

SLAVICA XXVIII.

ANNALES INSTITUTI PHILOGIAE SLAVICAE
UNIVERSITATIS DEBRECENIENSIS
DE LUDOVICO KOSSUTH NOMINATAE

SLAVICA

XXVIII.

ADIUVENTIBUS

ISTVÁN T. MOLNÁR, ISTVÁN D. MOLNÁR

REDIGIT

ZOLTÁN HAJNÁDY



DEBRECEN, 1997

SLAVICA XXVIII.

ISSN 0583-5356

Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem
Felelős kiadó: Bazsa György
Felelős szerkesztő: Hajnádý Zoltán
Szedés: KLTE Szláv Filológiai Intézet
Nyomás: KLTE Reprográfiai Osztály

97-510

ANNALES INSTITUTI PHILOLOGIAE SLAVICAE
UNIVERSITATIS DEBRECENIENSIS
DE LUDOVICO KOSSUTH NOMINATAE

SLAVICA

XXVIII.

ADIVANTIBUS

ISTVÁN T. MOLNÁR, ISTVÁN D. MOLNÁR

REDIGIT

ZOLTÁN HAJNÁDY

DEBRECEN, 1997

The inserted narratives in *Boris Godunov*

M. MEZŐSI

IN *BORIS GODUNOV* (both in Pushkin's drama and Musorgsky's opera¹) we find three inserted narratives the scene of which is laid in the town of Uglich where the Tsarevich Dimitry died a mysterious death. (However, to use the epithet *mysterious* in this case, according to Pushkin's and Musorgsky's interpretation, is obviously a euphemism since neither the poet nor the composer has the slightest doubt that in Uglich a murder took place.)² The first and the second Uglich stories are related by the same characters in the opera as in the drama (Pimen and Shuisky respectively); on the other hand, the third narrative is told by the patriarch in Pushkin's drama, while in Musorgsky's opera by Pimen. Let us start with the second story. After having promised Shuisky "a terrible death" in case he did not tell the truth, Boris Godunov is expecting a true answer to his question: was the little child, who died in Uglich, the Tsarevich Dimitry really? Shuisky's answer is *yes*. To confirm that he is speaking truth, Shuisky gives a detailed account of the Uglich mission (he was then sent by Godunov to the spot to investigate the circumstances of the *mysterious* death of the Tsarevich). This account turns out to be so realistic that it practically gives the Tsar the shivers. The third Uglich story is told by the patriarch in Pushkin's drama. That the pontiff is driven by political motives is obvious: he relates the story about the miraculous cure of the blind old man because with this "God himself has sent a means" to unmask the Pretender who

Is impudently using the
Name of the Tsarevich as a stolen vestment.
But let us tear it off: he will himself
Be shamed by his nudity.

¹ Musorgsky excluded the first Uglich story, related by Pimen in the Chudov monastery scene, from his final version of *Boris Godunov*.

² Historians up to the present have neither verified nor refuted that Boris Godunov had actually been behind the death of the tsarevich, and it is also doubtful if the false Dimitry and Grishka Otrepiev were one and the same person. See e.g. *The Historians' History of the World*, Vol. XVII, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1926. Karamzin's work, *The History of the Russian State* is also a good source although the author does not always adhere to the principle of *sine ira et studio*: he cares neither for Boris Godunov nor for his opponent, the false Dimitry, and accepts without reservation the version according to which Godunov had the tsarevich murdered and the false Dimitry was actually Grishka Otrepiev, a monk who had defrocked himself.

[Он именем царевича, как ризой
Украденной, бесстыдно облачился:
Но стоит лишь ее раздрать — и сам
Он наготой своею посрамится.]

In short, the "real" Tsarevich is dead, consequently the "Tsarevich" who emerged is in fact a pretender. The patriarch advises the Tsar to have the headboard of the Tsarevich's grave, the "sacred relic", brought in the Kremlin (before which "many sufferers have gained recovery") and

...have it exposed in the Archangelsk
Cathedral; the people will then see through
The fraud of the ungodly scoundrel,
And the devils' power will vanish as dust.

[... поставить их в соборе
Архангельском; народ увидит ясно
Тогда обман безбожного злодея,
И мощь бесов исчезнет яко прах.]

Shuisky, however, an *adherent of political realism*, does not approve of this since it might come back at the Tsar like a boomerang: it might easily remind the people of the circumstances of the Tsarevich Dimitry's mysterious death. On the other hand, not only the people might be reminded of the Tsarevich's death by the exposing of the "sacred relic" but also the present sovereign himself. And this is by no means desirable for the prince in the light of that the Tsar has promised him "a terrible death" if he "tells falsehoods" about the Uglich happenings. In addition, since it was Shuisky who was sent by Boris Godunov to Uglich to investigate the circumstances of the death of the Tsarevich, he finds himself in an insecure position: with the mission to Uglich Godunov has practically bound him as an accomplice to himself.³ Shuisky thus knows everything about the Tsar; yet by this means he got himself into that difficult state that he has to sail with Boris in this perilous tempest. Therefore he prefers to explain to the people himself that the person who claims to be the

³ See the following lines from the first dialogue between Shuisky and Vorotinsky in Scene I when the former relates that upon his return from Uglich

[Boris]
Questioned me, went into the details,
And I repeated before him the folly
He had *suggested* to me *himself*.

[Распрашивал, в подробности входил —
И перед ним я повторил нелепость,
Которую мне сам он *нашептал*.]
(italics mine — M.M.)

Tsarevich is in fact a young monk who has defrocked himself; he would of course exclude any reference to the death of the Tsarevich as it may turn out to be embarrassing.

In Musorgsky's opera, in the scene just before Boris Godunov's death Shuisky leads in Pimen to tell his story about the miraculous recovery of the blind old man. The point of Shuisky's "dramaturgy" is to prove that the prince spoke the truth when he said that the dead little boy in Uglich had been Dimitry (since it was the spirit of the *dead* Tsarevich that cured the old man). Thus Shuisky shelters himself twofold: first, with his account of the Uglich mission; secondly, with the story related by Pimen in which he has no concern. The prince has a further intention with Pimen's narrative: to upset the Tsar even more who is struggling with his guilty conscience. Boris gives utterance to his very last hope in this scene when he says: "the little one is alive, alive" and at the same time he appears to carry out his threat: "as for Shuisky, for his false vow, have him quartered!" This shows that Boris is caught in a trap: if Shuisky was speaking the truth in his account of his mission to Uglich, the Tsar is seized with compunction but if he was lying (i.e. "the little one is alive"), Boris should then take into account that he who claims his throne may be no *pretender* but, on the contrary, the Tsarevich himself, who at that time managed to escape, wants to regain possession of the throne of the Tsars of which he, Boris Godunov, is actually the *usurper*.

Hence Shuisky cannot be definitely condemned on moral grounds for his plunging his cold knife into the hot wound of Boris' heart, since for him it is literally a question of life and death whether or not it is true what he said and on what he has sworn an oath. Of course, in weighing what steps to take, Shuisky considers his own vital interests ever so much more important than to deal gently with the sovereign and not to torture him by upsetting his (burdened) conscience. Therefore he is reluctant to spare the Tsar the naturalistic details of his Uglich mission, which in his account serve as the guarantee of trustworthiness, as well as the heart-gripping conclusion of Pimen's narrative (that the Tsarevich is dead). And if the Tsarevich is dead, this obviously means to Boris that he is the murderer.

Shuisky was present in Uglich to conduct the inquiry on Godunov's authority and he proclaimed in public that Dimitry, the Tsarevich, had fallen victim to a regrettable accident. Thus he was the main witness that the Tsarevich had died and that no murder had occurred but an *accident*.

In Pushkin's play it is the patriarch who relates the miraculous story. Shuisky plays a major role here, too: he saves the situation after the patriarch's narrative and advice. He offers to enlighten the people himself:

Уговорю, усовещу безумство
И злой обман бродяги обнаружу.

[I will appeal to their better self, reprimand them
for their folly,
And disclose the wicked fraud of the vagabond.]

Let us recall that it was Shuisky, too, who at that time *explained* the mysterious death of the Tsarevich to the people. So as for Boris, it is an error to accept this offer, sc. to

leave it to that very same person to unwrap the mystery about the false Tsarevich who is known to have given false evidence on the occasion of the investigation in Uglich. This may remind us of the way the people reacted to the child-murders: the first time it believes it (or at least pretends to believe it), but the next time it will refuse to do so. In Shuisky's acting the main theme of the play is mirrored, viz. that a policy which is based upon immorality must inevitably collapse. Prince Shuisky's account of his mission takes up the thread of Pimen's Uglich story told in a cell of the Chudov monastery. One of the functions of these inserted narratives is that the poet (composer) has the roots of the play's plot told. It is a common feature in all the three Uglich stories that their protagonist, so to speak, is the murdered Tsarevich and their scene is that of the assassination.

The dramaturgic function of the narratives of Pimen and Shuisky respectively may be described as follows. The first Uglich story (told by Pimen) and the second (Shuisky's account of his mission) converge, or culminate, in the third (the miraculous narrative related by the patriarch in Pushkin and by Pimen in Musorgsky). As the dramatic conflict is *between the two usurpers* (i.e. Boris and Grigory), they can rightly be considered as the chief characters (although they never meet face to face in the course of the drama). Pimen relates his narrative to Grigory in the cell of the monastery, with this (willingly or unwillingly) setting the avalanche in motion: he practically renders his young fellow-monk a leading character. Shuisky addresses his Uglich story to Boris who is the other, in fact the first, protagonist. With this parallel construction the artist makes Pimen's chronicle-truth and Shuisky's character of the politician-intriguer focus in the third Uglich narrative (in Pushkin told by the patriarch, in Musorgsky by Pimen). Due to the composer's putting the miraculous Uglich story in Pimen's mouth, the artistic message of this narrative is that the chronicler's truth prevails.

In Musorgsky's opera this is immediately followed by Boris Godunov's death, so the story about the miraculous recovery is in fact a *coup de grâce* for the Tsar who is tortured by his guilty conscience. The young monk's prophecy has thus come true which he then, burning with the sacred fire of noble indignation, told in the back of the cell of the Chudov monastery; but if we keep in mind how the drama ends, we will certainly find the fulfilment of that prophecy less noble or sacred.⁴ This is Grigory Otrepiev's pure-minded indignation:

Борис, Борис! все пред тобой трепещет,
Никто тебе не смеет и напомнить
О жребии несчастного младенца.

(Подходя к столу. Почти говорком.)

А между тем отшельник в темной келье
Здесь на тебя донос ужасный пишет;
И не уйдешь ты от суда людского,

⁴ Although the plot of the opera and Pushkin's drama significantly differs at this point (Musorgsky's Boris will die immediately after Pimen's narrative while Pushkin's hero dies only five scenes later), by and large this holds true in respect of both *Boris Godunovs*.

Как не уйдешь от божьего суда...⁵

[Boris, Boris! Everything trembles before you.
No one will dare even to mention
The fate of the poor child...

(going up to the table; almost spoken)

And in the meantime a recluse in a dark cell
Is writing a terrible denunciation of you right here,

*And you will not escape the people's judgement,
Just as you will not escape divine judgement!]*

(italics mine: M.M.)

The sentence passed on Boris Godunov — *суда людского* (the people's judgement) in Musorgsky or *суда мирского* (earthly judgement) in Pushkin — is going to be carried out by Grigory: he will deprive the Tsar of the throne. *Divine judgement*, however, manifests itself in the chronicle-, or historical, truth hall-marked by Pimen: this is one of the artistic messages (if not *the* main one) conveyed by Musorgsky's opera, and the same can after all be said of Pushkin's play, too, despite that the poet has the third Uglich narrative related by the patriarch and not by Pimen.

⁵ The passage cited is from Musorgsky's text which here only very slightly varies from Pushkin. One of the very few alterations is that he changed Pushkin's *суда мирского* (earthly judgement) to *суда людского* (the people's judgement).