THE TRAGEDY OF SHAKESPEARE «ROMEO AND JULIET» IN THE LITERARY-CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF I.A. AKSENOV

Dmitry N. Zhatkin, Nikita S. Futljarev

1,2Department of Translation and Methods of Translation, Penza State Technological University, Penza, Russian Federation.

Email: 1*editor@prescopus.com, 2*asia@prescopus.com

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Abstract

Objectives: The article describes a specific understanding of Shakespeare’s tragedy «Romeo and Juliet» by I. A. Aksenov. Methods: While researching, we used the cultural-historical, comparative-historical and historical-typological approaches, as well as elements of the socio-psychological method required to recreate certain biographical realities that are often necessary for an objective perception of a literary text. Findings: In the essay «“Romeo and Juliet”. The place of tragedy in the work of Shakespeare» I. A. Aksenov called the text of the great tragedy «composite», noting the participation of several dramatists of the Elizabethan era at that time in its creation (Ch. Marowe, J. Peele, R. Green, T. Kyd). The motives of «Romeo and Juliet» and «The Honest Whore» by T. Dekker having much in common allowed I.A.Aksenov to raise the question of T. Dekker’s involvement in the work of the Shakespearean play. Novelty: As we can see, even in those few cases, when I. A. Aksenov tried to move away from analyzing, translating and popularizing the creative heritage of the little-known playwrights of the Elizabethan era in Russia in the first third of the XX century, focusing on the dramatic work of Shakespeare, in particular, on his tragedy of «Romeo and Juliet», he persistently continued to look for the collective «Elizabethan» trail in the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays. Keywords: I. A. Aksenov, Shakespeare, «Romeo and Juliet», drama, the Elizabethan era, artistic translation, Russian-English literary ties, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

I. A. Aksenov turned to the understanding of the Shakespearean tragedy of «Romeo and Juliet» in the mid-1930s when his attention was almost completely switched from the translation of the «Elizabethan» dramaturgy’s creative heritage to Shakespeare’s literary-critical analysis of works. In these years, I. A. Aksenov wrote essays and articles about such plays as «Hamlet», «Twelfth Night», «Othello», «Romeo and Juliet» by Shakespeare; many of them were later collected in the author’s book «Shakespeare», published in 1937 (after the death of I. A. Aksenov) by the publishing house «Fiction». In the article «Romeo and Juliet», I. A. Aksenov described the Shakespearean tragedy as one of the most famous works: «…even those who did not read and see it, know that there is something wonderful, that there is nothing better than this tragedy» (1, p.268). According to him, the reason that prompted Shakespeare to create a tragedy could be the acquaintance with Ovidius’s «Metamorphoses», in particular with the fourth book, Pyramus and Thisbe, based on which many works later created: «Masuccio wrote a short story out of it. Painter re-told it in English, including the collection “The Hall of Delights”, and the poet Brooke made a poem about “Romeus and Juliet” <1662>» (Young, G. 2008). I. G. Frank-Kamenetsky was also of the same opinion, having noted the reworking of the Italian novel by L. da Porto, carried out in 1524 in his monograph «On the Genesis of the Legend of Romeo and Julia» (Bornstein, B.H., Schwartz, S.L. 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW


MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article by I. A. Aksenov, «“Romeo and Juliet”. The place of tragedy in the works of Shakespeare», as well as other works of the literary critic, concerning Shakespeare’s tragedy, became the material for this study. According to the principle of historicism, separate facts and circumstances are considered in conjunction with others, as well as taking into account historical, literary and cultural experiences. In accordance with the subject of study, we use comparative analysis, cultural analysis, and historical-typological methods.
RESULTS

I. A. Aksenov analyzed in detail the editorial of “Romeo and Juliet”, which existed before Shakespeare, known in the form of a Germanized play published in 1626 in Vienna. Germanized stage editorial, which lost many features of the original during the period of wandering around the sites and at the same time supplemented with numerous minor details, was unable to completely replace the original text, but at the same time, it gave a definite impression of it. The German play does not contain a sonnet prologue, but it has a scene of reconciliation between warring families; Romeo turns out to be a furious enemy of the Capulet, his hatred is related to Tybalt’s hatred of Montague, Tybalt’s antic is preserved, but the «German» Paris is perplexed about it, because the enmity has ceased; the ending is fundamentally different from Shakespeare’s tragedy, the theme of ancestral revenge, being driven away by the description of a love story, fades into the background, the final sayings of the duke, explaining the incident’s meaning and the true causes of the death of lovers, are omitted. In the opinion of I. A. Aksenov, the play has undergone these changes for thirty years of it's manuscript and stage existence, evolving from direct morality to the love story. However, the play could have reached the German stage already in a transformed form, as the English repertoire actively got rid of the morality laid in historical sources before Shakespeare, – «Moralist reasoning was too well known and present in the perception of the viewer in places where they were supposed to be even when they were not spoken from the scene» (Suleri, J., & Cavagnaro, E. 2016; Mollaei, B., Gorji, Y., & Rezaei, F. 2014; Manapov, K. B. 2018).

I. A. Aksenov stressed that the topic of fatal hostility was clearly outlined in the early play, the harm of which was clearly demonstrated by the death of the last offspring of both houses; the moralizing that permeated the play throughout the course of events was gradually lost, with the result that the text reached a group of academic authors in an intermediate form – with elements of instructiveness and entertainment. Most academics, with the exception of R. Green, who was inclined to sentimental morality, sought to preserve the temperament of presentation in the plays, which, according to I. A. Aksenov, led to the fact that well-developed theme of the work was not properly organized around the plot, which was very chaotic and devoid of ideology. This task was solved by Shakespeare very hastily and with an eye to the interests of the troupe, which did not want to abandon the favorite material. In this, I. A. Aksenov saw the main cause of the characteristic variegation of Shakespeare’s text, which amazed researchers and translators. When translating into Russian, in the opinion of I. A. Aksenova, it was only A. D. Radlova who fully felt the diversity of the Shakespearian text, trying to «purely preserve the inconsistency of the English text»: «Her courage worth being noted».

«Romeo and Juliet», the first tragedy of Shakespeare, was anonymously published many times; I. A. Aksenov emphasized the facts of deliberate anonymity, when the author was pushed aside from his works, regularly staged in his theater (in particular, a compositor once put the author’s name, however, the print was stopped in edition of 1612). For example, Shakespeare renounced the authorship of the plays, which the public believed he wrote, in the foreword of the poem "Venus and Adonis", which I. A. Aksenov considered the mythological composition, written in the style of the most fanciful «conceit», destroyed by numerous paraphrases in the manner of Gongora (Martins, V. F., Sampaio, P. N. M., Cordeiro, A. J. A., & Viana, B. F. 2018). I. A. Aksenov associated this reaction of Shakespeare not only with his personal dissatisfaction with the plays but also with the unpleasant situation, surrounding his person, that is, in 1592, the dying R. Green accused Shakespeare of «literary thefts, the misappropriation of Green and Green’s friends of the property, calling him “the crow in a peacock feather”, and appealed to public opinion, first of all, frustrated friends, to take urgent measures against the bastard» (Hussey, S. S. (2018)).

In the article «A plain fanciful speech of Shakespeare», I. A. Aksenov described R. Green’s critique as «a stream of deathbed curses and expositions» full of «insinuations of the playwright unable to write bombastic verses and thus had to steal» the verses of «university-style» (the translator defines the main literary techniques of it like Alliteration, bombastic, pon, rant, as well as metaphors, converting concrete objects into abstract concepts); he also pointed out the extreme rejection and anxiety of R. Green associated with Shakespeare’s introducing literary novelty at the theater stage, namely, poetry deprived of bombastic verses. According to R. Green, Shakespeare’s success among Elizabethan’s public, «as ignorant as the author himself», led to the exit from a close circle of fans of the simplified drama of not only «the theater well, but also its gallery», looking for new stylistic techniques. Beginning with the very first plays, Shakespeare resolutely abandoned deliberate pompous descriptions, criticizing the style, defined in «Henry IV» as «eye gateways full of tears», rejecting the words game as redundant literary decoration, moving it from the main actors’ speeches to replicas of the proscenium jester. There is a rejection of the «rant» as a literary technique in Hamlet’s words in the scene of «fighting» on the cemetery («Hamlet», Act V, scene I), answering Laertes question, what he intends to take to express his grief – «”drink vinegar”, “eat a crocodile”, “boast mountains of sorrow”»: «You see, I can build a rant like an absurd convention» (cf.: «Woo't drink up isel! eat a crocodile? <...> Nay, a thou't mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou»)(Wharton, E., & Wegener, F. (1996)).

In the view of I. A. Aksenov, having reformed the metaphor, Shakespeare used it to «translate abstract concept into a concrete one in the form of a practical example of compressed explanation»: Thus, in Hamlet, wanting to interpret the statement that reflection on religious bans weakens human resolve, Shakespeare puts the following metaphor «this is the way a natural red color of intention languishes under the platter of thought» into the mouth of the protagonist, which «converts the abstract and philosophical plan of the phrase to the everyday observation». The situation in the theater, where he had some free time, and the performers who did not want to re-learn the familiar words, allowed Shakespeare whenever
possible eliminating the «fanciful» speeches of the predecessors from edited by his texts, making the poetic narrative as simple as needed. Taking the ballad about the Queen Mab from the fourth stage of «Romeo and Juliet»’s first act as an example, I. A. Aksenov argued that Shakespeare did not support the complete abandoning of speech decorations, he used these decorations «as a visual commentary with the aim to make the distracted considerations, sometimes uttered by his characters, not so dry». (Bortolotti, G. R., & Hutcheon, L. (2007).)

R. Green’s critique of Shakespeare was unanswered, moreover, the brightest representatives of the «university-style» such as R. Green, Ch. Marlowe, T. Kyd, J. Peele died one by one, and H. Chettle – the publisher of Green’s brochure «A Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance», made public apology to Shakespeare two and a half months after its release. Despite the resurrection of his honest name among public, Shakespeare, in the opinion of I. A. Aksenov, made a firm decision never to claim the personal authorship of texts that he corrected or redefined: «The alterations and corrections, made by Shakespeare, completely changed the products of collective creativity, but Shakespeare did not consider them worthy of himself». I. A. Aksenov, in particular, referred to «Two Gentlemen of Verona» as Shakespeare’s alteration, calling it the rework of R. Green’s comedy, and «Love’s Labour’s Lost», as created on the basis of the text of G. Chapman and in cooperation with him.

Recognizing that it was difficult to transform a comedy into a tragedy, which demanded an accumulation of horrors, I. A. Aksenov argued that Shakespeare could not completely «unleash» «Romeo and Juliet» as a tragedy, since the finale had to come out of the heroes’ nature, becoming inevitable, without any variants. In the eyes of I. A. Aksenov, the thesis of the world unsuitable for love, later advanced by Schlegel, aimed to justify the decoupling of the Shakespearean tragedy, was not simply disproved, but, moreover, it was destroyed by it: «…if Romeo and Juliet had to perish because they love each other, which is in accordance with the laws of the world, then there is no tragedy in it – it’s just natural that no one can escape, no one is to blame for it. There is no conflict either. And where there is no fault or conflict, there is no tragedy either». Later, according to I. A. Aksenov, «remembering the danger of a very bright image of love», Shakespeare tried to purposely do away with this feeling, doing it «as clearly as possible»: «…stage success of Juliet in many ways turned to the sad fate of Ophelia».

According to I.A. Aksenov, the tragic decoupling of the play is achieved by pocketing a «great pile of incidents», namely through the «nine-fold accident»: 1) Balthazar, who has to keep in touch with Romeo and Lorenzo, leaves for Mantova without warning the monk. Nobody delays him, he arrives on time, giving horrible and incorrect information to Romeo; 2) the monks sent by Lorenzo appear to be detained at the city gate of Verona, they do not get into Mantova, and they do not convey letters with a true and joyous message; 3) they fail to announce Lorenzo about it, which would be quite natural and quite easy because they did not leave Verona; 4) these monks come to the person, who sent them, only twenty-four hours later, which is also amazing, since they are associated with him by their medical activities and supposed to replenish the stock of drugs, especially in view of the epidemic in the city, in the morning; 5) it is also surprising that they found Lorenzo in his cell: he should, at best, be on his way to the cemetery. He appears in the tomb of Juliet with such astronomical accuracy, which is unlikely even in our time of advanced clock mechanism. He should, in common sense, have arrived ten minutes before the resurrection of Juliet, not just a few seconds before. However, his presence in the cemetery would have prevented two more casualties; 6) Romeo would not have attacked Paris, there would be no duel, and the unlucky bridegroom would not fall by the desperate husband’s hands; 7) Romeo would not have to poison himself at the feet of Juliet. Together with the monk, he would have been waiting for his wife’s wakening and then safely take her to Mantova; 8) if Romeo arrived in the cemetery two minutes later, he would not have met Paris; 9) with the condition that he would find Juliet awake» (1, p. 273–274).

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sleepy drink produces on the body, <...> the potion has a freezing effect. The body covers with a fine crust of ice and therefore turns cold». With the motives being much in common, I.A.Aksenov raised the question of T. Dekker’s involvement in the work on «Romeo and Juliet». Later M. M. Morozov noted the similarity of the Shakespearean tragedy «Romeo and Juliet» and the play «The Jew of Malta» by Marlowe, in which “the daughter of Barabas and her beloved, a young Spaniard, are victimized by hatred and hostility around them”. He also focused on the age of the heroines (14 years old), pointed to some individual external calls of two plays, noted that «Escalus’s speech was written by Shakespeare in a lush, festive style reminiscent of that of Marlowe’s»; he commented that the Shakespearean scholars of the past «completely abandoned the features of the internal thematic similarity of Marlowe’s sketch (Don Mathias and Abigail) and Shakespeare’s unfolding picture (Romeo and Juliet)».

Considering the text of «Romeo and Juliet» as «composite», I. A. Aksenov traced the participation of several dramatists from the «university minds»: “…there is both Marlowe’s and Peele’s hand. There are some traces of Green; there are some pieces, written by Kyd in his best romantic manner». For example, Capulet’s weeping over the corpse of Juliet, described in the classic Kyd’s style with cries between verses, is brought to some unity through the repetition of the same verse in the form of a refrain, the favorite of Peele; The rhymed lines of the first quarto turned out to be thoroughly revised and arranged in a precise stanza order in the second one, which resulted in the worsening of the content of the verses, which formally contains the «correct» stanza. According to I. A. Aksenov Shakespeare was not involved in the rhyming of lines, but it was impossible to identify the author of rhymes, which is why «it was only to confirm that the helper existed and that Shakespeare was not alone to edit not the very classic legacy of his predecessors».

I. A. Aksenov saw the confirmation of collective work on the text of «Romeo and Juliet» in a large number of verses ending in an unstressed (weak) syllable, which was the favorite genre of R. Green’s poetry and other «academics» but rarely used by Shakespeare, who preferred to finish the verse with stress. For I. A. Aksenov, the percentage ratio of both types of poems was a sort of identification of the «Shakespearean hand» and, as a result, a sign of Shakespeare’s authorship. Having compared the number of verses, ending in a weak syllable, in the comedy «Midsummer Night’s Dream», glorifying «idyllic relations of Thaisia and the Athenian Craftsmen», and in the tragedy of «Romeo and Juliet», I. A. Aksenov discovered that the percentage of weak endings was about 8 in both cases; however these endings were distributed unevenly: in the first act of «Romeo and Juliet» there was only 0.18%, the second – 0.25%, while in the third there was a sudden increase in the number of weak endings. When studying the specific scenes, I. A. Aksenov found out that there is only one weak ending in the first scene of the first act, in the second scene – four, in the third – seven, in the fourth – zero, and in the last fifth scene – one. Minimizing the number of weak endings, so popular with «university minds», in the opinion of I.A.Aksenov testified the editing of these episodes of the tragedy by the Shakespearean hand. Considering that «the maximum of Shakespeare’s material falls on the first two and last act» of the tragedy, I.A.Aksenov thus frees Shakespeare from being suspected «in Eufuisim, Rant and Tyurlupinad of the text», in the passion for the chopped iambic, characteristic of R. Green’s creativity, as well as in borrowing the wailing of Capulet over the daughter’s body, which was «not only written off the “Old Jeronimo” recitation, but also belonged to the author of the Spanish tragedy».

The researcher believed that Shakespeare had put the greatest effort into the drastic editing of the monologue of Mercutio in the fourth scene of the first act, which, instead of the prose form of the second quarto, gained a poetic construction in the third edition, showing unquestionable signs of a truly Shakespearean style. None of the «university minds» «was capable of either writing a monologue of Mercutio, or depicting his character, or making the second half of the farewell scene of the newlyweds, or the final monologues of Laurence and the Duke». The monologue of Mercutio, in the opinion of I. A. Aksenov, the key insertion of Shakespeare, was created to fully characterize the image of a handsome, cheerful young man, designed to make clear the idea of not allowing revenge for the death of a faithful friend. There isn’t enough time in the play to realize the plan of revenge; the possibility of revenge was also reduced by the fact that the death of the hero could lead to his replacement by another person in the plot intrigue, which was extremely damaging for the perception of the work. The aim of the lyrical characteristic, expressed by an inserted ballad monologue, was to excite Romeo: “…the queen-fantasy fascinates our feelings more than the familiar and hopeless reality». Thus, according to I. A. Aksenov, the mastery of Shakespeare’s composition lies in the fact that the insertions he made are organically linked with his creative intentions.

I. A. Aksenov believed that the image of a nurse, which like the image of Mercutio was admired by researchers, was traditionally characterized as purely Shakespearean («the nurse was written like no other wet-nurse was written either before or after Shakespeare»), had nothing to do with either Shakespeare or his work in its totality. The prosaic text of the nurse was given in italics in the first quarto, which meant new additions to the print release, and if it were Shakespeare’s authorship, then the ballad of fairy Mab would also have appeared in italics. I. A. Aksenov correlated these additions with T. Dekker’s literary activity, suggesting that it was he who introduced the essential features of his writing to the image of a wet-nurse – warmth, and sincerity. According to I. A. Aksenov, the involvement of T. Dekker is confirmed by other substantive nuances, such as “the intervention of the citizens and their combat exclamation like “dubes” (‘beat’)”, constantly encountered in the Dekker’s texts, but absent in Shakespeare’s; the characteristic of the power of the Duke as a performer of the will of the townspeople, similar to the role of the King in the comedy «The Shoemakers’ Holiday» by T. Dekker.
DISCUSSION

Rejecting the judgments of Shakespeareans who categorically correlated «Romeo and Juliet» with the work of the great dramatist, I. A. Aksenov convincingly spoke about his doubts about the legitimacy of any play of the Elizabethan time. In this case, when Shakespeare relied on someone else’s basis, he would suggest his own semantic arrangement of verses, his own comparisons of the persons who spoke them, showing what he would be talking about at the beginning of the play, and summing up at the end; the text corrections, made by him in the middle of the play, kept the action and characters in the boundaries set by the exposition and anticipated in decoupling. The interpretation of the old plot and the composition of the play is, as I. A. Aksenov states, «real authorship», although Shakespeare actually wrote only eight passages. However, I. A. Aksenov saw Shakespeare’s intervention in a variety of episodes: in the somnets of the fifth stage of the first act, in Green’s text of lovers parting in the morning, in the last scene of the tragedy, set forth by Ch. Marlowe, in every significant episode, except for separate passing scenes.

Bringing his own observations and data from the publications of his Anglo-American predecessors (F. Flay, R. Hubbard, D. Wilson, J. M. Robertson) and having singled out T. Dekker as one of the authors of «Romeo and Juliet», I. A. Aksenov presented a table of the text distribution between the authors, which now appears to be the fruit of the imagination of the Russian scholar: I. A. Aksenov, in particular, considering that the authors of the «Prologue» were Thomas Kyd, Shakespeare (verses 70–104 of the first scene, 55–104 third scene, 20–44, 58–92 of the fifth scene). Christopher Marlowe, Robert Green, and Thomas Dekker.

CONCLUSIONS

Turning to the literary-critical analysis of Shakespeare’s works in the early 1930s, I.A.Aksenov, remaining devoted to his work, continued to insistently trace the authorship of Elizabethan dramatists in the main plays of Shakespeare. From I. A. Aksenov’s point of view, the author is more than just a playwright who composes plays. In his opinion, Shakespeare has only eight fragments in «Romeo and Juliet»; the story was not invented by them, the plot was repeatedly recited in different world languages. But Shakespeare’s interpretation of the old storyline, the competent editing, and additions, which allowed to improve some of the former ugly episodes, actions, or characters, made it possible to transform the text of the predecessors; according to I. A. Aksenov, this was the real art of the brilliant author.

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