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Letter from a French Diplomat about Catherine the Great

by Baron de Breteuil

Louis Auguste Le Tonnelier de Breteuil (1730–1807) was a French baron and diplomat who served as the French ambassador to Russia during the rule of Catherine II. Also known as Catherine the Great (1762–1796), she was a German princess who became empress of Russia after her husband Tsar Peter III was assassinated during a coup d'état. In this letter Baron de Breteuil gives his perspective of Catherine II as both a Machiavellian (a leader who schemes to gain more power) and a lover of science and art.

Primary Source:

This princess seems to combine every kind of ambition in her person. Everything that may add luster to her reign will have some attraction for her. Science and the arts will be encouraged to flourish in the empire; projects useful for the domestic economy will be undertaken.

She will endeavor to reform the administration of justice and to invigorate the laws; but her policies will be based on **Machiavellianism** and I should not be surprised if in this field she rivals the King of Prussia.

She will adopt the prejudices of her entourage regarding the superiority of her power and will endeavor to win respect not by the sincerity of her actions but also by an **ostentatious** display of her strength. **Haughty** as she is, she will stubbornly pursue her undertakings and will rarely retrace a false step. **Cunning** and falsity appear to be vices in her character; woe to him who puts too much trust in her. Love affairs may become a stumbling block to her ambition and prove fatal for her peace of mind.

This passionate princess, still held in check by the fear and consciousness of internal troubles, will know no restraint once she believes herself firmly established.

Glossary:

Machiavellianism: being deceitful

ostentatious: pretentious, flashy or showy

haughty: arrogant

cunning: using deceit or evasion to achieve one's objectives