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The First Translation of Shakespeare into Russian: A Metamorphosis of Hamlet on Russian Soil

Reforms initiated by Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) had far reaching effects on all spheres of life in eighteenth-century Russia, including the cultural sphere. Profound changes also occurred in Russian literature. As Russian literature was becoming increasingly secular and new literary genres evolved there began an intensive search for aesthetic principles and an ideological platform that would be suitable for the demands of the post-Peter the Great epoch. Alexander Sumarokov (1717-1777) was among those Russian writers who considered adopting ethical principles and aesthetic norms of French classicism the most appropriate path for the development of an emergent secular Russian literature. In his rendering of Shakespeare's Hamlet into the Russian language, Sumarokov subscribed to the rules and traditions of French classicist dramaturgy. He adopted the modus operandi and approaches to translation prevalent during the period of classicism in French literature. By doing so, Sumarokov followed a very clear objective. Tailoring his Hamlet according to the patterns of French classicism and bringing in a strong didactic element into his version of Shakespeare's masterpiece, Sumarokov was able to re-evaluate the original material and focus on the issues that he considered most important for his contemporaries in eighteenth-century Russia.

1 The process of literary transplantation and the need for new directions in Eighteenth-Century Russian literature

Reforms initiated by Tsar Peter the Great who ruled Russia from 1682 to 1725 had profound and far reaching effects on all spheres of life in the 17th and 18th century Russia. Church authority that had dominated public life for centuries was greatly diminished and undermined in both political and cultural spheres. In the 18th century, Russia was a rapidly changing country. A long period of self isolation ended as Russia was opening up and turning its face towards Europe.

Profound changes within society also affected the development of 18th-century Russian literature.
As Sobol (2006: 377) noted, "the eighteenth century is one of the most fascinating periods in Russian cultural history during which, in ardent linguistic and literary debates and artistic experimentation, Russian modern prose and poetry were born".

At the time of Russia's transition into modernity, literature occupied a prominent and elevated position in cultural and intellectual life of the country. As Russian literature was becoming increasingly secular literary exchanges between Russia and abroad intensified and a vast number of works was translated into the Russian language. Some researchers estimate that the number of translated novels published in Russia in the 18th century was far greater than the original Russian oeuvres. Thus, in 1763, only two novels published had been written in Russian originally, while the remaining eighteen works of fiction were translations from foreign languages (Sipovsky 1909: 42–43, qtd. in Lotman 1997: 168).

This inflow of translated literature represented a unique phenomenon in Russian literary life, which was not dissimilar to the developments in ancient Russian literature between the 9th and 13th centuries in the epoch of Kievan Rus. Dmitry Likhachev, a prominent scholar and expert on ancient Russian literature, described this phenomenon as a process of "literary transplantation" ("литературная трансплантация"). He maintained that not only separate literary works but the whole cultural strata had been transplanted into Russia where they proceeded to acquire a life of their own in the new cultural and historical reality (Likhachev 1973: 15–23). A whole new crop of distinct literary genres appeared in 18th century Russian literature as a result of this intensified literary exchange. Among them were the ode, the satire, the comedy, the tragedy, and, last but not least, the novel.

The secularization of literature demanded a suitable philosophical foundation as well as aesthetic principles and norms to boost its further development. Being an important – if not the central – part of an aspiring culture as Russia had once again become in the 18th century, Russian literature was influenced by and borrowed from literary traditions and poetic means developed in Western Europe. At the same time, intensive search had been in progress for Russia's very own new cultural identity.
2 A brief overview of the French classicist tradition in literature and translation practice

For some prominent 18th century Russian intellectuals and writers classicism appeared the most appealing path for development of the emerging secular national literature. The term 'classicism' is derived from the Latin word 'classicus' which means 'excellent', 'superior' or 'exemplary'. It was originally reserved for the works of the Greek and Roman writers of antiquity which were considered the paragon of aesthetic norms. As literary style, classicism reached the apex of development in France during the reign of Louis XIV (1638–1715). Rational thinking and logical organization of abstract ideas were among the most important principles of French classicist tradition.

The penchant for the rational portray of reality in art had been reflected in aesthetic principles and norms adopted by French classicist literature – more or less loosely based on the rules sketched out in Aristotle's Poetics. In literary drama, for example, adherence to 'three unities' rule was imperative, i.e., unity of time, unity of place, and unity of action. First of all, the 'unity of time' rule stipulated that, strictly speaking, all events and developments in a theatre play must take place within twenty-four hours. This 'technical' constraint was aimed at making a theatre play as close to the development of events in real life as possible; it also prevented the theatre audience from getting confused or distracted by the time-related chasms in the play.

Secondly, the 'unity of place' rule demanded that the action in the theatre play should be confined to one place only. Thirdly, the 'unity of action' rule required a lucid development of the main plot with all side plots connected to the main storyline. Moreover, since the role of literature in the epoch of classicism was both to please and to educate, two important concepts developed in French classicist literature were 'bienséances' (adherence to good taste and the respect of moral values) and 'vraisemblance' ('verisimilitude' or plausibility).

While adopting a strict set of rules for the organization of a literary oeuvre, classicist tradition employed quite a different modus operandi to translation practice. In the classicist aesthetic tradition a literary work was seen as a medium for the writer to express and give shape to abstract ideas and thoughts that were believed to exist independently from the author. The function of a poet or writer (and translator) was first and foremost to capture these abstract ideas and ensure their lucid articulation by the means of poetic language (Gukovsky 1929: 62, qtd. in Etkind 1973: 1).
Since the authors were in some way regarded as mere transmitters of abstract ideas, all notions regarding original authorship were disregarded (Etkind 1973: 1). Thus, for French classicist writers, the most preferable and acceptable mode of the translation of a literary work was that of a rather free adaptation. In the process of translation, the most important issue therefore was to expound the ideas of the work being translated rather than to remain faithful to the text.3

Hence, as Smirnov and Alekseev (1934: 512–517) observed, "improving" and changing the original manuscript in order to satisfy the ideological requirements of the epoch or to observe the philosophical and aesthetic principles of the classicist canon became widely accepted in literary translation.4

3 Adopting French Classicist Traditions in Russian Literature: Sumarokov's Hamlet

In the first half of the 18th century, "Russian classicism was created by a generation of European-educated young writers who were born in the epoch of Peter the Great reforms and who gave their full support to those reforms" (Orlov 1991: 26).5 Ideological platform for the progressive Russian intellectuals in the post-Peter the Great period was defined by loyalty to the state and its sovereign ruler. A person's value as an individual was defined by the individual's contribution to the state and society (Orlov 1991: 10). Notions of rationality and the demand for lucidity in the organization of a literary work propounded by French classicist writers held a great appeal for some young Russian writers and intellectuals of the 18th century. Among them was Alexander Sumarokov (1717–1777) whose translation of Shakespeare's Hamlet (published in 1748) fully subscribed to the aesthetic norms of French classicism.6

In his life-time, Sumarokov was called the 'Northern Racine'.7 He was the author of nine tragedies (including his rendering of Shakespeare's Hamlet), twelve comedies, numerous satires, fables, and other works. Sumarokov was the first to introduce the genres of tragedy and comedy into Russian literature. He was the art director of the first public theatre in Saint Petersburg and aspired to become the founder of modern Russian theatre (see Berkov 1957; Orlov 1991).

Indeed, Sumarokov himself used to stress that "My Hamlet, apart from the
Monologue at the end of the third act and Claudius' falling down on his knees hardly
resembles Shakespeare's tragedy whatsoever" (Sumarokov 1781–1787, X: 117, qtd. in Levitt 1994: 320). To support this statement, numerous disparities can be found
between Sumarokov's translated version and Shakespeare's original masterpiece. Let
us examine those differences first and then consider the reasons for inconsistencies
between the two texts.

First of all, instead of more than two dozen dramatis personae in Shakespeare's play,
Sumarokov's version has only eight characters. Among them only five are from the
original Hamlet, i.e. Hamlet, Claudius (who is not Hamlet's uncle[!]), Gertrude,
Polonius, and Ophelia. Observing traditions of French classicist dramaturgy,
Sumarokov 'restores' a good balance to the original cast of characters and adds a
confidant ('naperstnik') for each of the protagonists; this creates a "neat tetrads" of the
play's characters (Levitt 1994: 321). Thus, Polonius becomes Claudius' confidant
while Ophelia is supplied with a nurse ('mamka'). Secondly, the plot of Sumarokov's
Hamlet only distantly resembles Shakespeare's original masterpiece. Developments in
Sumarokov's Hamlet could be summarized as follows:

Claudius becomes King of Denmark and marries widow queen Gertrude.
Gertrude has no suspicion that it was Claudius' confidant, Polonius, who
killed her husband. One night, the ghost of the murdered king appears in a
dream to his son, Hamlet, and tells him about the murder committed by
Polonius and Claudius. The ghost urges Hamlet to avenge his father's death.
Knowing of Hamlet's love for Ophelia, the daughter of one of the murderers,
the ghost urges Hamlet to "put aside affairs of the heart" ("ostavit dela
lyubovni"). Hamlet tells his mother Gertrude about his dream. The
widow-queen, who by that time has discovered the truth about her husband's
death, is devastated and overwhelmed with grief and guilt. She decides to
leave the palace and urges Hamlet to become the King of Denmark instead of
Claudius. Claudius, however, is not prepared to cede power. He plots to kill
Gertrude and Hamlet and to marry Ophelia. Hamlet is torn between his love
for Ophelia and the duty to his country and people who are ruled by a
murderous tyrant. Ophelia, meanwhile, refuses to marry Claudius, which
warrants her death sentence. Polonius dispatches his soldiers to kill Gertrude
and Hamlet; Ophelia awaits her execution. As rumors of Hamlet's death
spread over the town people begin gathering around the king's palace. At this
moment, Hamlet appears and rescues Ophelia from the prison. Ophelia begs
Hamlet to spare her father's life. Hamlet concedes and puts Polonius under
guard instead of executing him. Hamlet tells Ophelia how he had
overwhelmed Claudius' soldiers and killed Claudius with the help of loyal
citizens. At this moment the news of Polonius' suicide arrive and the play
ends.
As this somewhat rough plot summary testifies, the translator has greatly simplified the storyline of the original play. This was certainly done according to the rules and aesthetic norms of French classicist dramaturgy. The 'Three Unities' rule thus was to be observed, and the requirements of 'good taste' ('bienséance') and 'verisimilitude' ('vraisemblance') were satisfied in Sumarokov's rendering of Hamlet.

First of all, to observe the 'Unity of action' rule, Sumarokov removed all subplots present in Shakespeare's play, which includes the famous play within the play. Secondly, to respect the 'Unity of place' rule, he expunged the graveyard scene from his version of Hamlet. Thirdly, to preserve conformity of style, Sumarokov excluded all elements of the fantastic and bizarre. Thus, he removed the appearance of the ghost, since such a development went against all rational norms and, therefore, was unacceptable within the framework of French classicist dramaturgy.

Hence, when the ghost does appear in Sumarokov's Hamlet he visits Hamlet only in a dream. Furthermore, in coping with the demands of bienséance, there are no scenes of Hamlet's pretended madness, and Ophelia's real madness followed by her suicide; there is no mention of a drop of poison in the ear that killed the king. And finally, in stark contrast to the original play, Sumarokov's Hamlet has a happy ending where the villains – Polonius and Claudius – die, while the righteous and innocent – Hamlet and Ophelia – survive and, presumably, Hamlet proceeds to rule the country.

These discrepancies between Shakespeare's original masterpiece and Sumarokov's 'Russianized' version of Hamlet are surely surprising – granted even the somewhat lose principles of literary translation which French classicists embraced. However, as we shall see, reasons for the changes that Sumarokov made to the original Hamlet cannot be fully explained by the translator's desire to adhere to aesthetic principles and norms of French classicist literature. As an 18th century writer and intellectual, Sumarokov had other agendas as well.

4 Sumarokov's Hamlet as a nobleman's guide to morals

The 'high' genre of tragedy offered a suitable venue to address and discuss affairs of the state and contemplate the moral choices and ethical conduct of a noble hero (Lotman 1997: 134-136). Sumarokov used the theatre stage as a medium to send the message to his 18th century compatriots and contemporaries. The changes to the plot of Hamlet allowed Sumarokov to focus on the issues that he found most important for the social reality of his contemporaries.
Chief among them were the connected notions of a nobleman's duty to his country and the ability of an individual to change the course of history.

In a wider context, Sumarokov's adaptation of Hamlet was part of the literary transplantation process that was taking place in 18th century Russian literature. This literary transplantation process was a complex phenomenon that went far beyond a simple mechanical transportation (or translation) of certain groups of texts (Lotman 1997: 169). For an 18th-century Russian author or translator the task went far beyond a mere translation of a literary work from a foreign language into Russian; one had also to re-evaluate the original material and to look at it through the filter of Russian reality. For this reason, Sumarokov's Hamlet was supplied with an additional, 'value-added', function and contained a strong moralistic element.

Sumarokov realized that as a writer, intellectual and a nobleman he needed to promote the reforms initiated by the Tsar. In his work, he thus often focused on and highlighted the role of the nobility. As Orlov (1991: 73-74) noted, being a representative of the Russian gentry, Sumarokov fully enjoyed all the privileges accorded to him by his social status. However, at the same time he was aware of the duties that his social position entailed. This personal stance is well reflected in Sumarokov's rendering of the famous soliloquy delivered by Hamlet in Shakespeare's play (act iii, scene i), where the didactic element is brought in and features very prominently. Sumarokov's Hamlet is torn between his love for Ophelia (the daughter of his father's murderer) and the duty to his country (he must kill Claudius and free the land and people from the murderous usurper).

Unlike Shakespeare's Hamlet, Sumarokov's hero speaks not of the terror of dying but rather of the terror of dying a meaningless and useless death. He agonizes that, should his love for Ophelia prevail, and should he disregard his duty, his name would be tarnished forever, and his life would end devoid of honour. In his version of Hamlet's famous monologue, Sumarokov puts obvious emphasis on the issue of a nobleman's honour. His Hamlet contemplates the difficulty of choice between one's personal happiness and one's obligation to the country. It should also be noted, that in Sumarokov, there is no trace of metaphysical musings on the after-life existence in the 'undiscovered Country'. Instead, the fate of the protagonist's very real and concrete country is being pondered upon. In the end of Hamlet's musings, the sense of duty prevails and the hero is ready to take the necessary action and restore justice in his country.

For Sumarokov and other progressive writers of his generation, absolute but enlightened monarchy was the ideal form of the state's political organization.
To reflect this position, Sumarokov's characters discuss the issues of sovereign's power, a great responsibility that this power entails, and the proper manner of exercising the supreme authority. The dispute between widow queen Gertrude and Polonius is revealing of Sumarokov's personal stance. In the dialogue between the two characters, Polonius contends that a sovereign ruler is above the law and is never to be judged. Gertrude opposes him and says that a good and just ruler always remains human in his glory. For Gertrude, only the enlightened and benevolent monarch can be a guarantor of his or her country's prosperity and people's happiness. Through the changes done to the plot of the play where the evil ones perish and the just ones win, Sumarokov had clearly indicated that he supported and endorsed Gertrude's position that a country's ruler must be enlightened, just and humane.

5 Conclusion

In Western Europe, the modernization of literature "involved the emancipation of writing from its traditional association with the sacred, concentrated in the two great institutions of old Europe – the sovereign and the Church" (Freidin 1993: 150). Similar developments were taking place in 18th-century Russian literature. Russian literature in the post-Peter the Great epoch was rapidly emancipating itself from the authority of the church and establishing itself as a guide to morals. As Lotman (1997: 120) observed, "suddenly, the old world order collapsed and on its ruins new reality came into being, reality which was in total opposition to the old familiar mores".11

Eighteenth century Russian literature aimed to reflect contemporary life with all its complexities and bring about a better understanding of a rapidly changing world. As stated earlier, in the first three quarters of the 18th century, a plenitude of genres appeared in Russian literature as a result of the literary transplantation process. The genre of a literary oeuvre was the main identifier of its function. The 'high genre' of tragedy, for instance, presented "an ideal textbook" for educating and bringing up a responsible citizen (Lotman 1997: 134-136)12. In his 'Russianized' Hamlet, Sumarokov employed literary concepts, ideals and tools of French classicist literary tradition to raise and highlight issues that had been most relevant for Hamlet's adoptive country, Russia. For this reason, in Sumarokov's version of Hamlet, the didactic element is very prominent.

The epoch of Peter the Great has been described as a "new epoch" ("novaya epoha") of "new people" ("novii chelovek") (Lotman 1997: 120-121).
There was a need to provide the rapidly changing society with an appropriate moral code. Sumarokov and other writers and intellectuals working in the same period tried to harness the power of the written word for the purpose of educating their compatriots. They used the high moral status that literature enjoyed in Russia to educate the "new people" that came into being with the new social reality (Lotman 1997: 121).

For Sumarokov and other intellectuals of his generation, Peter the Great offered a vivid example of how one individual could change the world. There was also an understanding that the will of one person would never be enough to ensure success of such a tremendous endeavour. Who else but the representatives of nobility would be better suited to assist their sovereign in changing the course of history? Apparently, Sumarokov tried to convey this message to his contemporaries in Russia.

In his *Hamlet*, Sumarokov raised the issue of a nobleman's duty to the state and the people. He stressed the precedence of state and public interests over one's personal happiness; he endorsed the priority of the state affairs over the 'affairs of the heart'. Hamlet in Sumarokov's rendering survives not in order to provide a happy ending to the tale but for the purpose of restoring a just rule in the Kingdom of Denmark, which would secure and ensure the state's – and the people's – prosperity and wellbeing. This conclusion could surely be interpreted as reflective of the great enthusiasm, a 'can do' and 'must do' spirit among the progressive strata of Russian society that were living, working and creating in the post-Peter the Great epoch. The strange metamorphosis of Hamlet on Russian soil was only natural under these circumstances.

**Bibliography**


Notes

1. Kievan Rus (9th – 13th centuries) was an early East Slavic state that comprised almost the whole territory of the present-day Ukraine and Belarus, and included some parts of north-west Russia.

2. Sociologists employ the term "follower" nation (Bendix 1977). It has been proposed elsewhere that terms "the paragon culture" and "an aspiring culture" (Nikitina 2005: 173) could be used to describe the evolvement of national literatures as a result of the 'literary transplantation' process.

3. French philosopher, writer and encyclopaedist Denis Diderot (1713-1784) who translated Shaftesbury's Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit (1745) into French wrote that he was ready to 'translate' the book after he had read it a few times, absorbed its ideas and … put the book aside!" (Smirnov/Alekseev 1934: 517).

4. 'Improving' the original work included elimination of all the elements that were considered 'vulgar' or not in 'good taste'.

5. In the original text: "Русский классицизм создавало поколение европейски образованных молодых писателей, родившихся в эпоху Петровских реформ и сочувствовавших им" (Orlov 1991: 26).

6. This was the first translation of Shakespeare into the Russian language.

7. Jean Racine (1639-1699), a French dramatist.

8. In the original text: "Гамлет мой кроме моего философского размышления в третьей части, в классиках писателей, на шекспировском трагедии, единая, едва походила" (Sumarokov 1781-1787, X: 117, qtd. in Levitt 1994: 320).

9. Another reason why the scene had to be removed is that the episode did not match the 'high genre' of tragedy and was better fit for the 'low genre' of comedy.

10. For a detailed analysis of Sumarokov's translation of the monologue, see Levitt (1994).

11. In the original text: "... ' друг ' старый порядок жизни был уничтожен и на его обломках возникла новая реальность, полностью противопоставленная старине" (Lotman 1997: 120).

12. In the original text: "... идеальный учебник гражданственных эмоций" (Lotman 1997:136).