Between Public and Private: Re-Figuring Politics in Pushkin's «Boris Godunov»

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Abstract

Alexander Pushkin went about, quite deliberately, to write an historical drama without the conventional romantic sub-plot. He remarked in 1829 in reference to his Boris Godunov: "A tragedy without love has appealed to my imagination." In this, he was probably following the advice of Voltaire who railed against "love intrigues, often foreign to the subject, and so often debased by idle buffooneries." And with his drama Orestes, the French playwright made the following claim: "I have at least given my countrymen some idea of a tragedy without love, without confidants, and without episodes" (italics mine). The romantic sub-plot, in Voltaire's view, detracted from the gravitas of the main political/military plot-line. He therefore argued for a clear separation of romance and politics. But while Voltaire simply omits a romantic sub-plot, Pushkin "lays bare" his rejection of it within Boris Godunov, thereby critically engaging the tradition. Furthermore, his inclusion of "buffooneries" in his drama and his indebtedness to Shakespeare, whom Voltaire considered "a barbarian," suggest that Pushkin may have had somewhat different motives in excising romance than did Voltaire.

Keywords

Pushkin; Voltaire; tragedy; Shakespeare; Boris Godunov; Romantic; romance

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Among the problematic works of great writers, Pushkin's Boris Godunov occupies a special place. This strange hybrid of history, drama, narrative poetry, and prose Pushkin called a "romantic tragedy," and he considered it his masterpiece. Yet the play's publication in 1831 was met with surprise and dismay. By consensus of a baffled public, Boris Godunov was a failure—neither romantic, nor feasible on the tragic stage. Since that time, generations of critics, playwrights, and producers have tried to come to terms with this troublesome text. Boundaries are routinely blurred between the historical Tsar Boris, the historical period when his tale is retold, and the world of the fictional creation itself. Export citation

Request permission. Copyright. A period of Russian history comprising the years of interregnum between the death of the last Russian Tsar of the Rurik Dynasty, Fedor Ivanovich, in 1598, and the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613. After Fedor's death, his brother-in-law and closest adviser, boyar Boris Godunov, who had already acted as regent for the mentally-challenged Fedor, was elected his successor by a Great National Assembly (Zemsky Sobor). Godunov's short reign (1598–1605) was not as successful as his administration under the weak Fedor. Boris Godunov, an opera based on Pushkin's play, composed by Modest Mussorgsky. Dimitrij, an opera by Antonín Dvořák, on one of the false Dmitris, based on a fragmentary play by Friedrich Schiller. In conceiving Boris Godunov - his tragedy about the interregnum between the Rurik and Romanov dynasties, known as the Time of Troubles (1598-1613) - A. S. Pushkin was influenced not only by Shakespearian drama, but also by N. M. Karamzin's monolithic Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo/ History of the Russian State (1816-26). From the plethora of characters in Pushkin's tragedy, only two – Kurbsky's son and Afanasy Matveyevich Pushkin – do not appear in the historical chronicles. In its reflection of the clash of public and private worlds, the relationship between the roles of the tsar, as divine ruler of the State and as benefactor of his subjects, is highly pertinent to the tragedy of Pushkin's own life.