

The Mock-Shakespeare by Les Podervianskyi: Overcoming Soviet Experience

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Abstract

Shakespeare's presence in the Soviet and early post-Soviet culture was ensured not only by translations, productions and general official appraisal, but also by travesty and mockery, which were typical of the underground cultural space. The paper considers the specificity of the Soviet Shakespeare appropriation with a special focus on its burlesque type. The case of the Ukrainian artist and playwright Les Podervianskyi, who employed Shakespeare's plots and characters to mock Communist ideological clichés and stereotypes, is under study. The author aims at tracing the ways in which irony, mockery and burlesque remakes of the eternal classic literature undermine a range of destructive political and social discourses at various levels. Through the analysis of Shakespeare-based plays by Les Podervianskyi – Hamlet, or The Phenomenon of the Danish Katsapism and King Liter – the article highlights one of the main tendencies of the Soviet underground literature (that of mocking the gruesome reality) and specifies Podervianskyi's unique attitude which was both anti-Soviet and anti-Russian.

Key words: *William Shakespeare, Les Podervianskyi, travesty, burlesque, totalitarian discourse*

Ideology, as a cornerstone of totalitarianism, permanently seeks for support, legitimation and approval from arts and cultural practices. The so-called 'cultural front' had always been one of the primary concerns of the Soviet ideological machine, due to its high propaganda potential. The synchrony of shifts in political, ideological and cultural spheres of a revolutionary society is emphasized by Robert Tucker:

Every successful communist revolution has been attended by a sustained and strenuous effort of the newly established regime to transform the way of life of the population; and where the revolutionary takeover process has

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been protracted [...] the transformation of culture has begun in the course of the revolution (1973: 185).

Having emerged as a vibrant avant-garde experiment of the Proletariat in the 1920s, the Soviet culture made a dramatic transition to conservative imperial-like aesthetics in the 1930s, when the official cultural policies were introduced, and the socialist realism became the leading style in all the spheres of the so-called progressive people's art. The institutionalization of the ideologically-biased cultural discourse secured the establishment of the cultural hierarchy, atop of which there were those loyal artists who promoted Soviet ideology and glorified Soviet lifestyle.

However, the urge to prove the superiority of the Communist culture to the bourgeois one made the Soviet ideologues admit the necessity to make it valid in the global space. This required, among other measures, to integrate the world classical literature into the development of that new cultural model. Such approach was theorized in the works of the top Communist leaders, including V. Lenin, who acknowledged that "the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch" (1965: 316) are not to be rejected, but rather assimilated and refashioned according to the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat.

A theoretician of proletarian aesthetics, A. Lunacharskyi, was one of the most passionate supporters of the idea that classic authors sincerely sympathized with the working class and Communist ideas. He emphasised that it is only proletariat that can judge their literary legacies on merits and that the most representative men of letters were visionaries who had foreseen the future proletarian revolution:

By juxtaposing our proletarian culture to the old bourgeois one, I am far from believing that the works of geniuses are to be considered bourgeois, too. The works by geniuses, often contrary to their will, had a painful imprint of... a black seal of the market to which they had to adjust. However, even under these conditions, geniuses tried to unfold their wings, and all of them had a dream of true creative freedom which could help them to find the right direction and heal all their deformities... From this point of view, those geniuses are not yours, dear bourgeoisie, they are ours, and they do not need bows and slavish imitation, they are just our comrades and suffering brothers, who create life like we do (Lunacharskyi 1919) (*my translation*).

Thus, the Soviet ideological and cultural machine factually employed a range of classics as harbingers of the progressive Communist

ideas. It is worth noting that, at some point, Soviet ideologues gave preference to those canonical figures that were the so-called 'dead white men' (in terms of Harold Bloom's canon theory (Bloom 1995)), since active literary figures of the time could be quite unreliable in terms of Communism support (to mention just the cases of André Gide and Lois Aragon).

One of the most actively appropriated figures of this artistic pantheon was William Shakespeare, who was proclaimed 'the people's classic', and whose dramatic legacy was viewed as a true reflection of the class conflict of the Elizabethan society. As culturologist Irina Lagutina points out,

Shakespeare was a very appropriate classic. He was both international and 'native'. It also turned out that his texts were full of progressive ideas such as humanism, and socialism was considered its higher mode. Besides, they discovered craving for changes, interest to common people's life and love for freedom in Shakespeare's works. Renaissance comedies and Falstaffian laughter did not contradict the official joy of mass culture and were almost corresponding to famous Stalin's formula "Life has become better. Life has become more cheerful" (Лагутина).

Soviet cultural establishment employed various practices to pay homage to the Great Bard – they included jubilee celebrations, scientific conferences, new translations and editions, theatrical productions and screen versions of his dramas. Such massive promotion of the 'official' Shakespeare resulted in his iconization and monumentalization. However, this façade of bronze encouraged the emergence of Shakespearean burlesque and mockery in the underground art sphere.

During the Era of Stagnation and Perestroika, sharp contrast between optimistic slogans and Communist leaders' reports to the gruesome reality triggered general scepticism and ironic attitude in certain layers of the society, particularly among intellectuals and artists. This resulted in creating a number of artworks and texts that reconsidered and parodied Soviet discourse, i.e. rituals, leaders, routine, fears, etc. [1] In Ukraine, where the disbelief in the Soviet grand narrative and mythology intermingled with striving for cultural independence, this tendency acquired especially absurdist colouring, represented in the writings by Yuri Pokalchuk, members of the BU-BA-BU artistic group (Yury Andrukhovych, Viktor Neborak and Oleksandr Irvanets) and Les Poderviansky.

The latter is considered a true *enfant terrible* of the Ukrainian culture. Having paved his artistic path as a painter, he is still much more famous for his short plays in which absurd and pornographic plots are conveyed in foul language. Podervianskyi's dramatic method involves remaking "staple 'numbers' of the Soviet cultural repertoire" (Romanets 2019: 168) into a sort of gonzo-dramas. Maryna Romanets describes his creative technique as follows:

While reworking, synthesizing, orchestrating, fabricating, hybridizing, recombining, and representing pre-existing mythologies, narratives, figures, images, and phrases from the thrift shop of socialist realist literature, Poderviansky ruthlessly pornographizes them in his disturbingly violent oeuvre. Crammed with unmotivated murders, gluttony, alcoholism, defecation, fights, indiscriminate and unrestricted screwing, his plays strip socialist realist creations to their bare bones, proving that social realism is pornography (Romanets 2019: 170).

However, it was not only Soviet cultural repertoire that Les Podervianskyi drew his inspiration from. His dramatic canon comprises two Shakespeare-based plays – *King Liter* and *Hamlet, or the Phenomenon of the Danish Katsapism*. They both have brightly burlesque nature in the American meaning of this word – i.e. "variety show with a heavy emphasis upon sex". It is worth noting that in these plays it is not Shakespeare and his genuine plots to be mocked over, but rather the image of the Bard and his characters recreated by the Soviet appropriation. The choice of the pretexts does not seem occasional – *Hamlet* and *King Lear* were, perhaps, the most famous staged and quoted plays in the USSR, not least because of their celebrated screen versions directed by Grigoriy Kozintsev. In Podervianskyi's versions, licentious homosexual Claudius is smashed by a constantly drunk Hamlet, and incestuous promiscuous King Liter is involved into political intrigues against Yorick, who turns from a joker into a political leader of the English nation.

Poderviansky's plays are grounded not only on usual parodic techniques such as rewriting the well-known stories in a stylistically different manner or travesty the plotline and dramatis personae. In fact, he employs only key characters and conflicts as a framework which he fills with new meanings that mock Soviet reality. This way, the author flags and discloses the problematic issues of the Communist society both on the official and common level.

One of the major targets of Poderviansky mockery is Communist totalitarian discourse, with its party conferences, antisemitism, criminalized homosexuality, etc. At the same time, he discloses its hypocritical and double-faced nature. For instance, in *Hamlet* the Ghost, seemingly a very conservative homophobe, is revealed as a perverter of his younger brother.

Ghost. ... I've hated homos since I was a child, and sent them to chemical plants to work for the glory of the Motherland. O, poor Denmark, its time is out of joint. (Podervianskyi).

Hamlet. Why did you have to force your own brother, in weaker health than you, to s*** your d***? So no wonder he has gone bonkers (Podetvianskyi).

Besides, Poderviansky ironically represents one of the most popular ideologemes of the Soviet society – that of peoples' friendship which was in fact purely declarative, since other republics acted mainly as Russian colonies. Instead of friendship, there was ethnical opposition and conflict, accompanied by xenophobia and hate speech. Thus, as a Ukrainian, Les Poderviansky could not but feel a true attitude to his and other nations from the Big Russian Brother.

Hamlet. I've told you that I cannot avenge because all the people on earth are brothers, except for the Jews, Tatars, Freemasons, Negroes and Belarusians whose guts I hate (Podervianskyi).

In this context, another target of Podervisankyi's mockery is the so-called Russian national idea that comprises religious, philosophical, and vernacular concepts promoting 'exclusiveness' of the Russian nation among other peoples and famous Russian great-state chauvinism. This mockery is evident in the very name of the play: its latter part is *The Phenomenon of Danish Katsapism* which is an offensive word for Russian way of living. Besides, Hamlet in Act 1 claims to be a humanist and peace loving Tolstoyan, but in the course of action he and Claudius open up as nationalists with a complex of superiority:

Hamlet. You may not avenge. We must love all c***suckers, bastards and murderers. For each of them is one of the peoples, and all of them are God-bearers (Podervianskyi).

Hamlet. No, I don't eat meat out of principle. I just like to drink from time to time, for we are a nation famed for hospitality and generosity and can outdrink any foreigners, especially Jews and Turks (Podervianskyi).

Claudius. My Ghost, we are doing everything all right. We feel anger and hatred for all the Jews and Freemasons and every day perform the national anthem on the balalaika in a choir. The Jews and Turks fear us, the national prestige grows stronger, and every day the percentage of fats in butter increases (Podervianskyi).

The concept of the Russian nation as a God-Bearer (народ-богосец) was introduced by Russian philosopher, Nikolay Berdiayev, and was extensively used in many mystical and Slavophilic theories to emphasize the special mission of the Russians in the world.

Besides, in *Hamlet*, Podervianskyi's openly ridicules Russian patriotic symbols. The opening stage direction of Act 2 includes the following:

In the middle of the stage there is a Russian (Katsap) armchair bereft of artistic pretensions. Above it, the national coat of arms is hung. The coat of arms depicts a bear. In one hand the bear holds a hammer, and in the other a balalaika. This symbolizes the beast's industrious and fun-loving nature (Podervianskyi).

Indeed, the bear is very common in Russian heraldry: for example, a bear with a spear is a part of the Yaroslavl coat-of-arms. However, in this invented coat-of-arms, the bear with a balalaika is a quintessence of all popular Russia-related stereotypes.

Another patriotic concept to be parodied in these plays is the one of Soviet heroism. The Communist mythology included a lot of stories of unprecedented heroic behaviour demonstrated by ordinary people at war, at great construction projects of Communism, and in everyday life. Moreover, the highest Soviet distinction was named Hero of the Soviet Union. But in King Liter's interpretation, the notion of 'hero', being associated with taboo words, becomes totally desacralized and devalued:

King Liter... For I, a respected man and a patriarch, the progenitor, the founder of the city and the country, am the national hero! As it is well known, heroes do not f*** and do not shit! Needless to say that none of them had wanked as a child (Подерв'янський 2011: 207) (*my translation*).

Both gonzo-plays contain various references to the Soviet cultural repertoire. In *Hamlet*, which is more anti-Russian than anti-Soviet, well-known Russian tunes “Little Mosquitos” (“Комарики”) and “Little Apple” (“Яблочко”) are mentioned. The latter one has certain symbolic meaning in the play. “Yablochko” is a Russian song and dance which is traditionally presented as sailors’ dance. The final stage direction of the play says:

Quiet music plays, and a pleasant voice sings a Russian sailors’ song “Yablochko”. Sigmund Freud approaches Hamlet, sticks a syringe in his ass, and takes him away to the insane asylum. Seven sailors in scary black overcoats appear on the stage. The sailors’ song “Yablochko” grows louder. The sailors are tap-dancing to its cheerful sounds (Podervianskyi).

Here one can unmistakably see direct parallelism between end of monarchy in Les Podervianskyi’s Denmark and in the 1917 revolutionary Russia, as in both countries sailors were the main propelling force of monarchy overthrow.

In *King Liter*, there is an interesting combination of mock quotations from the official Soviet poetry and from urban chanson pieces. For instance, Ghost cautions King Liter and his allies about forthcoming revolutionary changes:

Tremble, you assholes, with horrible predictions! You all are f***** up! No matter if you eat pineapples, or, just as well, stuff yourself with grouse! (Подерв’янський 2011: 213) (*my translation*).

One can easily recognize here a direct quotation from a famous couplet by the Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovskiy (“Eat your pineapples, chew your grouse, / Your last day draws near, you bourgeois louse!”). Podervianskyi employs these lines to convey the same apocalyptic senses as the Russian futurist did.

Edgar, while telling about the unprecedented burst of democracy in England, finishes his soliloquy with the line “It’s freedom, damn, it’s freedom, damn, it’s freedom!” (“Свобода, бля, свобода, бля, свобода!”) which is a direct quotation from a popular rogue song “Kokteblya”, where humoristic effect is achieved with the help of a pun based on the Russian swear word “blya” (“damn”) and the name of the Crimean town Koktebel.

Besides making fun of the official Communist discourse and its cultural components, Podervianskyi saturated his Shakespeare-based plays with elements of gruesome Soviet reality. This imposes some elements of

the so-called 'chernukha' [2], making these plays realistic to an absurd extreme. This includes total alcoholism which is typical of all the protagonists and is quite ambiguous in meaning. For protagonists, alcohol consumption is the only way to cope with the horrible reality:

Hamlet. F***ing daddy is driving me f***ing nuts. Let me go drink champagne at the bar, for my throat feels like cat's piss and I feel the unconscious desire to lick hot teeth with a rough tongue... (Podervianskyi).

Hamlet... Death and ruins lie everywhere. I will drink no more, although what reasonable alternative is there? Poor Denmark! To hell go enterprises of great pitch and moment (Podervianskyi).

King Liter. Look, my dear son! There a hundred alcoholics present united front! In their eyes, courageous red colours are fulgurant, and their blue arms dance as Chinese dancers in Shanghai brothels!" (Подерв'янський 2011: 212)

whereas for antagonists, alcohol addiction is described as a source of danger and violence:

Hamlet. Altogether I am a humanist, unlike you, daddy. All you want is to drink vodka and f*** poor mama on the oven so hard that balls are on the wall. And then taste tea and throw an axe at paralyzed grandma, kick the toilet with your boots, and other stupid things I've noticed about you (Podervianskyi).

Les Podervianskyi's *Hamlet, or the Phenomenon of the Danish Katsapism* and *King Liter* stand out of the long-lasting tradition of travesty Shakespeare's plays and poems. The Ukrainian playwright refers to the Bard's dramatic canon not for the sake of pure entertainment, but in order to flag the most painful points of the Soviet society and to overcome this traumatizing experience with the help of rough but effective tools – pornography, brutality, lavatorial humour, and foul language which proved to be powerful underminers of the official totalitarian narrative.

Notes

[1] Among such texts there are "Moscow – Petushki" and "Notes of the Insane" by Venedikt Yerofeyev, short stories by Yuz Aleshkovskiy, "The Life and Adventures of Ivan Chonkin, the Soldier" by Vladimir Voynovich, etc.

[2] Volha Isakava defines this term as “a trend in Russian cinema (primarily) and literature that came into being in the late 1980s – early 1990s during the Glasnost era and addressed the negative aspects of Soviet (or early post-Soviet) society and history” (Isakava 2012: 2).

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