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Shakespeare in Russian Cultural Consciousness in the 20th Century

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Abstract

The essay outlines how Shakespeare's work came to be known, translated and interpreted in Russia. The first acquaintance with his plays in the 18th — early 19th century required an intermediary, the role acted by French translations and much altered versions of the original. It was in the time of Alexander Pushkin that adequate Russian translations were published, played on stage, while Shakespeare was first viewed as a productive artistic model in whose tragedies and histories a political and moral standard was put up. Since then Shakespeare has been present in Russian cultural consciousness as an “eternal fellow-traveller”. His plays in new translations and theatrical interpretations accompanied the most crucial and catastrophic events in the 20th century Russia: revolution, Stalin's terror and the so-called “thaw period” that followed it. The foremost Russian poets reflected on Shakespeare in their original verse, critical essays, or participated in his translation. The most important part in translating Shakespeare belongs to Boris Pasternak for whom his Shakespearian work was not only a means to survive and to earn his living but his message to people here and his attempt to be heard beyond the “iron curtain”. Marshak's translation of the sonnets, in the last Stalin's decade when new lyrical poetry was practically banned in print, served to transmit eternal feelings and enjoyed popularity unparalleled for translated verse.

Keywords list (en): Shakespeare in Russia, translation, Pushkin, political and moral standard, Stalin, Pasternak, Marshak, sonnet, nation

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1 Shakespeare in Russia — and not in Russia alone — for the last two centuries has served as a true model for humanism established since the time of European Renaissance, which he closed to open up a new historical perspective that extends to our time.

2 Besides that, there are, at least, three good formal reasons to talk now on Shakespeare and

on Shakespeare in Russia. Firstly, Shakespeare's jubilee, widely celebrated in 2014. We Russians are great jubilators and choose for such occasions practically all dates with a zero at the end but prefer births to deaths. This is why 450 in 2014 is preferable for our cultural mentality than 400 since his death two years later.

3 Among different events and editions (some of them still in progress) I want to mention the first Shakespeare encyclopaedia in Russia (there were but small reference books hitherto) coming out in 2015. The block of materials "Shakespeare in Russia" is, if not the most important for us, then undoubtedly the most informative for the rest of the world, the fact proved by a recent publication of articles from the forthcoming encyclopaedia in the American Russian studies in Literature. But besides these formal reasons there exists one more which prompts the choice of Shakespeare for my talk at the conference: his unique importance in Russian cultural consciousness.

4 Some ten years ago, a friend told me about a public speech given by the British Ambassador in Moscow Tony Brenton titled "Shakespeare the Russian". Next time at the embassy, I asked the Ambassador whether the text of his speech was available, and he sent me a fine essay. I liked his joke about serious matters and received a permission from him to have it translated for the foremost Russian journal in literary criticism *Problems of Literature*. The translation was published in 2007 (issue 4).

5 Tony Brenton began his retrospective reminding us that it was in Shakespeare's time that the first Russians had reached Britain, a dozen of them — under Boris Godunov — were even sent to Oxford to study there (none of them came back) — why not to omit one of these recusants as a candidate to have written all we know as Shakespeare's:

6 Maybe I even have a Russian candidate in mind — an exile from the brutal court of Ivan the Terrible. Perhaps a clerk or a skoromokh [vagrant actor] who finds his way to England in some Ambassadorial suite, and whose fascination with the strange and insular ways of the English gives that clarity and concreteness of vision which is one of Shakespeare's hallmarks. In London he is beguiled by some British beauty to settle, and brings Russian eloquence and intensity to the hitherto rather provincial English language and stage. So in the fusion of our two cultures he creates an example of Anglo/Russian co-operation which I can extol as the magnificent model for how relations between our two countries ought to be today (*Brenton* 216).

7 I will concentrate on some facts from the 20th century but first ought to sketch the way of Shakespeare into Russia¹. He came, of course, not in his own time and not by a direct way but a century and a half later through France and Germany. First, *Hamlet* was remodeled by our leading classical tragedian Sumarokov (1748), then *Merry Wives of Windsor* — with their traditional appeal to a royal taste — adapted by the empress Catherine the Great. The reformer of the Russian language, historian and poet, Nikolai Karamzin translated *Julius Caesar* if not from the original then looking into it. In many European countries *Julius Caesar* was the first or among the first to become popular with its classical background in the age of classicism. But the time for translations was not ripe yet and on stage they played adaptations borrowed from French.

8 It was Pushkin's time and with his own admiration for Shakespeare when his fame spread wide and his experience was found important as a guide for contemporary thought setting up a moral and political standard. Pushkin "shakesperized in a broad sense" (as he put it) in his national tragedy *Boris Godunov*, wrote a parody of Shakespeare and history in his mock poem *Count Nulin* (what might have happened if a modern Lucrece would put an end to a rape by slapping the face of an offender?), and the most enigmatic Pushkin's sally into Shakespeare's ground was with *Measure for Measure*². He first translated odd 20 lines opening the comedy, then gave it up and wrote a poem *Angelo*, appreciated by critics in the same vein as Shakespeare's play — a failure. Pushkin was very much displeased and told a friend that *Angelo* was the best he ever wrote. His opinion, at least, is worth consideration.

9 Through the 19th century Shakespeare's popularity and impact on the Russian mind grew steadily. There were short periods in 1860—1870s when a new nihilistic and utilitarian turn of mind

made young people prefer Henry Buckle and Herbert Spencer to Shakespeare, but both in the capitals and provinces his plays were performed and admired.

¹⁰ The first years of the 20th century (1902—1904) record the first important edition of Shakespeare's works of an academic type — a 5-volume collection brought out by the famous publishing house Brokhaus-Efron (edited by Semyon Vengerov). It was both a summing up and a step taken into the new epoch. The Best old translations and some new specially commissioned ones were provided with prefaces and commentary based on German and English criticism and textological work. All books were lavishly illustrated. Only 40 years later would a similar ambitious project be attempted. Shakespeare, though not a domineering influence, became an important figure among “eternal fellow-travellers” into the domain of culture (Merezhkovsky's metaphor) for the Russian “silver age”. Many of them were doing Shakespearian work: Alexander Blok played Hamlet on a home stage and reflected on him in poems: “I am Hamlet, and blood grows cold in my veins / When perfidy is at work, conspiring...”

¹¹ Valery Briusov translated sonnets (their popularity in Russia is still half a century ahead); Marina Tzvetavaeva wrote in defense of Ophelia addressing bitter words to Hamlet: “And you with your mixture of plaster / And decay... Gossip with bones, / Prince Hamlet! It is none of your business to judge an inflated blood...”

¹² А Вы с Вашей примесью мела
И тлена... С костями злословь,
Принц Гамлет! Не Вашего разума дело
Судить воспаленную кровь.

¹³ Boris Pasternak... However, his great Shakespearean achievement belongs not to his early pre-Revolutionary years but to a later Soviet time, when Shakespeare became for many persons from the “silver age” a source to revive and speak up: Mikhail Kuzmin, Anne Radlova, Mikhail Lozinsky and Boris Pasternak created a new Russian Shakespeare in their translations. At the same time banned from the field of philosophy Mikahail Bakhtin and Gustav Spet wrote on Shakespeare: Bakhtin not extensively for his book on Rabelais (Shakespeare's pages published in 1990s), and Spet had great plans to be one of the commentators, editors of translation for the new collection of Shakespeare's works. He was arrested and shot dead before the first volume came out, and his collected papers in the field of Shakespeare were brought out only in 2013.

¹⁴ In the first revolutionary years Shakespeare was enlisted to serve the great cause and even preferred to avant-garde art. Thus Mayakovskii was very much annoyed when in the autumn of 1918 his revolutionary play *Mystery-buff* (staged by Meyerhold) after three nights was (as he believed) ousted by *Macbeth*. His information was wrong — *Macbeth* was performed at another theatre in Petrograd (Cinizelli circus) but the futurist was infuriated against Shakespeare.

¹⁵ The authorities would attend to this revolutionary protest against old classics only some years later. The first Soviet theatre in Petrograd (Bolshoi Drama Theater initiated by Maxim Gorky and Alexander Blok) in the first 4 seasons (1919—1922) lived on Shakespeare: *Much Ado*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar* ... But then they were told, or realized, that Friedrich Schiller better corresponded to the revolutionary spirit, and by mid-1920s all classical names had to give place to the new art.

¹⁶ In Moscow Shakespeare was also on stage attracting some new talented actors. Mikhail Chekhov (Anton Chekhov's nephew) began his Shakespearean career as Malvolio in Moscow Art Theatre (1920), and 4 years later, when a group of young actors rehearsing *Hamlet* was institutionalized as MAT-2, he played his famous Prince of Denmark. His Hamlet had little to do with either revolution or heroism and much with melancholy and the transcendental anticipation of universal evil. The famous theatre director and teacher of dramatic art Maria Knebel much later wrote of Chekhov's Hamlet: “Theoretically I know what catharsis is but I experienced it only once at the moment when Chekhov's Hamlet died”.

¹⁷ This art was no longer in demand. It must have looked like a leave-taking gesture from the “silver age”. And those who practiced it were suspected or called enemies. Mikhail Chekhov,

afraid of arrest, left Russia in 1928. At that time a threatening question, addressed to every citizen — “What did you do before 1917”, was relevant towards classics too. Their social position and origin were scrutinized, and the first Soviet dispute about Shakespeare related to whether he belonged to the archaic feudal society or could be considered as a herald of a new bourgeoisie age. The second was much preferable, of course, because this social diagnosis would allow Shakespeare to claim a more progressive role and to be positioned as not completely alien to the proletariat.

18 But before all these uncertainties were cleared up Shakespeare in late 1920s was not much staged or translated. Only when in the totalitarian state its ideological leaders came to a decision that in art and literature a hierarchy should be as rigid as it was in political reality they rehabilitated classics. Shakespeare was among the first and greatest. It was in mid-30s that new translations were commissioned and performed all over the Soviet Union. Shakespeare arrived at places where he had never been heard of before. According to the reviewers fantastic performances were produced in Asian republics, in the Caucuses, on the stage of national theatres. There was not much variety in choice from Shakespeare’s canon — only *Richard III* among histories, some comedies, among tragedies — *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*... *King Lear* was too complex and mystical, *Antony and Cleopatra* — staged by Tairov seemed too aesthetical. *Hamlet* was viewed on with a suspicious eye by Stalin

19 The role of the Prince was rehearsed in Moscow art theatre by Boris Livanov (his son Vasilii is famous as Sherlock Holmes in the late Soviet film version). Livanov belonged to the artistic elite who were invited to Kremlin for receptions there. At one of such events, Stalin came up to him to ask about his plans, probably, aware of his work on *Hamlet*. Livanov heard: “Why *Hamlet*, he is a weak hero... Not the one we need”. This, of course, put an end to a long rehearsal process in MAT. and to *Hamlet* in the USSR, but it served as a good reason for *Hamlet* to herald the political “thaw” after Stalin’s death.

20 In 1955 Peter Brook brought *Hamlet* with Paul Scofield to Moscow. It was not just theatre and Shakespeare, it was a break through when the iron curtain was raised. Scofield played *Hamlet* 12 times in 10 days.

21 A year earlier in Leningrad Grigory Kozintzev staged *Hamlet* in Pasternak’s translation. In 1964 he filmed the tragedy with Innokentii Smoktunovsii. This production coincided with the end of Khrushchev’s era, whose stay in power thus was bracketed with spectacular Shakespearean events and foremost with *Hamlet*.

22 Many eventful turns in Russian history in the 20th century took place to Shakespearean accompaniment which did not look either coincidental nor occasional but provided an important commentary, supplied a heavily censored mind with an opportunity to speak up. It concerned not the political side of life only.

23 When Kozintzev chose Pasternak’s translation of *Hamlet* in 1954 he decided to close a performance with the sonnet 74 (“But be contented: when that fell arrest / Without all bail shall carry me away...”) Pasternak was not happy with the idea but made a translation, that he did not consider a final version. The director seemed not to appreciate his work and made use of another translation — by Samuil Marshak. Pasternak was indignant and protested. But Kozintzev’s choice must have been dictated by the unprecedented popularity poetry in translation omit that Marshak’s sonnets enjoyed.

24 The picture of Shakespeare in the 20th century Russia would not be complete without Marshak and his translation of the sonnets. They have won popularity, that seldom befalls a translated text — they became a literary fact in the target language. This is largely due to the time and circumstances of Marshak’s work started in the wartime: first of the sonnets were published at the end of the war in journals and brought out as a book in 1948.

25 Before then Shakespeare’s sonnets had never enjoyed much popularity in Russia. Translated by different hands since mid-19th century, they were twice completed as a full sequence — once in the 19th century and then at the beginning of the 20th (the second go was by Chaikovsky’s brother Modest). Marshak set to work at the time when love lyric was practically

ruled out — first because of the war and then because of the censor’s strictures in the last Stalin’s decade. Lyrics were written by the best poets (Pasternak, Akmatova, Zabolotsky) and by the young generation but to have them published (even if it could be imagined) would be to expose oneself to a scathing criticism.

26 The only possibility allowed was to have lyric translated through a classic original, and this is exactly what Marshak had done with Shakespeare. He wrote texts that were demanded by the common reader and could pass through censorship. Since then his translations are widely remembered, sung (though not many, of course) as pop songs. They were adapted to this popular usage. Marshak did exactly what he intended and from this point of view his job was perfectly done. But how close to the original?

27 When I have to illustrate Marshak’s interpretation / deformation with one example I prefer the first lines from the sonnet 129:

28 Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action...
If we had Marshak translated back into English we would have:
Th’expense of spirit AND a waste of shame
Is VOLUPTIOUSNESS in action...

29 Style has been smoothed and bowdlerized (this is one of Marshak’s tendencies). Another tendency concerns the metaphor dissected in the first line that is against both rhetoric in this particular sonnet and the verbal nature of the renaissance sonnet in general. To retain metaphors in Shakespeare’s sonnet means to follow his generic instruction and the translator is not in his right to choose in this case but has to submit.

30 “All this the world well knows...” Yet none knows well how to translate better than Marshak did. By now generations of translators have challenged his achievement, as it seems fully aware what they should do and failing to win in this competition. They know that sonnets should sound in a lower style, rough and manly, and have a more elaborate, sophisticated imagery, but translators after Marshak persistently fail in their attempt to retain poetry, alive in Marshak’s translation, though in a different genre, for different public taste. The highly reflective renaissance sonnet in Marshak’s version had been transformed into a romantic song — *жестокий романс*, and survives in this quality in Russian poetry.

31 But it is not with poetry that I would wish to close my talk. I would rather come back to Shakespeare as an acknowledged political commentator that has so often been called on as a contemporary to most crucial events in Russian history in the 20th century too.

32 I had a personal chance to witness how powerful he is in this capacity and how earnestly his word is expected as an epitome of political wisdom. In mid-90s I was invited to talk on some literary matter on the radio station *Echo of Moscow*. When I finished and was about to leave the editor rushed into the room with the latest news that the Chechen war began or was renewed and with a request to me to provide an immediate comment... in Shakespeare’s words or images. I protested but was pushed back into a close room, found myself with earphones and a line running before my eyes: “Speak” which meant that I was put on the air.

33 I am not sure what my choice would be had I ten minutes to think, but on the spur of the moment I started talking on what seemed most obvious to me as an illustration of how the order of state is always in opposition with an ever “wavering multitude” — the final episode in Part II of *Henry IV*. The new king proves his right to become an ideal monarch when he expels the companion and master of his youth sir John Falstaff. Much has been said in this connection, and apology of the king acting in the interest of state does not look more convincing than the voices of rebuke addressed to the one inhumanely ungrateful to old friendship.

34 This is an everlasting problem, growing not less but more and more urgent with a worldwide migration processes dressed up as multiculturalism, absolutely bewitching some ten years ago and met with more and apprehension voiced by the leading politicians in the West: “We thought they are coming to us to embrace our principles” But what made you think so?

35 Sir John Falstaff is not a multicultural newcomer. He belongs to carnivalesque outlaws, he represents Nature opposed to History as the author of the best Russian book on Shakespeare in the 20th century Leonid Pinsky had put it and titled the chapter on Falstaff: “History and Nature face to face” (67-84).

36 Significantly simultaneous to *Henry IV* is another Shakespeare’s play where — probably for the first time the nation is problematized. I mean *The Merchant of Venice*, of course, and not Shylock alone but Venice as a multicultural community. It is there and nowhere else, as we are told, that the Jew is in his right, as well as any other national representative, to appeal to the law and to be heard by the law because otherwise Venetian trade would be undermined. And, as it is traditional with Shakespeare, he does not leave an important motif to stay alone but doubles and trebles it as it happens in Belmont with a competitor for Portia’s hand.

37 There is a contemporaneous impression of an Elizabethan play: “On another occasion not far from our inn, I beheld a play in Bishopsgate ... a play in which they presented divers nations and an Englishman struggling together for a maiden...”

38 Is there another Elizabethan plot, known to us, that fits into this description better than *The Merchant*? I have not heard of such. Thomas Platter, a Swiss traveler and student of medicine, is famous as practically a unique person who left a theatrical description from the period — that of *Julius Caesar* performed at the new opened Globe theatre, but I have never come across an attempt to attribute this above quoted impression to *The Merchant of Venice*. And if it relates to *The Merchant* (as I believe) it demonstrates what a contemporary remembered: not the Jew, capitalism or homosexuality, much favoured by the critics of our time, but “diverse nations” where Shylock grows not into a single problem of whether Shakespeare was antisemitic or vice versa, but stands out against a multicultural background.

39 Of course, Shakespeare is our contemporary, but it is not less important to understand that we are his, because he spoke from the starting point of the period in world history which with us, probably, comes to its end. And Shakespeare has much to recommend us about the world we still live in because it is the world he viewed opening up in a long perspective.

Remarks:

1. The history of Shakespeare in Russia, especially its earlier stages in the 18th and 19th centuries, has been substantially documented and outlined. The most fundamental study is a collection of chronological materials *Shakespeare and Russian Culture* / ed. M. P. Alekseev. M.; Leningrad, 1965.

2. This comparative theme had provoked not a few comparative studies. My own article titled “Two failures” came out first in the periodical *Problems of literature* 1 (2003) to be reprinted in several collections and in my book: Shaytanov, Igor. *Comparative Literature or/and Poetics*. Moscow, 2010.

Шекспир в русском культурном сознании в XX веке

Шайтанов Игорь Олегович

Аннотация

В данной статье прослеживается, каким образом в России произведения У. Шекспира стали известными, переводились и истолковывались. Первое знакомство с его пьесами в XVIII — начале XIX вв. потребовало посредников — эту роль сыграли французские переводчики со своими сильно измененными, по сравнению с оригиналом, версиями текстов. Во времена А. С. Пушкина были опубликованы первые качественные переводы Шекспира на русский язык. Пьесы ставились на сцене, а Шекспир был впервые рассмотрен в качестве первого в истории художественного образца, в трагедиях и исторических пьесах которого, были сформированы политические и моральные стандарты. С тех пор Шекспир присутствует в русском культурном сознании в виде «вечного спутника». В новых переводах и театральных постановках его пьесы сопровождалась самыми важными и катастрофическими событиями XX века: революция, сталинский террор и последовавшая затем так называемая «оттепель». Самые выдающиеся русские поэты размышляли о Шекспире в своих стихах, критических эссе, а также участвовали в составлении переводов. Самую видную роль в переводах Шекспира сыграл Б. Л. Пастернак, для которого работа над Шекспиром была не только главным источником дохода и выживания, но также и его посланием людям в Советском Союзе и попыткой быть услышанным по другую сторону «железного занавеса». Переводы сонетов, сделанные С. Я. Маршак в последнее сталинское десятилетие, когда новая поэзия была практически запрещена к публикации, служили для передачи вечных чувств и оказались несравнимо популярнее, чем любая иная переводная поэзия.

Ключевые слова: Шекспир в России, перевод, Пушкин, политические и моральные стандарты, Сталин, Пастернак, Маршак, сонет, нация

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