The reforms of the Petrine era affected all spheres of social, political, and administrative life, gradually fostering the cultural development of the Russian aristocracy and the Court[1]. The first stage, with Peter I (1672 -1725) and a policy oriented towards the subversion of the secular closure, represented a period of rupture with the past and openness to the outside, characterized by contacts with other cultures and by the Europeanisation of all fields of existence. Later, with the empresses Anna Joannovna (1693–1740) and Elizabeth Petrovna (1709 – 1761), the amalgamation of two different trends (on one hand, the inclination towards tradition and, on the other, towards European culture) had been observed, while, in the second half of the eighteenth century, under Catherine II (1729–1796) and Paul I (1754 – 1801), a profound influence of Enlightenment on Russian culture was evident[2].

The period taken into consideration will be the first years of the reign of Catherine II, in particular, the years 1764-1765, those in which Giacomo Casanova stayed in St. Petersburg and Moscow, as described in the *Histoire de ma vie*. In fact, we will use his autobiography as a starting point to reconstruct and investigate the amusements and entertainments of Enlightenment Russia[3].

In the eighteenth century, leisure acquired a status it had never previously enjoyed[4]: in particular, after the provisions of Catherine II's husband, the nobility had finally freed itself from military and administrative obligations[5]. With Peter III, a radical change started to the advantage of aristocracy private life[6], which entailed a transformation and revision of all previous forms of spare time[7]. This change went hand in hand with the secular character of culture, but also the affirmation of leisure time and entertainment as an instrument of imperial policy[8].The Petrine era introduced new forms of entertainment and social gathering, assemblies, masquerades, court festivities with music and dancing, daily concerts, and various leisure activities imported from the West. Through these, Russian nobles began to cultivate more refined manners and tastes. Among the most striking novelties of Peter I's time were the fireworks, while theatrical performances already served to glorify the tsar and his victories. These plays became part of official court life and also offered a select audience the opportunity to become acquainted with European drama[9]. And if with Peter I the borrowing of Western customs was imposed from above, by decree and against national tradition, at the time of his daughter, Elizaveta Petrovna, these new ways of meeting had already taken root in full[10], fireworks were already widespread

among the nobility and the masquerades turned into real masked balls. Among the theatrical performances that had caught on were musical and opera ones. At the time of Catherine II, in addition, noble theaters flourished, both in country estates and in the cities, which brought the comedy to the fore. The norms of ethics and etiquette in society became priorities for the Russian nobility, both in terms of the amount of time spent and the effort and substances that were expended[11].

Casanova, one of the many Western travelers who arrived in Russia to seek his fortune, offers a vivid and insightful account of how the Russian aristocracy spent its leisure time under Catherine II. Upon his return from Russia, he would in fact state that he had done little more than enjoy himself and frequent the Court[12].

Among the key elements of the culture of amusement, card games featured prominently on all social occasions. Casanova refers to them repeatedly, as if he had fully immersed himself in Russian daily life – alongside billiards, lotteries, and smoking—activities enjoyed not only by men, but also by women. An English lady who stayed at Dashkova's estate observed that the ladies spent their time drinking tea, making music, and playing cards in the evening[13]. Even the leisure of noblewomen had undergone a transformation: under Peter the Great, aristocratic women – who had previously been excluded from banquets – began to participate in assemblies, eventually becoming the true queens of the ballroom[14].

In particular, the Casanova refers several times to the game of Pharaoh (also known as Stuss or Bank)[15], which was officially banned in Russia "under strict penalties"[16]. Yet, as Casanova himself noted, "everyone was playing"[17]. At the home of his friend Petr Melissino, he observed that Pharaoh was the only game played, and that the guests were all considered "trustworthy" individuals – so much so that no one would have suspected the law was being violated[18]. Casanova was struck by the contrast with Venetian and broader European customs; in Russia, those who lost at cards were not morally obliged to pay their debts and did not suffer a loss of honor as a result[19]. The game was forbidden both in private homes and on public occasions, even within the Russian Clubs, which were among the first to help transform card playing into a true lifestyle[20]. Although Peter I disliked card games, he adopted a generally tolerant attitude, merely classifying them among reprehensible and scandalous amusements. At the assemblies, according to the foreigner Berholdz, chess and checkers were usually played, not cards [21]. A Decree of 1732 prohibited

gambling, first for officers and soldiers, among whom it was widespread, and later extending it to all classes as well[22]. The spread of card playing continued under Anna Ioannovna[23]. Even Catherine II initially upheld the ban on gambling, introducing a tax on the importation of playing cards from abroad[24]. Certain games – such as Pharaoh and Kvintich – were classified as games of chance and therefore prohibited, while so-called "commercial" games, including Quadrille, Lomber, Piquet, and Kontra, were permitted. However, despite the ban, her government turned a blind eye to gambling[25]. One of the empress's favorites, Semen Zorič had even opened an Academy where the art of card games was learned[26], and the Sovereign herself on one occasion – as Casanova reports, played and got broke by his Court followers[27]. Russian legislation, in effect, did little more than replicate European models, without establishing a specifically national application; perhaps for this very reason, all efforts to curb gambling in Russia remained largely ineffective.

Among the first entertainments in which Casanova participated after arriving in St. Petersburg in December 1764 was a masked ball at court. In the eighteenth-century costume balls became an essential part of the culture of the court and of the leisure time of the Russian nobility[28]: in fact, they accompanied most of the parties (both on private and state occasions). In the beginning, they were a real novelty, introduced by Peter in the aforementioned 'Assemblies'. During his reign, a grand three-day open-air public masquerade was organized, featuring a variety of entertainments[29]; fireworks, *illuminatsji* (see below), a lottery, dinner, music, and dancing. Already in the time of Empress Elizabeth, masquerades had reached an impressive scale, attracting thousands of participants. They were held twice a week – one reserved for the Court and the other for the Empress's personal guests[30]. These balls served as a form of entertainment but also carried a sense of obligation for the invitees, to the extent that formal reports were drawn up explaining the reasons for any absences[31].

Some details strike the Venetian, who reports that the ball was free, open to about five thousand people, and lasted sixty hours. In addition to the 'importance' of these masquerade parties, the Venetian highlights the fact that the balls were public; for people who did not belong to the nobility, there were *vol'nye* masquerades, i.e. open to all. Under Catherine, free participation in palace evening events by members of the bourgeoisie and ordinary citizens without noble titles became possible for the first time. The empress herself gladly attended public carnivals; she liked, in particular, not to be recognized by her subjects, who,

in turn, played along, as our adventurer attests[32]. The masquerades were especially organized in the old wooden Winter Palace on the Neva[33], and often staged by the Italian theatrical impresario, Giovanni Battista Locatelli, who had already received imperial permission from Elisabetta Petrovna[34]. Her public masquerade balls, planned to the smallest detail, became famous and the first posters were drawn up to advertise them; they usually began with a concert, followed by card games or lottery. It was also possible to dine there and drink coffee, tea, or alcohol for a fee[35]. About eight masquerades a year were usually organized in the Winter Palace where guests occupied the entire second floor. It is also curious that there was an etiquette to be observed for the age (no entrance under thirteen years old) and the costumes of the masquerades – Western or traditional and national costumes could be worn, but Turkish, and Asian clothes and weapons were forbidden. The Ceremonial provided also for the recognition of the guests at the entrance[36].

Catherine II had assigned a special place to these costume balls, giving them a precise meaning of propaganda of imperial policy: they were called to exhibit and communicate to the whole world the splendor and glory of the empire and to show the empress in the role of the patroness of the arts and benevolent sovereign. Guests, especially foreign adventurers, on the other hand, used such invitations as an opportunity to be introduced to Catherine II and to get acquainted with Russian high society. The effect on foreigners was documented by the many travelers who stayed in St. Petersburg in those years; even Casanova was amazed by the duration of his first ball in Russia, almost three days, finding everything "magnificent and superb"[37].

Over time, these dances also acquired and assimilated more and more Western traits; in the course of a few decades, simple walks in the Court[38], with music and masks had turned into real masked parties of Western origin. They had soon left the courts and royal residences in the city environment, becoming public amusements, while still retaining an elitist character. Especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, a sort of 'democratization' of entertainment was observed in Russia, an aspect also recalled by Casanova, who stated that "having fun without needing anyone, without needing money: shows and walks, and even court entertainments were open to all"[39]. Casanova, referring to the masquerade, reports that it had taken place on a Saturday[40]: under Catherine (as already with Elisabetta Petrovna), the entertainment calendar was divided into days of the

week[41]: on Monday the *Comédie française*, on Wednesday the comic pièces by Russian playwrights, on Thursday French tragedies or comedies, on Friday there were the court carnivals, on Sunday, however, it was the turn of balls at the palace or there was the *Courtag*[42], a concert of instrumental and vocal music open to all. Casanova moved through the brightly lit rooms, passing from one to another; this detail is significant, since during the masquerade participants were free to mingle.

It is necessary to distance the concept of masquerade from that of ball in the strict sense; in the first there were social traits that were impossible in the second, where the mixing of participants belonging to different social groups and a certain licentiousness of behaviors were allowed[43]. The aesthetics of the ball, on the other hand, was linked to a form of orderly 'game' regulated by the strict rules and by rigidly hierarchical social ethics, far from the anarchy of the masquerade, inclined to eliminate social differences[44].

In the mid-eighteenth century there was a significant emergence of the culture of dancing in Russia[45], which represented the *modus vivendi* of the noble[46] and an important element of the cultural policy of the state, to the point that the lack of knowledge of the figures of dance was considered a flaw in the education of the aristocrat, who was expected to master foreign languages, fencing, horse riding and dancing[47].

Under Catherine's reign, both court and private dances became an integral part of noble identity. Social hierarchy was codified even within the layout of the ballroom, where each noble was required to occupy a specific place. Etiquette dictated a strict ceremonial that regulated every phase of the event: balls typically opened with a polka, followed by a minuet, and even the order of dance invitations followed precise rules[48]. During Elizabeth's time, however, dancing was not yet regarded by noblemen as a pleasurable pastime, but rather as a social obligation governed by rigid protocol – and, in the mindset of many Russian aristocrats, it was often viewed negative.

Dance parties also evolved significantly over the final decades of the century, as Enlightenment aesthetics and the cult of nature and naturalness influenced the structure and character of dancing itself.
What had once been a purely ceremonial event gradually turned into a setting for drama and flirtation, thanks to fashionable novelties such as the waltz – a dance not particularly

appreciated by Catherine – marked by a passionate and even risky intimacy, since for the first time the lady was held by the waist and stood face to face with her partner [49].

Casanova was invited by Melissino and Aleksei Orlov to attend several military displays a few kilometers outside Petersburg[50]. There, the Venetian witnessed a demonstration of a Russian innovation in the field of warfare; a cannon capable of firing twenty shots in one minute. The parade was followed by a banquet with lunch. Casanova does not dwell on the details of the military event, instead, he seems more interested in Russian customs and traditions of conviviality. He is particularly struck by the countless toasts (*tosty*), through which he enjoys experiencing "the very Russian spirit". These meals could last for several hours, and each guest had an assigned seat[51]. At another military parade[52] – a public one attended by the Empress herself – the adventurer observed the maneuvers of the infantry not far from St. Petersburg. However, his account serves primarily as another opportunity to again praise Russian magnificence; for the occasion, the houses of nearby villages were made available to guests, and the spectacle lasted three days, concluding with a fireworks display.

The art of fireworks reached its apogee with Elizabeth Petrovna on the many occasions of the court[53], public or private[54]. The public fireworks, which the Venetian attends, took place in the squares and streets of the capital; Casanova himself recalls that, before leaving Russia, he had organized a farewell party for friends which ended with fireworks, a gift from his friend Melissino[55].

The idea of fireworks in the eighteenth century was quite different from the modern one. At the time, the term referred to a themed composition consisting of a "plane" – a wooden frame over which a fuse soaked in saltpeter was laid out following a precise design. Once ignited, it revealed to the audience a specific image, often an allegorical figure or emblem "drawn in fire". These displays were created by decorators and technicians based on carefully planned symbolic motifs, sometimes conceived by renowned authors such as Lomonosov or Sumarokov, or by unknown designers, often drafted by the Academy of Sciences, all with the purpose of glorifying the virtues and merits of the sovereign[56]. These allegorical representations were also characterized by their repetitive motifs, in which even the smallest details held symbolic significance. The encrypted name of Empress might appear in the representations along with the Russian coat of arms or the likeness of

imperial medals; natural phenomena were also frequently depicted – rainbows, the sun, clouds, or water – rendered through rivers, fountains, and waterfalls that enhanced the visual impact of the displays created by fireworks or illuminations (*illuminatsii*, see below)[57]. Fireworks were an official initiative designed to attract large audiences and, already under Peter I, became a significant tool of state propaganda[58]. During Catherine's reign, this art form gradually extended to private noble estates, where it began to lose its official function and symbolic weight. In public celebrations, fireworks were often accompanied by the so-called *illuminatsii* – illuminations of court gardens, streets, squares, and buildings with festive light; these decorations, made with banners, candles, or lanterns, usually followed the fireworks and remained lit throughout the night. Like the fireworks themselves, they could also depict allegories and emblems, reinforcing the celebratory and ideological messages of the festivities[59].

Finally, another type of show Casanova mentioned was "the grandiose joust"[60] with all the brave knights of the Empire: four hundred warriors, divided into four squadrons, had to parade through the capital. The only drawback – as he specified – was the unfavorable weather conditions; the joust, therefore, had been postponed for a year due to bad weather[61] and took place on June 26, 1766. Both men and women and the sovereign herself took part in the tournament. The quadrilles were arranged according to the customs of antiquity and these references carried a symbolic meaning; the young Slavic empire was not only equal to the other European powers for uses and customs, but even to ancient Greece and Rome[62]. With Catherine II, the chivalric tournament became, as well as an important element of the literary and cultural life of the empire, a political event, the very symbol of Russia's definitive entry into the European cultural context[63], an event promoting a panegyric image of the empress[64]. Some twentieth – century critics interpreted the joust as a revival of the Trojan roots of the imperial myth shared by many European dynasties, including the Russian one. They pointed to its similarities with other "classical" courtly rides, such as those staged under Louis XIV or Maria Theresa[65]. Other scholars, by contrast, viewed it as an opportunity for composing Pindaric odes that celebrated not military victories, as was customary, but early forms of sporting competition[66]. Still others viewed it as an affirmation of the Amazonian myth and gynocracy, a theme that gained ground not only in Russia but also across Europe[67]. In the ladies' tournament of 1743, organized by Empress Maria Theresa to celebrate Austria's victory in Prague, noblewomen paraded on horseback, led by the Empress herself[68].

Similarly, in the 1766 joust, Catherine the Great—early in her reign—took on the role of the "Amazon on the throne"[69], embodying a form of political masculinity as a woman ruling an empire. Here, the ladies not only awarded prizes but also competed and paraded in the image of Penthesilea, the mythical Amazon queen[70].

Leisure time represented a new ideal and a novel concept for the Russian nobility in the 18th century, marking a clear break with the past. Due to Casanova's sharp observations and vivid insights, it becomes evident that amusement served as the first stage for the reception of European cultural forms, with the court and the Russian aristocracy acting both as intermediaries and protagonists. Catherine II, following the example of Elizaveta Petrovna, devoted particular care and attention to entertainment, treating amusement as a privileged channel of communication between the government, its subjects and the outside world [71].

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Endnotes

[1] Sertakova 2010: 16-17.

[2] *Ibid*. 13.

[3] For Casanova's *Mémoires* we will use the first Italian edition *Storia della mia vita*, edited by Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan 1989, vol. III, annotated and translated from the original French (transl. by Piero Chiara and Federico Roncoroni), in the Brockhaus-Plon edition (*Histoire de ma vie*, 12 vols., Wiesbaden-Paris, F. A. Brockhaus-Librairie Plon, 1960-62).

[4] Sertakova 2010: 15.

[5] De Madariaga 1988: 28-29.

[6] Ševcov 2004: 106.

[7] Korotkova 2008: 5-6. On the semiotisation of all spheres of life of the noble, in the game of cards and in dance see also Lotman 1977: 68.

[8] Sertakova 2010: 15.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] *Ibidem*. If during the eighteenth century, the Russian nobility assimilated the external aspects and patterns of behavior of European culture and learned to understand and use European ideas, in the Nineteenth century, instead, began a creative and independent reflection on the assimilated culture (Shevtsov 2004: 108).

[11] Vlasova 2016: 88.

[12] Casanova 1989: 256.

[13] Popkova 2019: 61.

[14] The position of women in the family and in society changed profoundly in the eighteenth century, as did their free time: with the assemblies convened by Peter I, women finally participated. Then, during the century, the female presence will play an increasingly significant role in dances, comedies, and performances (*ibidem*).

[15] *Ibid*. 194, 195, 219.

[16] *Ibid*. 191.

[17] Casanova 1989: 216.

[18] *Ibid*. 205.

[19] *Ibidem*.

[20] Sertakova 2010: 15.

[21] Galaj 2011: 10.

[22] Despite the severe penalties for gambling, it nevertheless spread to all ranks, especially among the militaries and in *Nemetskaya Sloboda* in Moscow (*ibidem)*.

[23] *Ibid*.10-12.

[24] *Ibidem.*

[25] Galaj 2011: 19.

[26] *Ibid*.18.

[27] Casanova 1989:192.

[28] Korotkova 2008: 5.

[29] Since Petrine's time, the tendency towards the theatricalization of parties and the fusion of masquerades with performances will continue with Elizabeth and will strengthen under Catherine II (*Cezhina* 2009: 141).

[30] Mankevich 2004: 67.

[31] *Ibidem*.

[32] Casanova 1989: 200.

[33] *Cezhina* 2009: 143.

[34] The masquerades were also accessible to other classes, in addition to the nobles. Paid evening masquerade balls were also held in Prince Naryshkin's private garden, with theater performance included (*ibid*. 132).

[35] *Ibidem*.

[36] *Cezhina* 2009: 143

[37] Casanova1989: 199.

[38] Alyakrinskaya 2012: 209.

[39] Casanova1989: 215-216.

[40] *Ibid*.145.

[41] Mankievich 2024: 65.

[42] *Casanova 1989:* 241.

[43] Korotkova 2008: 16.

[44] Alyakrinskaya 2012: 210.

[45] Korotkova 2008: 7. On dance as a game or as a theatrical form and performance, see Kolesnikova 2005: 126.

[46] An important role in the development of dance was also played by foreign teachers, who arrived in Russia starting in the 1930s: they not only taught dances but also good manneor how to move in society, remarking in 1721 that Russian high society was in no way different from the European one (Alyarinskaya 2012: 204).

[47] *Ibid*. 204.

[48] Before the opening to dance, the young men engaged the ladies, who brought a carnet (a small booklet sewn with a chain, where they wrote the names of the knights who were granted the honor of the dance): the young men had to invite the lady of the house and her daughter before all the other ladies, and it was not allowed to dance more than three times with the same partner (*ibid*.14).

[49] Ibid.: 212.

[50] Casanova1989: 253.

[51] Mankevich 2004: 41.

[52] Casanova1989: 256.

[53] Dedova 2009: 251.

[54] The first fireworks of the Elizabethan era took place on 18 December 1741 for her birthday. They traditionally ended with blank shots from hundreds of guns at Kronstadt, the Peter and Paul Fortress, and ships on the Neva. In winter, displays were held near the Winter Palace; in summer, they were launched from boats on the Neva or from noble gardens (Mankievich 2004: 40-41).

[55] Casanova1989: 250.

[56] Dedova 2009: 252.

[57] *Ibidem.*

[58] *Ibidem.*

[59] *Ibid*. 251.

[60] Casanova 1989: 222.

[61] *Ibid*. 222-223.

[62] *Ibidem*.

[63] Prikazchikova 2015: 27.

[64] In the 1766 tournament, Empress Catherine was presented as the goddess Minerva—an image previously adopted by other sovereigns like Anna Ioannovna and Elizabeth I of England. Through such allegorical portrayals and divine disguises, she shaped the image of herself as an ideal ruler of the Enlightenment (*ibid*. 37).

[65] With these tournaments the empress revived the times of medieval chivalry and distinguished herself from the classic masquerades, already in fashion (*ibid*.26).

[66] *Ibid*. 27.

[67] *Ibidem.*

[68] *Ibidem.*

[69] *Ibid*. 25.

[70] In the final year of Catherine's reign, the poet Derzhavin revived the theme, calling the empress not Minerva or Felica, as was customary, but Penthesilea. Thus, the Amazon figure found its place in Russian occasional odes, as a literary symbol of the gynocratic ideal in 18th-century Russian literature and culture, *ibid*. 37.

[71] Makhotina 2010: 85.