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TRICKING UP THE EXPANSIONIST PLOT: VASSIAN AND NIGRIN AS “CLASSICIST MAGI” IN MIKHAIL KHERASKOV’S *ROSSIADA* (1779)

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Abstract

In Mikhail Kheraskov’s *Rossiada* (*Rossiad*), praised (for a while) as Russia’s national epic, two characters, the mysterious hermit Vassian and the vicious sorcerer Nigrin, occupy a special place because of their capacity to do magic. This article explores whether these magi and their tricks have any historical basis – the *Rossiada* tells about the successful siege of Kazan’ in 1552 – and also examines the literary predecessors of the two magi have in the rich European epic tradition. Especially Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* and its parallel plot must have been a great source of inspiration. It turns out that the presence of magic in the *Rossiada* has little or nothing to do with Kheraskov’s potential interest in authentic Russian magic. Actually, it was the Aristotelian poetical concept of the *marvellous* which the classicist poet took into account when he constructed his epic plot.

Keywords: *Magic; Mikhail Kherasov; Epic; Classicism; Aristotelian Poetics; Gerusalemme liberata*

Although nowadays more or less forgotten, Mikhail Matveevich Kheraskov’s (1733–1807) *Rossiada* (*Rossiad*, 1779) was Russia’s instantly canonical national epic. It not only earned its author the epithet “Russian Homer”, but it was also one of the few works ever read (partially) at Goncharov’s legendary

Oblomovka (1958, I: 110). The *Rossiada*, purportedly, even drove Turgenev into authorship (Lebedev 1990: 31).

In the second half of this grand, classicist,¹ twelve-canto epic on the sixteenth-century taking by the Russians of the Tatar stronghold of Kazan', Kheraskov devotes a significant amount of verses to the mysterious Vassian, a hermit with supernatural powers, and to the evil sorcerer Nigrin. This article is, to our knowledge, the very first to focus on these two "magi". After the introduction of the two literary characters and their place in the plot of the *Rossiada*, we will discuss the sources and the purpose of their magic and argue that the (presence of) magic in the *Rossiada* has a lot to do with Aristotle's poetic concept of the *marvellous*, a device which classicist poets took into consideration when constructing their epic plots.

Russia's National Epic and its two Magi: Vassian and Nigrin

Near the end of the eighteenth century, for little more than a decade or two, Russia boasted a grand national epic in classicizing style, the *Rossiada*, dedicated to Empress Catherine the Great and manifestly named after the empire she ruled. In it, Mikhail Kheraskov sings the praises of the historical expedition led by young Tsar Ivan IV, to the Muslim-ruled city of Kazan', and of the siege and capture of this Tatar bulwark in 1552.

Before the *Rossiada* had come about, several Russian poets had already made attempts to compose a national epic. Antiokh Kantemir (*Petrída*, 1730) and Mikhail Lomonosov (*Petr Velikii*, 1761) each had written one or two cantos of what they intended to be epics on Peter the Great. By the time of Catherine the Great's rule (1762-1796), it was crystal clear that Russia's future national epic needed to be based on events from the empire's rich history. In the preceding decades (Weeda 2005), some of the Western (at that time chiefly French) theoretical debates concerning the question of suitable epic subject matter had reached Russia: the strict classicists, the followers of Nicolas Boileau's influential *Art poétique* (1674), did not permit historical subjects, but the majority of the (altogether few) Russian men of letters involved in the debate sided with Voltaire, who himself had written an epic on the 1589 siege of Paris, the *Henriade* (1723).²

Nevertheless, the first *completed* classicist Russian epic, Vasilii Trediakovskii's *Tilemakhida* (1766), was not based in actual events from Russia's history. Trediakovskii's epic dealt with Ulysses' son Telemachus, and was a big failure in Empress Catherine's view, although her scathing criticism cannot be ascribed merely to the fact that the poet took his subject matter from Homer's ancient universe.³ Around 1770, three other modest attempts were made: two *Dimitriads*, by Aleksandr Sumarokov and Vasilii Maikov, focusing on Dmitrii Donskoi, the Tatar-defeating hero from the

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