaire's motif of royal exemplarity into a backhanded compliment and a further argument for peace: 'la valeur des musulmans pouvait-elle surpasser celle d'une nation qui a devant ses yeux la magnanimité, la justice et la clémence du souverain à qui elle a le bonheur d'appartenir ? Je ne vois donc dans une action d'éclat qu'une affaire toute naturelle [...] Tant d'événements heureux doivent enfin accélérer le moment si désiré de la paix.'<sup>18</sup> By insisting on how 'natural' Catherine's army's victories were, Henry implied that they were not that great after all; as a result of all that 'luck' ('tant d'événements heureux'), the Prussian demand for peace ought to be fulfilled. The courtesy of an apparently friendly epistolary exchange about literature and full of mutual flattery barely concealed the tensions and ulterior motives behind each allusion and each word.

This case is an exceptionally elaborate diplomatic exchange *via* Voltaire's name and works in Catherine's correspondence during the writer's lifetime. It illustrates clearly how Voltaire had already come to signify the most cultivated form of literary entertainment for the royals of Europe, cueing an outwardly offhand treatment of the texts as topics for friendly discussion. The highest echelons of society largely ignored Voltaire's own diplomatic initiatives, but his status as an elegant writer who wrote for and to them allowed them to use mentions of him and his works both as markers of their own cultural pre-eminence and as means of indirectly communicating their own diplomatic messages in an apparently non-confrontational manner.

In the immediate aftermath of Voltaire's death, Catherine quite explicitly turned Voltaire into a symbol in her correspondence: a symbol of quality literary entertainment. She wrote to her favourite correspondent, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, already on 11 August 1778 (OS): 'Depuis que Voltaire est mort, il me

17 Catherine to Henry, 3/14 July 1771, in *Briefwechsel zwischen Heinrich Prinz von Preußen und Katharina II. von Rußland*, p.59.

18 Henry to Catherine, 9 August 1771 (NS), in *Briefwechsel zwischen Heinrich Prinz von Preußen und Katharina II. von Rußland*, p.64.



semble qu'il n'y a plus d'honneur attaché à la bonne humeur; c'était lui qui était la divinité de la gaieté.'<sup>19</sup> This emblematic Voltaire reappeared frequently in the years that followed, for instance in 1781: 'chez moi, quand je dis le dieu de l'agrément, cela est synonyme au nom de Voltaire : les anciens l'auraient déifié, et l'agrément aurait été son partage.'<sup>20</sup> The attributes that Catherine gives to her deified Voltaire, gaiety and charm, are entirely those of light literature and society entertainment. But this apparent neutralisation of Voltaire's political activity in no way prevented the token 'Voltaire' from being used by Catherine and her illustrious correspondents to send their own diplomatic messages: it was precisely his power to represent a seemingly innocuous but distinctly elite culture that made him a lastingly useful tool.

This diplomatic exchange value of Voltaire in Catherine's correspondences can be seen from the efforts of two of Catherine's younger colleagues on the thrones of Europe, Gustav III of Sweden and Joseph II of the Holy Roman Empire, to form closer ties with Catherine by insinuating themselves into the epistolary conversation about and *via* Voltaire. In 1779, Gustav was engaged in ongoing endeavours to court Catherine's diplomatic favour despite personal dislike between the two first cousins. He struck up an informal correspondence with Catherine alongside official channels, and, in the course of the exchange, he also sent a series of gifts. One such gift was a painting of the 'Cabinet de lecture de Drotningholm,' accompanied by an explanation of the subject in Gustav's own hand. It represented the Swedish court at leisure, with, in the foreground, the king's reader with his back to the viewer: Gustav added, 'Il lit dans les œuvres de Voltaire les vers qu'il a adressés à l'Impératrice.'<sup>21</sup> Gustav did not even need to quote the *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie*: the implied flattery for Catherine personally as a former correspondent of Voltaire and the proclamation of a shared enlightened culture, first and foremost exemplified by reading Voltaire, sufficiently signified Gustav's aim of winning over the empress. Gustav wanted to insinuate himself into the chain of cross-references between the major figures of his age, which joined Voltaire, Frederick, Henry, and Catherine in epistolary trading of and on the *Épître*. Catherine, however, was far from being won over, and she countered Gustav's reading of the painting with her own: 'J'ai été enchanté du joli tableau sur lequel il [Gustav] est représenté avec une partie de Sa famille, au moment d'une lecture que personne n'écoute, excepté peut-être la dame aux chiffons, si tant [il] y a que l'épagueul

19 *Sbornik imperatorskago russkago istoricheskago obshchestva* [henceforth *SIRIO*], 136 vols. (St Petersburg, Imp. Akademiya Nauk, 1874-1916), vol. 23, p. 96.

20 23 June 1781 (OS), *ibid.*, p. 208.

21 Gustav to Catherine, [1779], in *Catherine II et Gustave III : une correspondance retrouvée*, ed. Gunnar von Proschwitz (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 1998), p. 142.



qui jappe ne l'en empêche.'<sup>22</sup> She thus somewhat mischievously points out that there is no way to tell from the painting what is being read aloud: Gustav's flattery may well have been invented post-hoc. But knowing what Gustav claimed was being read reveals Catherine's double-edged modesty. On the one hand, her claim that no one is listening to the reading of the *Épître* could be interpreted simply as graceful downplaying of Gustav's flattery; on the other hand, her comments also could send the veiled message that no one at Gustav's court actually pays any heed to her authority or to what she would like to see happen in Swedish politics, since they are too busy thinking of themselves. She implies that Gustav's professed admiration is like a poetry reading that no one is listening to: words with no significance or audience.

Even Joseph II was obliged to resort to this strategy when he and Catherine sought to form an alliance in 1780-81. Joseph was notorious for snubbing Voltaire when he passed straight by Ferney on his way home from France in 1777 without calling on Europe's most famous writer. But Joseph also had a habit of conforming to his interlocutors' opinions regarding the patriarch, as the occasion required.<sup>23</sup> So, to consolidate the positive impression he had made at his first personal meeting with Catherine in spring 1780, he paid his dues to her cultural reputation by introducing Voltaire's name into his new correspondence with the Russian empress. Joseph's allusion set out to prove that he too had been talked about by Voltaire and that he therefore could aim to enter into Catherine's epistolary conversation like the monarchs that had come before him. Pleased with her friendly letter sent after their meeting, Joseph weighed Catherine's present judgment against Voltaire's past one: 'j'ai contredit le pronostic que Voltaire avait fait si joliment de moi, lorsque je passai près de chez lui sans faire des démarches pour le voir.' According to Joseph, Voltaire had said that all Europe's other great men, including Catherine, had already claimed all the available virtues and great qualities, leaving to Joseph only the virtue of modesty. But Joseph asserted that his modesty had failed him when he received Catherine's letter, since, as he told himself proudly, 'Catherine l'approuve.'<sup>24</sup> Both correspondents were aware of Voltaire's former ambitions to be the judge of monarchs' merits, but now they reclaimed that power for themselves, reducing Voltaire's name to a token of mutual recognition as monarchs with shared cultural and political ambitions of their own. Catherine delicately pretended to be unaware of Voltaire's piqued comments, and she undertook to predict that Voltaire, had he lived, would have

<sup>22</sup> 9 August 1779 (OS), *Catherine II et Gustave III*, p.143.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Beales, *Joseph II*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987-2009), vol.1 (1987), pp.382-85.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph to Catherine, 13 November 1780 (NS), in *Joseph II. und Katharina von Russland. Ihr Briefwechsel*, ed. Alfred Ritter von Arneth (Vienna, Wilhelm Braumüller, 1869), p.14.

reversed his judgment: 'je me rends garant que ce même Voltaire que le dépit a fait bavarder dans ce moment, s'il avait eu le bonheur de voir et d'entendre une demie-heure [*sic*] celui sur le compte duquel il se trompait, Voltaire, dis-je, dont l'âme avait l'enthousiasme du grand et du beau, aurait regardé comme sublime la modestie compagne des plus hautes vertus.'<sup>25</sup> Unlike with Gustav, Catherine was eager to form an alliance with Joseph. Catherine transferred her own views onto Voltaire: she had enjoyed Joseph's conversation during his visit and wanted to progress to a political bond based on the rhetoric of personal friendship and admiration between sovereigns. Her response to Joseph is an instance of what might be termed the 'What Would Voltaire Say?' motif in Catherine's correspondence after Voltaire's death: using Voltaire as a symbol of good conversation and literature, Catherine and her correspondents presumed to speak in his name and to send their own serious messages by intentionally conflating the literary, the social, and the political. On the basis of their previous encounters, or missed encounters, with Voltaire, they arrogated the right to reinvent Voltaire's opinions, speaking through him to attain their own ends.

This habit of talking in Voltaire's name and of turning him into a symbol of the cultural superiority that justified the rule of an 'enlightened' elite took on new significance with the onset of the French Revolution. Catherine's correspondence with Friedrich Melchior Grimm again renders explicit the idea behind the motif. She and Grimm repeatedly asserted that Voltaire, had he lived to see the Revolution, would have agreed with Catherine in opposing it: as she wrote, 'qu'est-ce que les Français feront de leurs meilleurs auteurs, qui tous presque vivaient sous Louis XIV ? Voltaire même, tous sont royalistes, ils prêchent tous l'ordre et la tranquillité et tout ce qui est opposé au système de l'hydre aux douze cents têtes.'<sup>26</sup> For the absolute rulers of Catherine's age, who saw themselves as imitators of Louis XIV's dazzling court, good literature and monarchy ought to be allied. Catherine still used Voltaire when writing through Grimm to other royals of Europe. In 1791, two decades after Voltaire first wrote the *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie*, it again surfaced in Catherine's correspondence. By this time Catherine and Henry of Prussia could no longer correspond directly: far from allies, the two nations were teetering on the verge of war with one another. Living in retirement and hoping for peace, Henry paid court to Catherine through Grimm, who copied out and forwarded to St Petersburg the relevant extracts from the letters that he received from Henry.<sup>27</sup> Replying to one series of such

<sup>25</sup> Catherine to Joseph, 20 November 1780 (OS), *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine to Grimm, 12 September 1790 (OS), *SIRIO*, vol.23, p.493.

<sup>27</sup> Chester V. Easum, *Prince Henry of Prussia: Brother of Frederick the Great* (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), p.350.

extracts, Catherine herself quoted a slightly altered version of the last lines of Voltaire's *Épître*. Defying the Prussian-supported English threat to send a fleet into the Baltic to attack her, Catherine declared: 'C'est bien là qu'on pourrait dire avec Voltaire : "À quels sots tyrans as-tu confié le monde !" Car cette menace est une sottise de plus, et puis c'est tout.'<sup>28</sup> Just as twenty years earlier, Catherine had written through Henry and Voltaire to inform Frederick of her confidence in her own might; now too she wrote through Grimm, Henry, and Voltaire to send the same message to Frederick's nephew and successor, King Frederick William II.

After the death of Joseph II in 1790 and of Gustav III in March 1792, Catherine had no major royal correspondences of literary interest. However, her exchanges with some other elites continued to the end of her life. Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne, a Belgian aristocrat, military man, and diplomat in the service of the Holy Roman Empire, wrote in 1790 the most extended example of the 'What Would Voltaire Say?' motif in Catherine's epistolary corpus. Upon reading the correspondence with Catherine printed in the Kehl edition of Voltaire's complete works, de Ligne wrote a lengthy and as usual highly laudatory letter to Catherine about it. He framed the letter precisely as a conversation with the empress through Voltaire: 'je viens seulement de lire les lettres de Votre Majesté Impériale à M. de Voltaire ; j'ai ri, ou j'ai admiré : et moyennant cela, j'ai cru, Madame, vous entendre.' Bemused at the letters in which Catherine refuted the French government's pronouncements that Russia was nearly bankrupt and would have to give up her double war with the Ottomans and the Poles in 1768-74, de Ligne drew an obvious parallel with Catherine's situation in 1790, when she was again fighting a war on multiple fronts. He then moved on to invectives against Revolutionary France, and once again he placed Voltaire on his own side against the Revolutionaries: 'Qu'écrirait ce pauvre Voltaire ? Cela l'occuperait trop, pour qu'il songeât encore à insulter Votre Majesté Impériale, sur son nom de Catherine.'<sup>29</sup> Catherine concurred that Voltaire would have opposed the rebellions raging in France and, of more immediate concern to the empress, in Poland: 'Voltaire n'aimait aucun fanatisme et ses écrits avaient une grande influence sur les esprits de ses contemporains.'<sup>30</sup>

28 Catherine to Grimm, 23 April 1791 (OS), *SIRIO*, vol.23, p.515. The original lines of Voltaire's *Épître à l'impératrice de Russie* are: 'Ô sagesse des dieux, je te crois très profonde ; / Mais à quels plats tyrans as-tu livré le monde !' (*OCV*, vol.73, p.448).

29 Prince de Ligne to Catherine, 14 July 1790 (NS), in Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne, *Correspondances russes*, ed. Alexandre Stroev and Jeroom Vercruyssen, 2 vols. (Paris, H. Champion, 2013), vol.1, pp.169-74; Voltaire to Catherine, [November 1765], D12973.

30 Catherine to the Prince de Ligne, 5/16 August 1790, in *Correspondances russes*, vol.1, pp.180-81.

Into the early 1790s, until Voltaire became too firmly associated with Revolutionary discourse, political elites could thus still speak comfortably through Voltaire, trading in his name as their common cultural currency. Both during his life and after his death, Voltaire's name and works were valuable tokens in the epistolary commerce of flattery that was an essential means of conducting diplomacy in the eighteenth century. His legacy was disputed in monarchs' letters, but not in the terms one might expect: even as late as the 1790s, Voltaire could be appropriated as a mouthpiece for elites confident of their superiority, who had been born and bred on Voltaire's works as the pinnacle of contemporary culture. Even despite the clear instrumentalisation of Voltaire and his legacy that dominates these elite uses of his name, their sheer frequency and offhandedness suggest that it would be wrong to see them as mere cynicism. Voltaire genuinely symbolised the shared culture of these crowned heads, and the Revolution deprived them not only of their uncontested position of power, but also of the literary reference points and epistolary rhetorical toolkit to which they had been accustomed.