

AN EXPERIMENT IN INTERPRETATION AND RUSSIFICATION: THE INFLUENCE OF SHAKESPEARE ON PUŠKINIAN DRAMA

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It is not for nothing that in his third draft preface (1829—30) to *Boris Godunov* (1825), A. S. Puškin claims that William Shakespeare, together with Nikolaj Karamzin, exerted a fundamental influence on the formulation of his attitude towards historical tragedy and on the development of his skill at depicting a wide variety of characters with psychological accuracy.

In contrast to Dante and Milton, the essence of Puškin's genius lies in his success at liberating Russian drama from a fixed system of beliefs and convictions in favour of an imaginative understanding of human nature, which is fully assimilated, as if it were his own. And this talent is basically Shakespearian.

Shakespeare's merit was founded in his ability to revive a bygone era in all its truth, and Puškin too adapts this principle, which he views as the function of a dramatist. In attempting to recreate the historical atmosphere of a past age, Puškin also investigates problems of politics and human psychology.

The "Plantagenet Histories" of Shakespeare served as a model for Puškin's *Boris Godunov* in four main characteristic ways. Inspired by Shakespeare's drama of national political history, Puškin utilized his own familiarity with the Russian national past — with its folkloric and feudal traditions — which dated from his childhood days. Whereas Shakespeare was preoccupied with the wrongdoings of King John and Richard III, Puškin turned his attention to the violent dynastic feuds of Russian political history in all their dramatism. The Time of Troubles was particularly suitable for this task. Puškin supplemented the plots of nobles and statesmen in Shakespeare's Histories with his own pertinent experience of gentry life in St. Petersburg. However, it was the reality of Shakespearian drama which had the most effect upon Puškin and was preserved in his depiction of power struggles.

Parallel historical events occurred in profoundly different political circumstances. In Shakespeare's tragedies we observe dynastic contentions for power in the efforts of John, Richard III, and Henry IV to usurp their crowns, the dethronement of Richard II, and the destruction of Henry VI and Richard III. Moreover, these political deeds involved much murder and bloodshed in attempts to consolidate power and influence. However, despite having the great advantage of being able to wield absolute authority, a Russian tsar lacked all the comparative security provided by established English custom and law.

Puškin demonstrates Shakespearian talent in his appreciation of the richness and poetry of human experience and situations. Breaking away from Lord Byron and the Romantic Movement, he displays a whole spectrum of human types with neither personal bias, nor subjectivity. Furthermore, despite differences in creative development and national experience, it was Shakespeare who was largely responsible for Puškin's objective and realistic approach in portraying characters who are seen

as an embodiment of human values, but who speak and act in accordance with what they think without the intervention of the poet's abstract ideas.

Puškin's conflict with Byron and Romanticism is based upon his recognition of the importance of poetic detachment and purity of genre. Indeed, Puškinian "poetic distance" involves an unromantic, realistic and historical perspective. Sharing mutual discontent with social circumstances, Puškin, however, differs from the Romantics in so far as he is critical at the same time as being creative. His draft letter of September 1825 to N. N. Rajeuskij reveals his admiration for Shakespeare's inventiveness as far superceding that for Byron's.

Whereas Shakespeare demonstrated the ability to introduce colloquial elements into his tragedies as they affected the language of all classes of society, Puškin recognized the importance of linguistic conflict in *Boris Godunov* in his contrast between historicisms and highly stylized Church Slavonic terminology, on the one hand, (in the diction of Grigorij, Boris, and Pimen, for instance) and the colloquial, everyday language of the Russian people, on the other. Indeed, Varlaam's folksy speech is capable of considerable variation from a high-flown Church Slavonic style to colloquialisms, with their inherent idiomatic folk element. The speech of Ščelkalov, the Patriarch, and the Boy's Prayer is saturated with ecclesiastical terms.

Boris Godunov marked a major breakthrough in modern Russian tragedy in so far as, in Puškin's drama of universal principles, there is a realistic, linguistic interchange between the characters. Hence, Puškin goes *beyond* the bounds of Classical drama in terms of style, characterization, and language. In the direct dialogues he also utilizes a variety of lexical, syntactical and intonational devices, such as word repetition, for the purpose of linguistic reciprocation. But, as he confesses in his letter of 30 January (or June?) 1829 from Petersburg (or Arzrum?) to N. N. Rajeuskij junior, his intentionally diverse language, forming an amalgam of various styles and moods, is drawn from Shakespearian tragedy.

Abandoning the traditional, rhymed alexandrine of Racinian tragedy, Puškin prefers blank verse in *Boris Godunov*. The intermingling nature of blank-verse scenes with those in prose, a great innovation for Russian tragedy, was also very Shakespearian. Moreover, the contrast is heightened by placing comic scenes immediately after tragic ones. It is true that Puškin does *not* adopt the English, Shakespearian iambic pentameter, but prefers the French one, which counts its syllables (despite the obvious disadvantages of the almost unstressed French language). However, he readily admits his mistake in his "Nabroski predislovija k *Borisu Godunovu*" (1830). As we learn in his preface of 1825 to *Boris Godunov* and in his "Pis'mo k izdatelju *Moskovskogo vestnika*" (1828), Puškin deliberately disregards the three classical unities, i.e. of time, place, and action, as does Shakespeare, but retains a unity of interest, or theme in his depiction of the collapse of the old order of Muscovy and the dramatic confrontation between East and West.

In *Boris Godunov* we observe a fusion of two completely different linguistic styles — an appropriate superimposition of a layer of historically stylized terminology onto the foundation of a modern, codified literary language, which is, at one and the same time, typically Puškinian. *Boris Godunov* is historically accurate in so far as it characterizes the era of the Time of Troubles by *imitation* of its style, transferring the narrative into the past. It also has a contemporary, universal significance. Thus, Puškin achieves a synthesis of a seventeenth-century language with that of the nineteenth century, while retaining his tragedy's intelligibility to a modern audience. In order to be in a position to make his drama both historically and linguistically realistic, Puškin studied, in a most conscientious manner, documentary material

about Russia, dating back to the Middle Ages, in particular, N. M. Karamzin's *Istorija gosudarstva Rossijskogo* (the first eight volumes of which had appeared as early as 1818), and also the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott.

In contrast to Shakespeare, Puškin shows that ordinary people play a significant role in the creation of history, acting as the voice of conscience in their silence at the crowning of the Pretender as their new tsar. Yet, the People are also pretentious, fickle and child-like, relying on a strong ruler to govern and preside over them, behaving as the "holy" father of a huge family. They are depersonalized, unnamed, and their smallness is emphasized. Moreover, they weep like a child and, according to Boris Godunov, have childish dreams. This theme also occurs in the scene in Pimen's cell when Grigorij dreams that Moscow is an anthep and the Muscovites are ants.

As I. Z. Serman has shown, the People, with all their faith in miracles, have a highly irrational and paradoxical consciousness which believes in Boris Godunov's guilt in the murder of the Pretender but, at the same time, accepts that the Tsarevich Dmitrij is still alive. The People's inability to discern incompatible and contradictory elements and ignore causal relationships reflects Puškin's belief in the conflict between the Europeanized Russian consciousness and the folk mind, with its faith in miracles.

In *Boris Godunov* Puškin succeeds in breaking away from the legacy of eighteenth-century Russia in his exploration of new territory. The influence upon him of the experience of ordinary people, of their thoughts and feelings, is a Classical trait. In this respect, French Classicism had a considerable effect upon the young Puškin, who inherited its good sense of proportion and harmony, austerity and precision, as well as its predilection for complete perfection of external form. Nevertheless, it is precisely his linguistic innovation in reflecting thematic conflicts which differentiates him from traditional, Classical writers of eighteenth-century Russia, such as M. V. Lomonosov, who excluded colloquial elements from his odes.

In actual fact, it is his very attempt to emancipate modern drama from the bonds of Classicism which brings Puškin close to Shakespeare's "system". However, Puškin's new form of drama, based upon thoughts, rather than passions, was largely misunderstood by contemporary critics, such as I. V. Kirejevskij.

According to L. N. Majkov, Puškin first read Shakespeare's tragedies not in their English original, but in the French translation of Letourneur, corrected by François Guizot, by whom he was influenced and who considered Shakespeare's theatre to be a theatre of the people. Hence, Shakespeare was regarded in Russia as both a popular and a national dramatist.

Boris Godunov is not the sole work by Puškin which was based on Shakespearian drama. The playful, comic nature of *Graf Nulin* (1825) reveals that it is a parody of Shakespeare's tragic work, *The Rape of Lucrece*. The plot of Puškin's *Andželo* is based upon Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; as Jurij Levin has demonstrated, Puškin was influenced by Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (first published in 1817), the fifth edition (1831) of which was in Puškin's own library.

However, in his *Andželo* Puškin departs from Shakespeare in several ways. *Andželo* is set in Italy, whereas *Measure for Measure* takes place in Vienna. Puškin's work has a narrative, rather than a highly dramatic format. Nevertheless, *Andželo* is an examination of similar moral issues as those which arise in *Measure for Measure* and, indeed, may be compared with *Boris Godunov* in its preoccupation with problems of leadership and legitimacy in a social order which is in a state of disarray, leading to the absence of the proper ruler and an increasingly unpopular false king

(a situation which led Jurij Lotman to come to the conclusion that the structure of *Andželo* is not unlike that of many traditional fairy tales). Certainly, we are reminded of *Boris Godunov* when we consider the conflict between falsity and reality, and also the popular belief that the *true* leader will return to bring order to the chaotic state of affairs.

Puškin aimed both to reform and, at the same time, modernize the Classical Russian theatre. In his draft letter of September 1825 to N. N. Rajevskij, Puškin claims that a truthful portrayal of characters and their speech is a pre-requisite for modern drama and refers to Shakespeare as a model. Moreover, in his "Table-talk" (circa 1834—36) Puškin confirms his belief in the clear advantages of Shakespeare's multi-faceted, realistic method of characterization which, he considers, is in many ways preferable to that of Molière, for it expresses the true complexity of vices and passions which are an inherent part of the human nature of a given character.

Many historical analogies may be drawn between Puškin's *Boris Godunov* and Shakespearian tragedy. Boris Godunov's rise to power has been compared with that of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Like Gloucester, Boris murders an innocent child to assert his authority. As with Gloucester and Julius Caesar, he subsequently feigns reluctance to receive the crown, accepting it only after the people have persuaded him to do so. Both Richard III and Boris Godunov are filled with uneasiness and foreboding. Grigorij's career may be compared with that of Bolingbroke before the latter comes to power.

Nevertheless, despite imitating Shakespeare, Puškin carefully preserves his own independence of thought and original dramatic reality. In his letter of 16 April 1830 to Count Benckendorf, he confesses his belief that all rebellions are similar to one another. Yet, Puškin displays considerable originality in his own unique interpretation of Shakespearian situations. He has been described as "A Russian Shakespeare" by C. H. Herford because of his attempts at russifying the traditional Shakespearian play. Indeed, three basic characteristics have been identified by A. D. P. Briggs as a means of differentiating the form of Puškin's *Boris Godunov* from Shakespearian tragedy: scenic russification; individualized theatrical style; and a wide-ranging, brief and sober language. Hence, providing us with an abundance of historical and geographical references, folk songs, and other traditional Slavonic phenomena, Puškin sets the scene in Eastern Europe — authenticity being attained by the richness of local details of Russian life and history.

Further innovations made by Puškin include frequent changes of scene and numerous transitory characters, which are presumably included to convince us of the reality of the actions which take place. In this respect, in *Boris Godunov* we observe twenty different settings for twenty-three scenes, several of which are surprisingly short. Many characters, such as Pimen, Misail and Varlaam, Father Czernikowski and the Fool, appear in only one scene. Various characters in *Boris Godunov* have no parallel in Shakespearian tragedy — these include the chronicler, Pimen; Marina, the heroine (a "type of worldly coquette unknown to Shakespeare"); as well as the Pretender, whose adventures have been likened to those of the French Henry IV.

Many crucial moments in *Boris Godunov* are essentially different from those in Shakespearian tragedy. An example of this is the contrast which S. M. Bondi makes between Shakespeare's portrayal of the decease of Henry IV with the much more sudden death of Puškin's Boris Godunov. Whereas Shakespeare, with all his psychological verisimilitude, takes advantage of playing considerably on the audience's feelings, Puškin hardly prepares us for Boris' death and provides us with a concise revelation of the bare facts. While the long soliloquies of Shakespeare's characters

express much of their psychological complexity and contradictory nature, the relatively brief speeches delivered by Puškin's heroes are a measure of their authenticity, reflecting, at the same time, the poet's skill at character portrayal. However, having an affinity with French and Greek tragedy, Puškin's laconicism and "classical economy of form" mark the delineation between the unadorned simplicity of his language and the emotionally-charged, dramatic speech of William Shakespeare.

NOTE

This article is based on pages 53 to 68 and 108 to 135 of the author's unpublished thesis for the research degree of Master of Philosophy on "The Principle of Conflict in Certain Historical and Lyrical Works of A. S. Pushkin: A Thematic and Linguistic Investigation" (University of Sheffield, England, 1984—85, 248 pp.)

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PRÓBÁLKOZÁS A SHAKESPEARE-I DRÁMA RUSSZIFIKÁLÁSÁRA: SHAKESPEARE HATÁSA PUSKIN MŰVEIRE

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A cikk A. Sz. Puskin próbálkozását elemzi a *Borisz Godunov*, valamint *Andzselo* c. művekben abban a vonatkozásban, hogy hogyan szabadítja fel az orosz drámát a klasszikus hagyomány kötéleitől és azt Shakespeare-i alapelve helyezi.

Shakespeare-i azáltal, hogy pszichológiai életvalóságokat használ sokoldalú jellemábrázolásban. Puskin russzifikálja az uralkodók hatalmi harcát, demonstrálja saját meggyőződését abban a harcban, amely az ésszerű európaiasodott orosz tudat és a történelmileg jelentős, de mégis ésszerűtlen csoda — központú népi gondolkodás között folyik. Történelmi-filozófiai konfliktus párhuzamos összehasonlítása, nyelvészeti megkülönböztetéssel.