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## The Performance of Maternal Sentiment in the Memoirs and Letters of Ekaterina Dashkova, or How ‘*une mère, sagemente tendre*’ Became Director of the Academy of Sciences

The emphatic professions of maternal sentiment found in the memoirs and correspondence of Ekaterina Dashkova indicate how important this was for her self-presentation. This article explores the pragmatics of these motherly effusions by examining their diverse functions – personal, rhetorical, social, and political – in the context of Dashkova’s account of taking her son to the University of Edinburgh in 1776. Making use of archival materials from the National Library of Scotland, we read Dashkova’s memoir version of negotiating with the University against the letters that she wrote at the time to principal William Robertson, and those written to him simultaneously by his friend Alexander Wedderburn which take Dashkova as their subject. We argue that Dashkova employed the epistolary performance of motherly tenderness both to integrate her son into a course of study in Edinburgh and to establish valuable personal connections of her own that would serve her well upon return to Russia.

Ekaterina Dashkova is well-known for the professions of maternal sentiment that lace the memoir *Mon histoire*, her best known text and the source of much of what we know about her. Nonetheless, there is some debate about how to interpret this retrospective performance of maternity. Some take the numerous passages in which she describes herself as a selfless and devoted mother to be reliable portraiture (e.g. Dashkova 2001: 22), while others hold a more distanced view. Marcus Levitt, for example, argues that *Mon*

*histoire* is an ‘eloquent exercise in constructing a self-image’ in which Dashkova’s self-presentation even sometimes resembles that of ‘a heroine of tragic drama or a sentimental novel’ (Levitt 2006: 41, 43). Indeed, though there is little doubt that she actually felt real love and concern for her children, her frequent and forceful emphasis on motherly sentiment encourages us to take such assertions with a grain of salt. Moreover, within *Mon histoire*, the loving sentiments that Dashkova so vociferously claims

to feel are not fully illustrated – and sometimes even contradicted – by her obvious interest in other things, often her own role in politics and society. She avers having undertaken her first grand tour abroad (1769-1772) for the sake of her children's health, for example, although there is little or no mention of health concerns in her account of the actual trip and fewer references to either her daughter or son than to socializing with illustrious personages *en route*. And since *Mon histoire* goes on to recount the negative turn that her relationships with both children took as they grew, it favours the impression that her performance of maternal sentiment is in part driven by a desire to somehow justify herself, perhaps assuaging a feeling of inner guilt, and demonstrate her innocence and even victimization at the hands of ill-mannered and ungrateful offspring.

It is worth noting, then, that still more extensive profusions of maternal dedication are to be found in Dashkova's correspondence, a fact suggesting that the performance of maternity was as important for her contemporary self-presentation as it was in her retrospective version of events and also that it was not simply motivated by defensiveness. While a desire to

justify her comportment may have been partly responsible for *Mon histoire's* emphasis on maternal feeling, Dashkova's motherly qualities do not seem to have been particularly ill regarded by those who knew her: no suggestions to that effect appear in the commentary left by contemporaries, although disparaging remarks on her other qualities and actions are not infrequent (cf. Cross 1980: 235-40; Chekunova 1996: 55-58, Barker 2019). In fact, Dashkova stands out among her peers for the active interest that she took in motherhood and child-rearing, closely attending to the schooling of her own children (a subject of great pride), and more generally advocating enlightened views on upbringing and education [*vospitanie*], even publishing a number of essays on the topic. Thus, even if we regard with caution her self-report of receiving praise for her mothering from the Queen of England – said to have greeted her with the words: 'Je l'avais déjà su, et vous me prouvez encore davantage que vous êtes une mère comme il y en a peu' [I already knew, and you have given me additional proof, that you are a mother like few others]

(Dashkova 1999: 114)<sup>1</sup> – it is clear that Dashkova’s maternal preoccupations made a notable impression on foreign acquaintances. She was seen as a mother deeply involved with her children’s upbringing and education and also as one who wished to be regarded as such.

In point of fact, Dashkova’s motherly effusions perform diverse functions – personal, rhetorical, social, and political – only one of which is actually expressing maternal sentiment. This article begins with a brief example from *Mon histoire* that illustrates how Dashkova’s professions of maternal sentiment could be employed as a petitioner’s strategy. We then focus on a series of letters that Dashkova wrote in 1776 to William Robertson, well-known historian and principal of Edinburgh Universi-

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<sup>1</sup> *Mon histoire* exists in several versions. The original text was destroyed in 1808, but two copies made from that still exist. We rely here on Dashkova 1999, the published version of the manuscript copy of *Mon histoire* that was taken from Russia to Britain by Catherine Wilmot in 1807. The other copy, which remained among Dashkova’s own papers and was published in the *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova* (Dashkova 1881), appears to have been an earlier draft since it lacks additions in Dashkova’s own hand. On the writing and copying of Dashkova’s *Memoirs*, see Woronzoff-Dashkoff 1995. All translations in this article are my own.

ty, in connection with bringing her son Pavel to study at his institution. By examining these letters in sequence and reading them against the narrative of *Mon histoire*, we explore the pragmatics of motherly sentiment found within them. Primary among these letters’ multiple illocutionary aims was integrating Pavel into a course of study at the University of Edinburgh and Dashkova herself into academic society there. Given the roughly 40-year gap that exists between the memoir version of these events and what is reported in the letters, it is not surprising that there are a number of discontinuities between them. The nature of the gap is quite instructive, however, and ultimately allows us to better understand Dashkova’s rhetorical techniques and epistolary practice and thus to become better readers of both her memoirs and letters, and to more fully and perhaps more justly understand Dashkova herself.<sup>2</sup>

We make use of archival materials from the National Library of Scotland, including, in addition to Dashkova’s own letters, two 1776 epistles to Robertson written by Alexander Wedderburn, member of Parliament and the

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Victoria Frede for urging me in this direction.

first Earl of Rosslyn, who was acquainted with both Robertson and Dashkova and sometimes served as an intermediary between them. Wedderburn's letters unexpectedly illuminate Dashkova's performance of motherhood, corroborating her wide use of this particular rhetorical strategy in order to establish personal ties to Robertson and other Edinburgh luminaries. Ultimately, we can confirm Levitt's perceptive comment that 'Dashkova's image of motherhood belongs primarily to her virtuous, male, public self' (Levitt 2006: 50). If Pavel's education and general familiarization with elite European society (the goal of his grand tour) was intended to prepare him for a future career in the Russian service, Dashkova's own service career far outshone that of her son. This article explores how Dashkova employs the epistolary performance of motherly tenderness to establish personal connections with professors at the University of Edinburgh that subsequently helped to smooth the way towards her directorship at the Imperial Academy of Sciences<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank manuscripts curator Ralph McLean and his colleagues at the National Library of Scotland for invaluable help with locating Dashkova's correspondence and related archiv-

### Maternal Sentiment in *Mon histoire*

The heterogenous aims of Dashkova's professions of maternal sentiment may be illustrated by a relatively simple example from *Mon histoire*. As noted, that memoir indicates that concern for her children's health was the primary factor that led Dashkova to undertake her first European tour: 'L'année 1768 je sollicitai en vain la permission d'aller dans les pays étrangers, éspérant qu'un changement d'air et le voyage feraient du bien à mes enfants, qui avaient la maladie anglaise et étaient d'une santé faible' [In the year 1768 I solicited in vain permission to journey abroad in the hope that a change of air and travel would be good for my children, who had the English disease [rickets] and were in poor health] (Dashkova 1999: 83).<sup>4</sup> There were other motivations as well, however, including Dashkova's own interest in travel and an increasingly

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al materials. A debt of gratitude also goes to Angela Brintlinger for her comments on a draft of this article and to Rodolphe Baudin for his insights on Dashkova's French.

<sup>4</sup> Here the version found in Dashkova 1881 (123) differs in omitting the phrase 'et étaient d'une santé faible'.

difficult relationship with Catherine II, with a consequent desire to put distance between the empress and herself (Grot 2001: 368; Lozinskaia 1978: 38; Woronzoff-Dashkoff 2008: 94-97). While their strained rapport is touched upon in *Mon histoire*, it is not directly credited with inspiring Dashkova's trip: children's health serves as a more palatable substitute for a delicate and inopportune topic. Moreover, this reference to her children is not only employed in the memoir's retrospective characterization of her motivations for travel, but also, she reports, presented to Catherine in the request to travel abroad that Dashkova made during a brief conversation held at a ball:

je priai Sa Majesté de me permettre, pour la santé de mes enfants, d'aller pour deux ans dans les pays étrangers. Elle n'eut garde de me refuser et me dit: 'Je suis fâchée de la raison qui vous fait entreprendre des voyages; mai vous êtes certainement la maîtresse, madame, de partir quand vous voudrez'. (Dashkova 1999: 85)

I begged Her Majesty to allow me, for the health of my children, to go abroad

for two years. She did not care to refuse me and said to me: 'I regret the reason that causes you to undertake travel; but you are certainly the mistress, Madam, of leaving when you like'.

This is an exchange between two women skilled in diplomatic repartee, neither of whom chooses to directly address their mutually strained relationship. By couching her requests in a form agreeable to courtly etiquette, Dashkova manages simultaneously to avoid an unpleasant subject and to evade demeaning herself 'with abasement and chagrin' [*unizheniem i ogorcheniem*], her later formulation of what was usually required to obtain favours at court (Dashkova 2001: 247). In expressing dismay at the state of the Dashkov children's health, Catherine concedes her petitioner's framing of the topic. Another feature of this colloquy worth remarking is its affirmative result: the Empress did indeed grant Dashkova's request to travel. Indeed, citing the health and welfare of her children undoubtedly served as one of Dashkova's most preferred strategies for petitioning because professions of maternal feeling implied no loss of face

and tended to favourably influence the response of interlocutors, who could not easily deny requests made in the name of a mother's love. Similar conditioning of eventual outcomes was certainly one purpose of the fervent professions of maternal feeling found in Dashkova's letters to William Robertson.

#### Professing Maternal Sentiment to Robertson: Memoirs vs. Letters

Dashkova's letters to William Robertson date from her second extended European journey, undertaken, she explains in *Mon histoire*, to achieve 'the classical and final education of my son' [l'éducation classique et final de mon fils]. This was the official reason given to Catherine, who again granted Dashkova's request to travel, albeit 'with incredible coldness' [une froideur incroyable] (Dashkova 1999: 107). Once again, their relationship was in difficult straits, which added to the appeal of a prolonged sojourn abroad. On this trip Dashkova and her son, now thirteen, were accompanied by the fifteen-year-old Anastasiia, also known as 'Madame Shcherbinina' in view of her re-

cent marriage.<sup>5</sup> They were to spend a few years in Edinburgh to be followed by a tour of the continent; the entire journey lasted over six years (1776-1782). Dashkova first wrote to Robertson from Spa. Her project to take Pavel to Britain was well known in Russia before her departure and, given Dashkova's prominence and the number of personal links that existed in this period between Petersburg and Edinburgh, it seems likely that Robertson would have been apprised of her intentions before receiving her letter. Nonetheless, direct arrangements with the University of Edinburgh waited, she recalls in *Mon histoire*, until she had drafted a letter announcing:

que je viendrais en automne m'établir pour tout le temps des études de mon fils à Édimbourg, qu'il n'avait que treize ans et que j'aurais vraisemblablement besoin d'être guidée par lui pendant le

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<sup>5</sup> Dashkova had providently arranged for Anastasiia's marriage to the much older A. E. Shcherbin (b. 1735) before departing on the long tour from which Anastasiia would have returned older and less marriageable. Shcherbin himself travelled with the group as far as Spa before returning home (Dashkova 1999: 109).

cours de quelques années, et que je le priais de me donner tous les renseignements qu'il croyait nécessaires. (Dashkova 1999: 110)

that I would come in autumn to fix my residence for the duration of my son's studies in Edinburgh, that he was only thirteen years of age and that I would likely need to be guided by him [Robertson] during the next several years, and that I prayed him to give me all of the information that he deemed necessary.

*Mon histoire* also reports that Robertson advised postponing Pavel's entry into the University in view of his age, but that Dashkova induced the principal to change his mind by outlining Pavel's academic qualifications. In her proud report:

j'eus la jouissance flatteuse pour une mère de pouvoir l'assurer avec vérité que mon fils était très propre et capable d'y être étudiant: car il savait déjà parfaitement le latin, les mathématiques, l'histoire, la géographie, les langues française, allemande et as-

sez d'anglais pour tout comprendre, quoique peut-être il ne le parlait pas assez couramment encore. (Dashkova 1999: 110)<sup>6</sup>

I had the pleasure so flattering for a mother to be able to assure him truthfully that my son was quite ready and capable to study there: for he already knew perfectly Latin, mathematics, history, geography, the French and German languages, and enough English to understand everything, although perhaps he did not yet speak it fluently enough.

The question of Pavel's eligibility for university study appears to have remained open until the party reached Edinburgh, however, where, Dashkova recalls, 'Monsieur Robertson trouva, à ma grande satisfaction, que mon fils était préparé par son éducation au point de pouvoir entrer avec succès à l'université pour ses études classiques' [Mr. Robertson found, to my great satisfaction, that my son had been prepared by his education to the point that he was able to suc-

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<sup>6</sup> Dashkova 1881 (170) gives 'fluemment' instead of 'couramment'

cessfully enter the university for his classical studies] (1999: 110). Dashkova's three extant letters to Robertson – written respectively on August 31 (Spa), October 9 (London), and November 10 (London) – outline a somewhat different process. These are far more complex and oblique communications than suggested by the report in *Mon histoire*. One easily understands from them that Dashkova's constant references to maternal feeling are an attempt to influence Robertson, although the precise nature of the requests for which his assent is being pursued is unclear. Her first letter begins with a brief preamble that draws attention to the nascent relationship between letter writer and addressee. She introduces herself as a particularly devoted mother, flatters Robertson as a man of both Virtue and Letters, and elaborates at length on the combination of personal inclinations and educative theories that characterizes her own approach to mothering:

C'est une mère, sagemente tendre, (qui aime qui respecte en vous, encore plus l'home Vertueux, que le Grand Literateur) qui s'adresse à Vous maintenant; mais pour que Vous ne dedaignez pas de don-

ner l'attention necessaire à la pryere que je vais Vous faire, je dois Vous expliquer ces premières lignes, et je le ferai sans d'autre vue, que celle de tacher de Vous convaincre de la verité du Caractere, que je prends vis a vis de vous. (Dashkova 1776: 269r)<sup>7</sup>

It is a mother, wisely tender (who loves and respects in you the Virtuous man even more than the Great Writer), who addresses you now; but in order that you do not refrain from giving the necessary attention to the request that I am going to make you, I must explain to you these first lines, and I will do so with no other purpose in mind than that of trying to convince you of the veracity of the disposition that I assume towards you.

By focusing on a series of presumably common interests re-

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<sup>7</sup> We reproduce here the grammar and spelling found in Dashkova's original letters, with the caveat that her almost random application of any principles of capitalization makes it often impossible to determine which words she intended to begin with capitals in these handwritten texts and which she did not.



lating to education and educative guidance, and by underlining in herself the same qualities of perspicacity, virtue, and intelligence with which she credits Robertson, Dashkova takes the first steps in drawing her addressee into a web of direct personal connections. Pavel's role in this letter, though obviously important, is significantly reduced with respect to the version of events presented in *Mon histoire*. In the letter, what Dashkova goes on to relate about her children and her rapport with them is firmly contextualized in a new relationship between Robertson and herself. As the letter unfolds, Dashkova expands on the blend of sagacity and tenderness that distinguish her from the average mother – and implicitly align her still more closely with Robertson; her loving heart is subject to the guidance of reason and her maternal instinct and partiality checked by a 'Law' that she has imposed upon it:

J'aime mes Enfants Monsieur Autant par inclination que par Principe, l'habitude de les avoir, toujours auprès de moi à peut être augmenté encore la tendresse que j'ai pour eux, mais je ne suis point aveuglée, je n'idolatre

point leurs faiblesses, contente de les voir honnetes, et sensibles, je ne les crois pas parfaits; et je me suis fait la Loix de les voir tels qu'ils sont, et non, comme la majeure partie de mères voyent leurs Enfants. (Dashkova 1776: 269r)

I love my children, Sir, as much by inclination as by principle, the habit of having them always near me has perhaps still further increased the tenderness that I feel for them, but I am not blinded, I do not idolize their weaknesses, being content to see them honest, and sensitive, I do not believe them to be perfect; and I have made it my Law to see them as they are, and not, as most mothers see their children.

Dashkova also shares with Robertson the tragic circumstances surrounding her children's upbringing, namely the death of their father when they were very young, a revelation aimed in part at eliciting his compassion both for them and for herself: 'Il y à douze ans qu'ils ont eu le malheur de perdre dans le plus vertueuse mortel, leur Père, et leur Protecteur; leur Education n'a donc dépendu que de moi

seule' [It has been twelve years since they had the misfortune to lose in the most virtuous mortal, their Father, and their Protector; their education has therefore depended solely upon me] (Dashkova 1776: 269r-v). Again, the emphasis on her own educative role suggests a parallel with Robertson, who, having been described as 'virtuous' only a few lines earlier in this flux of ideas, now even implicitly resembles Dashkova's late husband, 'the most virtuous mortal'. The impression that Robertson might become Pavel's new Father and Protector grows stronger as the letter goes on.

Dashkova outlines Pavel's prior education, and indicates that a proposal is coming ('Venons maintenant a ce que j'ai à Vous proposer' [let us now come to what I have to propose to you] [Dashkova 1776: 269v]), though she does not clearly state one. She does not directly request admission to the university for Pavel, for example, even though her memoirs indicate that this was an issue as noted above. She does circuitously ask that Robertson take Pavel under his own personal supervision, however, making clear that she knows he might refuse:

je sais que Vous avez refusé de prendre chez Vous

des Enfans de gens de la plus haute Condition de Votre Pays, mais je me flate que l'objection principale que Vous aviez peut être pour cela étoit, qu'ils vouloient que leurs fils, soyents des Seigneurs même dans leur Enfance, he bien, Monsieur, le mien ne vous donnera aucun embarras de ce genre si Vous voulez me faire cette grande obligation de Vous charger en Partie, de mon fils, c'est Vous meme qui me prescrirez tout, ce que vous jugerez a propos, et je ne demande qu'une seule Condition pour moi, c'est d'être dans la meme ville que lui. (Dashkova 1776: 269v-270r)

I know that you have refused to take in the children of persons of the highest status in your country, but I flatter myself that the principle objection you perhaps had for this was that they wished their sons to be seigneurs even in childhood, well, Sir, mine will not give you any embarrassment of this kind if you would like to oblige me so deeply as to partly take on the care of my son,

it is you yourself who will prescribe everything to me as you deem appropriate, and I ask only one condition for myself, which is to be in the same town as he is.

Whether or not ‘chez Vous’ means in Robertson’s own home, or generally at the University of Edinburgh is unclear from this letter, but Dashkova’s endeavour to recruit Robertson as a parental surrogate may also be seen when she invites him to take absolute control over the tutor that has accompanied them from Russia, quite disposable, she suggests, if Robertson find him unnecessary (Dashkova 1776: 270r). She presents her own role in this context as supplementary, even verging on the superfluous were it not for the importance of a mother’s care in times of illness:

je suis persuadée Monsieur, que si mon fils estoit sous Votre direction, il n’aura plus besoin d’aucun de mes soins come de ceux de tout autre, mais laissé moi etre prête pour etre sa garde mallade, au cas qu’il en aye besoin; c’est un tache que personne ne peut remplir come une mere; et en ayant fait la

triste experience, c’est ce qui m’a fait partir avec lui. (Dashkova 1776: 270r)

I am persuaded Sir, that if my son were under your direction, he would have no further need of any care from me or anyone else, but allow me to be ready as his sick nurse, should he need one; this is a task that no one can fulfil like a mother; and my having already had this sad experience is indeed what made me accompany him.

The suggestion that Dashkova left home solely to be ready to care for Pavel should he fall ill follows an earlier assertion in the same letter that she made the long and complicated trip from Russia exclusively for his sake: ‘Je n’ai quitté mon Pays que dans le dessein de finir et perfectionner ces Etudes et son Education’ [I left my country solely with a view to finishing and perfecting these (aforementioned) studies and his education] (Dashkova 1776: 269v). Thus, Dashkova presses upon Robertson the full weight of maternal sacrifice in an attempt to condition his response to the choice that she rhetorically offers between satisfying on one

hand 'les vœux les plus ardens d'une mere qui ne vit que pour ces Enfans' [the most ardent wishes of a mother who lives only for her children], 'le plan le plus cher à mon coeur' [the plan dearest to my heart], and making Dashkova 'la plus contente des meres' [the happiest of mothers], or, on the other, causing her 'un chagrin bien vif' [a very keen distress] (Dashkova 1776: 270r-v).

We do not have Robertson's replies to Dashkova, but to judge from her second letter, posted from London six weeks later (October 9), there appears to have been a misunderstanding about the nature of her request, for she attempts in this second letter to clarify 'quelqu'uns des Articles de ma premiere, que j'avais aparenment mal rendu, a en juger par ce que vous me dites en reponce' [some of the articles of my first (letter), which I apparently misrepresented, judging by what you say in reply] (Dashkova 1776: 281r). Specifically, Robertson seems to have read Dashkova's first letter as a request to house Pavel under his own roof and to have declined to do so. Evidently perturbed, Dashkova adamantly denies having ever made such a request and declares that she will reside in Edinburgh precise-

ly so that Pavel may lodge with her:

Je n'ai jamais souhaité placer mon Fils horsde chez moi. 10 parcequ'après un strikt examen de moi même, je demeure convaincue, que je ne gate point mes enfans, et que ma tendresse pour eux ne me rend que plus attentive a veiller sur leur moral, comme sur leur physique, 20 parceque ma maniere de vivre ne peut point etre genée par leur presence, il ne resulte donc point d'inconveniens pour nous, d'etre ensemble. (Dashkova 1776: 281r)

I never wished to place my Son outside my home. Firstly, because after a strict examination of myself, I remain convinced that I do not spoil my children, and that my affection for them only makes me more attentive to look after their morality, as well as their physique, secondly because my way of life cannot in the least be troubled by their presence, thus no inconvenience results from our being together.

Dashkova's show of indignation seems excessive in light of the ambiguous nature of her original proposal – and her contradictory corroboration in this letter of the fact that living with Robertson was indeed an attractive prospect and what she had desired:

Mais si j'ai voulu placer mon fils, hors de chez moi, s'étoit dans la supposition, qu'il auroit l'avantage d'être chez vous, et ce n'est qu'à vous Monsieur que je l'aurai jamais confié. (Dashkova 1776: 281r)

But if I wanted to place my son outside my home, it was in the knowledge that he would have the advantage of being with you, and it is only to you, Sir, that I would ever entrust him.

We will further explore the nature of her misunderstanding with Robertson shortly under the new light shed upon it by a letter from Alexander Wedderburn.

The suggestion found in *Mon histoire* that Robertson had first rejected Pavel because of his youth and level of preparation is not borne out in Dashkova's correspondence. In her second let-

ter, she further expands upon the topic of collaborating with Robertson in the education of her son, setting out a quite detailed plan of study that she has composed for Pavel's program at the University, highlighting her own involvement in drafting it (again an interest shared with Robertson), and (again) noting her willingness to submit to his authority in educational matters. Upon arrival in Scotland, she will aim to additionally strengthen the compact between herself and Robertson through social exchange, harboring 'la douce Esperance, que vous voudrez bien diriger si non le fils, du moins, la mere dans ce qu'elle devra faire pour l'avantage de son fils' [the sweet hope, that you will want to direct if not the son, at least the mother in what she must do for the benefit of her son]; she also 'beseeches' him to review and critique her educational plan, 'de m'en dire Votre Sentiment, d'y Corriger, ajouter, ou retrancher, ce que Vous jugerez à propos' [to tell me your feelings about it, to correct, add to, or subtract from it what you deem to be appropriate] (Dashkova 1776: 281r).

A month later (November 10) and still in London, Dashkova sends a third letter to Robertson that addresses still more specifically the personal connection

between them in view of her imminent arrival. She begins with a version of the humility *topos*, claiming not to have written sooner out of ‘discretion’, for ‘Je sens parfaitement que c’est abuser de Votre indulgence, que de détourner Votre Attention portée toujours vers des objets digne d’employer votre tems’ [I understand perfectly that it is an abuse of your indulgence to divert the attention that you always direct to objects worthy of employing your time], and describing herself as one who ‘n’a jamais eu la presumption d’entamer une Corespondance avec un homme dont l’Erudition, soye si celebre que l’est la Votre’ [has never had the presumption to enter into correspondence with a man whose erudition is as celebrated as yours] (Dashkova 1776: 289r). She also asks that Robertson be ready to receive her in person: “preparez Vous dans peu, de me voir a Edimburg vous demander come une faveur reelle, et utile pour moi, de m’accorder quelqu’uns de Vos moments perduts’ [prepare yourself in a little while to see me in Edinburgh asking you as a real favour, and one useful for me, to grant me some of your spare time] (Dashkova 1776: 289r). Here Dashkova’s petition is clearer and more direct: she de-

sires to spend time with Robertson, part of which will be spent discussing her educational ideas. Notably, in her third letter, the discussion of shared educational concerns takes place without the explicit intermediacy of Pavel, who fades from view. Dashkova closes with an explicit wish for greater intimacy with Robertson himself:

j’ai fort à Coeur d’Etablir entre Vous et moi un genre de Lien, parcequ’avec des gens d’une Elevation de penser come la Votre, c’est un lien que l’on forme, quand on en Veut recevoir des bienfaits. Je Vous prie de Croire que je me fairai toujours gloire de Vous avoir des obligations, come je m’en fais de me dire avec L’Estime la plus sentie et la Consideration la plus parfaite, Monsieur, Votre très humble servante, Princesse de Daschkaw. (Dashkova 1776: 289v)

I have a great desire to establish between you and me a type of bond, because with persons of such elevation of thought as your own, one forms a bond when desiring to re-

ceive advantages. I beg you to believe that I will always be proud to be in your debt, just as I am proud to consider myself with the most sincere esteem and the most perfect consideration, Sir, your very humble servant, Princess Dashkova.

As we have seen, affirmations of active maternal concern did not always condition Robertson's agreement on specific questions, but they did involve him in a web of politesse that fostered the growth of a personal relationship between Dashkova and himself. Through the epistolary performance of maternal sentiment, Dashkova applies social and emotional pressure, reminding Robertson repeatedly of her high opinion of him, of his intellectual and educatory authority within her family, and also of her expectations for a befitting (personal and courteous) response. Real maternal love and concern exist here as well – for as Michelle Lamarck Marrese has said of Dashkova's pronouncements on serfdom, 'even if self-interest played a role in her solicitude, her sentiments were sincere' (Marrese 2006: 30) – but Dashkova's assertions of maternal sentiment also have specific pragmatic functions. In

the context of elite social exchange, both at Catherine's court, as we have seen in *Mon histoire*, and in the internationally renowned milieu of the Edinburgh intelligentsia, such assertions help to condition the possible responses of Dashkova's interlocutors by encouraging them to respond positively to her overtures and to her person.

Wedderburn            Characterizes  
Dashkova

Dashkova's letters to Robertson were flanked by two *communiqués* from Alexander Wedderburn, whose path intersected with her own in Spa, where, he, too, was taking the waters in the summer of 1776. It may well be that Dashkova had waited so long to contact Edinburgh directly in order to have better advice on how to proceed from her well-connected British acquaintances in Spa. In Wedderburn, Robertson's self-advertised 'old & sincere friend' (Wedderburn 1776: 271r), she found a direct link to the University of which she made full use. Dashkova in turn became the subject of two letters written by Wedderburn to Robertson that aim to soften the impact of her arrival in Scotland.

Wedderburn sends Dashkova's letter from Spa to Robertson

along with his own (August 31), having been charged to add a note of clarification, as she informs Robertson: 'de Vous expliquer (plus clairement que je ne l'ai fait) mes desirs' [to explain to You (more clearly than I have done) my desires] (Dashkova 1776: 270r). Thus, while Wedderburn suggests that his epistle will provide a behind-the-scenes perspective on Dashkova and 'explain a few things which Fame never publishes' (Wedderburn 1776: 271r), there is little doubt that his flattering introduction and glowing evaluation of her maternal qualities was specifically intended to please Dashkova and may even have been subject to her review:

The Princess's Letter makes it very unnecessary to tell you, that No Mother was ever more attached to a child than She is to a Son, who has never however been hurt by her Indulgence. Her determination to fix her residence in the place of his Education will be a great satisfaction to you, for the preference given to the University under your care is as hazardous, as It is flattering and the observation of such a Mother will give courage to Every one en-

gaged in the Instruction of her Son. (Wedderburn 1776: 271r)

Wedderburn also helps to articulate what Dashkova's memoirs describe as her own request to Robertson for 'all of the information that he deemed necessary'. In point of fact, it is Wedderburn who asks that Robertson provide as much detail as is required to 'satisfy the reasonable Inquiry of a careful Guardian' and 'the just & natural Anxiety of a Mother, whose Soul is bound up in the welfare of her son', namely 'a particular account of the plan you would propose for such a Pupill, his course of Study, his way of life, his Exercises, his Conversations, what portion of his time would be spent with you, how much you would allow to his Mother, what to amusement'; he also solicits various financial details, in short 'all that a Parent wishes most to know, to whom every detail is important in the education of a child' (Wedderburn 1776: 271v-272r). The question of how much time Robertson would allow to Dashkova herself recalls the trajectory charted by Dashkova's own letters with their increasing focus on establishing a partnership with Robertson, initially in regard to the education of Pavel and then in



terms of direct social and intellectual exchange with his mother. By making maternal effusions part of her interactions with Wedderburn, who in turn reiterates them to Robertson, Dashkova exerts still more pressure on her correspondent to respond to her with civility and compliance.

Wedderburn's letter also allows us to better define what lay behind Dashkova's ambiguous 'proposal': she had indeed hoped that Pavel might board with Robertson, though this detail remains vague in her own letters and is ignored in *Mon histoire*. Indeed, the equivocal phrasing of the original proposal seems to have served Dashkova by allowing her to later disavow these intentions in the face of Robertson's refusal. Wedderburn both spells out Dashkova's ideas and avers that he dissuaded her from insisting upon them:

It was thought you might incline that the Prince should become a part of your family, but I have apprized the Princess that It is more probable you will wish that he should remain in her house, which will be more entirely dedicated to the purposes of his Education than yours can be consistently with

the duties of your office; I have at the same time assured her that wherever her Son is lodged, his Improvement will be equally the object of your peculiar Attention. (Wedderburn 1776: 271r-v)

Wedderburn's letter clarifies Dashkova's 'proposal', allowing Robertson to understand what lies behind her references to joint parenting and also encouraging him to feel comfortable articulating a refusal.

Despite her initial reliance on Wedderburn, Dashkova grew wary of his intercession, hinting in her third (November 10) letter that she mistrusted him, perhaps a suggestion that she was a bit jealous of his close personal relationship with Robertson:

Ne croyez pas que ce soit Mr Wederburn, ou quelqu'autre Personne qui m'aye suggeré le Plan de finir les Etudes de mon fils a Edimburg. L'Estime et la Veneration que j'ai pour vous Monsieur, à été un des premiers motifs de ce projets que j'ai formé deja depuis plus de trois ans. (Dashkova 1776: 289r)

Do not think that it was Mr. Wederburn or some

other Person who suggested the plan of finishing my son's studies in Edinburgh to me. The esteem and veneration that I have for you, Sir, has been one of the foremost motives for this project, which I had already fashioned more than three years ago.

At any rate, Wedderburn's intermediary role would soon have served its purpose: within a month Dashkova would arrive in Edinburgh and be able to conduct a relationship with Robertson herself.

Wedderburn's interventions had not yet ended, however. Two weeks later, he sent a second letter to Robertson (from London on November 25), giving him more frank and practical advice on how to best handle the challenges of Dashkova's sojourn in Edinburgh. This letter, which does indeed 'explain a few things which Fame never publishes', opens by declaring 'You have no reason to be alarmed at the arrival of your Princess' (Wedderburn 1776: 291r) and takes reassuring Robertson as one of its primary aims. Nonetheless, Wedderburn implicitly confirms that Dashkova's visit will raise a number of problems and suggests that Robertson rely on Dashkova's friend, Mrs. Hamil-

ton, to negotiate the social misapprehensions that are bound to occur:

if there should at any time be occasion for you to convey more to her than She chuses to understand or you to express, her friend Mrs. Hamilton, daughter of the late Archbishop. of Tuam who accompanys her, is a very sensible worthy Woman & will be of use to you. (Wedderburn 1776: 291r)

He also advises Robertson to be on the alert regarding Dashkova's 'share of vanity especially on two Points, the fortitude of her mind is one, & the other is her rank' and offers a number of strategies designed to save Robertson time and trouble. 'Attention to her Condition is very proper & necessary' (Wedderburn 1776: 292r), for example. On the question of sociability, he notes that Dashkova's 'friendships [...] are very ardent', and since 'she has already conceived one for you, & She can never see too much of those She regards', Wedderburn suggests that Robertson retain 'A little distance & a total independance [in order to] preserve your friendship a long time'. If necessary, Dashkova can always be appeased with

‘a good Whist Party’ in which the stakes run a little higher than is generally the norm in Robertson’s set (Wedderburn 1776: 292r-v).

Interestingly, Pavel is virtually absent in Wedderburn’s second letter, which makes no explicit comment whatsoever on Dashkova’s maternal activities. Wedderburn, too, has grown less concerned with Pavel’s studies and more preoccupied about Dashkova’s relationship with Robertson and the place that she is to occupy in Edinburgh society. His counsel to both parties was undoubtedly useful in facilitating Dashkova’s integration into academic circles, where she seems to have succeeded quite well. While her letters reveal a few rough patches in initial communications with Robertson, these were overcome, *Mon histoire* suggests, when Dashkova finally arrived to set up house in grand style and embark upon a steady routine of social and intellectual intercourse with Robertson and his colleagues, regular guests who came to ‘dîner et passer la journée chez moi deux fois par semaine’ [dine and pass the day with me twice a week] (Dashkova 1999: 111). Even with allowances for possible exaggeration, it is clear that Dashkova was able to solder lasting ties with Robertson and his fellows.

## Conclusions

The letters discussed here illuminate part of the long and careful process by which Dashkova established both her son and herself in foreign society. This process was executed with retrospective aplomb in the memoir account, but with more difficulty in the narrative documented by the letters. As we have seen, citing urgent motherly concern allowed Dashkova to inaugurate a direct personal relationship with Robertson, the rhetorical endeavour to find the best for her son providing a means for her to advance a claim for her own social recognition abroad. Professions of maternal sentiment allowed Dashkova to establish relations that were ostensibly founded on shared concerns and civility and that would thus be conducive to a later blossoming of sociability. When her maternal requests were granted or the need for them otherwise obviated, she used the channels of communication that had thus been excavated in turning to arguments that more directly related to herself. A similar blend of asserting maternal sentiment on Pavel’s behalf and pursuing a more personal relationship with her addressee ap-

pears in the letters that she would soon write to Grigorii Potemkin regarding her son's future service career (Dashkova 2001: 246-49).

Connections with luminaries from the University of Edinburgh served Dashkova well back in Russia. She returned home with a better educated son (and a better educated daughter), but still more importantly, she herself came back gleaming with the lustre of learning and enlightenment. The University of Edinburgh, which enjoyed considerable prestige throughout Europe at the time, was highly regarded in Russia, where Robertson and his colleagues were well known to Catherine.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the personal relationships that Dashkova had cultivated in Edinburgh were an important recommendation for what became her unprecedented scientific and administrative career and may be credited with leading to her appointment as director of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Dashkova's own recognition of Edinburgh's role in this process may be seen in the election of Robertson and his colleague Joseph Black to

corresponding membership in the Academy of Sciences that Dashkova effected at her very first meeting (Dashkova 2001: 275). These honours not only institutionalized the ties between Dashkova and Robertson, but also help to shore up her relationship with Catherine, which took a new and positive turn as Dashkova's life entered a decade of relative calm and prosperity. Dashkova's unusual academic appointment (as the first and only woman to ever head the Russian Academy of Sciences) bears further exploration, but certainly her connections at Edinburgh, initially cultivated through the performance of maternal sentiment, played an important role in bringing her back into Catherine's good graces. As *Mon histoire* makes evident, citing motherly feeling was a rhetorical technique that Dashkova had used successfully with Catherine when requesting permission to travel abroad and the assertion of motherly feeling arguably gilded her return to Petersburg as well. In a petition ostensibly written on behalf of her son towards the end of her European tour (February 1782), Dashkova implicitly calls attention to her ties with the University of Edinburgh. This was one of several letters that Dashkova wrote to Potemkin from abroad,

<sup>8</sup> Robertson was author of the well-known *History of the Reign of Charles V* (1769), whose first volume had been translated into Russian from French in 1775 (Cross 1980: 143).

and it warmly lauds both Pavel's education and her own role in having organized it. Her addressee was clearly intended to share its contents with the Empress:

Who better than the empress can appreciate the benefit [blago] and usefulness of a sound education [vospitanie]? What sovereign would more willingly than ours regard himself a bit grateful [neskol'ko priznatel'nym] to those parents who trouble over the education of their children in attempting to make useful citizens of them? (Dashkova 2001: 247)

While Catherine seems to have taken these tacit suggestions to heart and have seen in Dashkova herself another 'useful citizen', Dashkova's influence began to wane after a decade at the Academy of Sciences. 'With the *vospitanie* so lauded by their mother, both daughter and son have turned out to be scoundrels', Catherine caustically remarked in 1792 (Khrapovitskii 1862: 268), an indication that the cultural

credit extended to Dashkova for the years she had spent in Edinburgh was coming to an end. Catherine's words also demonstrate that the relationship between herself and Dashkova was again in difficulty, of course, and that the ramifications this would have on Dashkova's professional activity would be further compounded by familial problems. While maternal sentiment continued to play an important role in Dashkova's emotional life up until her death in 1810, it took different forms. Against the background of her growing estrangement from both Catherine and her own adult children, the performance of maternal love and concern became irrelevant as a petitioner's strategy. Motherly sentiment, now complicated by a host of negative feelings that intruded into Dashkova's relationship with her children, less readily lent itself to rhetorical use and its performance seems to have disappeared from her letters.

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