

## REVIEW

*Shekspir v russkoi teorii pervoi poloviny XX veka* [*Shakespeare in Russian Theory in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*]. By Ludmiła Mnich. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Kultury Regionalnej i Badań Interdyscyplinarnych im. Franciszka Karpińskiego. 2019. Pp. 264.

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*Shekspir v russkoi teorii pervoi poloviny XX veka* [*Shakespeare in Russian Theory in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*] presents a systematic and informative study of how Russian thinkers appropriated Shakespeare as an integral part of their theoretical formulations. Ludmiła Mnich accomplishes a comprehensive bibliographic and historiographic inventory of what constitutes Russian theory, on the one hand, and the ways in which that theory asserts its validity through reference to Shakespeare, on the other. Albeit primarily furnished as an intervention into the history of literary theory in Russia, the study offers insight into wider debates about intercultural exchanges. To that end, Mnich's contribution at once mirrors and refracts some of the recent research on Anglo-Russian relations and the resulting images of Britain/England and Russia in respective cultural environments. The past decade has seen the publication of several major volumes: *Russia in Britain, 1880–1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, edited by Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock (2013), Caroline Maclean's *The Vogue for Russia: Modernism and the Unseen in Britain, 1900–1930* (2015), Olga Soboleva and Angus Wrenn's *From Orientalism to Cultural Capital: The Myth of Russia in British Literature of the 1920s* (2017), H. G. Wells and *All Things Russian*, edited by Galya Diment (2019), and Rebecca Beasley's *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922* (2020). Similarly, *Shakespeare in Russian Theory* investigates the relationship of its subject (Russian theory and, more broadly, Russian culture) to the perceived crisis of Western modernity in the first half of the twentieth century. Just as her aforementioned colleagues trace the compensatory constructions of otherness in British culture through the work of, most frequently, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, Mnich turns to Shakespeare as the Other of Russian theory. In her own imagological terms, she embarks on an enquiry into 'how and

in which texts Shakespeare helped the Russians to understand Russia, Russian reality, and themselves' (p. 20).<sup>1</sup>

The body of Mnich's study is comprised of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. This structure enables an effective facilitation of the argument, a robust systematization of Russian theory, and an equally coherent explication of 'Shakespearean discourse' in a wide selection of theoretical exercises. In the introduction, Mnich invokes an analogy of French theory in order to designate Russian theory as a distinct body of writing, whose legacies, however, have gained much belated traction outside Russia, as the case of Mikhail Bakhtin especially demonstrates (p. 11). For Mnich, Russian theory manifests two mutually complementary facets: like all theories, it is a 'verbally articulated form of rationality', while its speculations always necessarily pertain to literary theory (p. 16). In its development, Russian theory congregates around four major strands: Russian literary studies proper (with a focus on both historical and theoretical poetics), the Russian religious philosophy of the Silver Age, Russian Symbolism, and Russian Formalism. Throughout her analyses, Mnich sensibly distances herself from the unresolvable questions of Shakespeare's biography and authorship. This dispensation permits her to treat Shakespeare as text, reactivated by Russian thinkers in particular historical and sociocultural contexts and cut to size for their own theoretical agendas.

Chapter 1 serves the purpose of a literature review: it brings the reader up to speed with state-of-the-art Russian criticism and incorporates Anglophone sources, which emanate predominantly from the research trends perpetuated by *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (1986). Subsequent chapters discuss Russian theory's engagements with Shakespeare. In Chapter 2, 'Shakespeare in the Russian literary studies of the first half of the twentieth century', Mnich takes stock of a large caucus of Russian literary scholars, both officially approved and emigrant. Such an arrangement foregrounds a contrast in their appropriations of Shakespeare: while the former used Shakespeare to substantiate a chronological conception of literature and reveal the core of genres intrinsic to particular epochs (Alexander Potebnja, Alexander Veselovsky, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Mikhail Bakhtin), the latter found in Shakespeare an articulation of their own sense of displacement (p. 74). Chapter 3, 'Shakespeare in the Russian religious-philosophical thought of the Silver Age', inspects how Shakespeare catalysed Russian theory's dialogue with Western philosophy. In their own peculiar ways, Lev Shestov, Semyon Frank, Pavel Florensky, and Alexei Losev appointed Shakespeare as a measure of Europeanness, poising him between Christian morals and ideals of Antiquity, between the Kantian categorical imperative and Nietzschean individualism (p. 151). Chapter 4,

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter all translations from the Russian are mine.

‘Shakespeare in the aesthetics and literary criticism of Russian Symbolism’, scrutinizes how Shakespeare embodied ‘tragic symbolism’ in the writings of Vladimir Solovyov, Valery Bryusov, Alexander Blok, Andrei Belyi, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and Dmitry Merezhkovsky. For the Symbolists, Shakespeare’s characters of Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth exemplified both the historical vagaries of post-revolutionary Russia and the more general tragedy of being in the world (p. 186). Chapter 5, ‘Shakespeare in the intellectual heritage of the Russian Formalists’, records how Shakespeare came to be appraised for the mastery of poetic language. Rather than preoccupying themselves with the underlying philosophy and manifest symbolism of Shakespeare’s texts, Boris Tomashevsky, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Viktor Zhirmunsky examined the form of the English poet’s art, which involved considerations of plot, versification, and pun (p. 204). In the conclusion, Mnich highlights Shakespearean discourse as a marker by which Russian theory attained its interdiscursive position at the interface between literature and philosophy (p. 223).

Like all good books, Mnich’s study poses important questions. Does Russian theory end when it confronts and assimilates the Other? Or does it pursue the ends that surpass interdiscursivity and imagological permeations? I wish *Shakespeare in Russian Theory* shone a light on what it seems to take literally as the ‘ends’ of theory (p. 31). However, these questions do not detract considerably from my otherwise positive evaluation of this erudite book. Specialists working at the intersections of English Literature, Russian Studies, and Literary Theory will find Mnich’s intervention both timely and useful.

## REFERENCES

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