Boris Godunov
and
Little Tragedies
Alexander Pushkin
Translated by Roger Clarke
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Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837)
Abrám Petróvich Gannibál, Pushkin’s great-grandfather

Sergéy Lvovich Pushkin, Pushkin’s father

Nadézhda Ósipovna Púshkina, Pushkin’s mother

Natálya Nikoláyevna Pushkina, Pushkin’s wife
The Imperial Lyceum in Tsárskoye Seló, which Pushkin entered in 1811

Fragment from Pushkin’s manuscript of the ode ‘Liberty’
БОРИСЪ ГОДУНОВЪ,
СОЧИНЕНИЕ
АЛЕКСАНДРА ПУШКИНА.

САНКТПЕТЕРБУРГЪ.
1831.
Boris Godunov
Introduction

Who has fathomed, who has understood, Boris Godunov, that lofty and profound work, enclosed in a private and inaccessible poetry, a work that has rid itself of all crude and garish adornment of the kind that normally fascinates the masses?…

– N.V. Gogol, ‘Some Remarks about Pushkin’ (1832)

Boris Godunov is Alexander Pushkin’s only full-length drama and one with which he was particularly pleased. It is a historical play, in the manner of the historical plays of Shakespeare, whom Pushkin greatly admired. The circumstances of its composition, its unique structure and literary significance and the historical background to the action are described more fully in the Extra Material and Appendices at the back of this volume.

Pushkin completed work on Boris Godunov on 7th November 1825. The authorities withheld permission for its publication for several years. When it was eventually approved for publication at the beginning of 1831 Pushkin incorporated a number of significant changes, ranging from the alteration or omission of odd words to a more drastic curtailing of certain passages, a reversal of the order of two scenes, and the deletion of three scenes in their entirety. The reason for particular changes is not always clear. Some Pushkin was obliged to make to meet the objections of the censorship; others were consequences of these; others he made of his own accord to correct mistakes or improve drafting. A few of the minor differences in the 1831 edition may have been printing errors. The subject is discussed in more detail later in this volume.

The approach of subsequent editors has varied. But strangely, until the last few years Boris Godunov has hardly ever been published in either of the versions sanctioned by Pushkin during his lifetime. Normally Pushkin’s 1831 text has been taken as a basis, but with some reinstatement of deleted material, notably of Scene 3. The 1831 text itself seems never till recently to have been republished; and it was
not until 2004 that the University of Wisconsin Press did Pushkin scholarship a service by bringing out for the first time the full text of the play, in Russian and English, as Pushkin had originally composed it. Subsequently, in 2008, a new Russian edition has appeared giving both a facsimile of the 1831 edition and the 1825 text.

In this volume I have followed almost entirely Pushkin’s 1825 text, as given in the 2008 Russian edition. The few divergences are noted in the commentary. This is the version that seems to me to represent, very largely, the author’s unconstrained conception and aspiration for the play. I have also examined the 1831 edition directly and have identified and listed in Appendix 2 – for the first time in an English edition – all the significant differences between the 1825 and 1831 versions. Scholars, readers and directors in the English-speaking world are therefore now able to make their own fully informed judgements on which text to use.

There are a few other editorial decisions I have made of which the reader should be made aware at this stage. The first concerns the numbering of scenes. Pushkin’s play consists of a continuous succession of twenty-five scenes, ungrouped into acts. Pushkin did not number the scenes; but for ease of reference I have assigned them numbers in this volume. My numbers coincide with those in the University of Wisconsin Press edition. Secondly, although neither Pushkin’s original text nor the 1831 edition contained a list of scenes or of the dramatis personae, I have drawn up lists of both in the pages immediately following this introduction for the convenience of readers, scholars and directors.

The last point relates to metre. Pushkin followed Shakespeare in composing *Boris Godunov* for the most part in blank verse – unrhymed lines of ten or eleven syllables, stressed normally on the even syllables. A few scenes and shorter passages are in prose. Two whole scenes and other brief passages he composed in other metres. This translation largely reproduces Pushkin’s metres (or their absence).

For the treatment of Russian and Polish names see the Translator’s Note at the end of the Extra Material. Asterisks have been placed in the text after words that are the subject of an endnote.

– Roger Clarke, 2010
List of Scenes

Scene 1: Moscow, the Kremlin Palace – 20th February 1598
Scene 2: Red Square
Scene 3: Maidens’ Field, the Novodévichy Convent
Scene 4: The Kremlin Palace
Scene 5: A Cell in the Monastery of the Miracle, at Night – 1603
Scene 6: Within the Monastery Walls
Scene 7: The Patriarch’s Palace
Scene 8: The Tsar’s Palace
Scene 9: An Inn on the Polish Frontier
Scene 10: Moscow, Shúysky’s House
Scene 11: The Tsar’s Palace
Scene 12: Cracow, Wiśniowiecki’s House
Scene 13: Governor Mniszech’s Castle at Sambor, Maryna’s Dressing Room
Scene 14: A Suite of Brightly Lit Rooms – Music
Scene 15: Night-time, a Garden, a Fountain
Scene 16: The Polish Frontier – 16th October 1604
Scene 17: Moscow, the Tsar’s Council
Scene 18: A Square in front of a Cathedral in Moscow
Scene 19: A Plain near Nóvgorod-Séversky – 21st December 1604
Scene 20: Sevsk
Scene 21: A Forest
Scene 22: Moscow, the Tsar’s Palace
Scene 23: A Tent
Scene 24: Moscow, the Place of a Skull
Scene 25: The Kremlin, Borís’s Residence – Guards by the Steps
**Characters**

*Russians*

The Tsar and His Household

Borís Godunóv, Regent, and later Tsar of Russia  
María Godunóva, his wife  
Feódór, his son  
Xénia, his daughter  
Xénia’s nurse  
Stewards in the palace  
Court servants and officials

Russian Orthodox Churchmen

Patriarch of All Russia  
Superior of the Monastery of the Miracle  
Father Pimen, an elderly monk at the Monastery of the Miracle and a chronicler  
Grígóry (“Grishka”) Otrépyev, a young monk at the same monastery; later the Pretender Dimitry  
Older monk at the same monastery  
Varlaám and Misaíl, vagrant monks  
Other church dignitaries

Boyars, Nobles and Officials in Moscow or in the Service of Tsar Borís

Prince Vasíly Ivánovich Shúysky, a boyar  
Prince Vorotýnsky, a boyar  
Afanásy Mikháylovich Pushkin, a boyar  
Mosálsky, a boyar  
Shchelkálov, secretary to the Tsar’s Council
Semyón Nikítich Godunóv, relative of Borís and head of his secret police
Rozhnóv, a nobleman, a prisoner of the Pretender
Basmánov, a nobleman of low rank and general in Tsar Borís’s army
Captain Margeret, a Frenchman in Tsar Boris’s army
Captain Walther Rosen, a German in Tsar Borís’s army
Other boyars
Guests of Prince Shúysky

Others

Landlady of an inn on the Polish frontier
Boy, servant in the house of Prince Shúysky
Other servants of Prince Shúysky
Andréy Karéla, a Cossack chieftain
Nikólka, a holy fool
Urchins
Beggar
People of Moscow, police, soldiers

Boyars, Nobles, etc. in Exile in Poland

Gavríla Pushkin, nephew of Afanásy Pushkin
Prince Kurbsky, son of a boyar exiled by Tsar Iván the Terrible
Khrushchóv, a nobleman
Other Russian exiles and adventurers

Poles

Mniszech (Mnishek), Governor of Sandomierz
Maryna Mniszech, his daughter
Róža (Ruzha), Maryna’s maid
Wiśniowiecki (Vishnevétsky), a nobleman, friend of Mniszech
Sobański (Sobánsky), a nobleman
Father Czernikowski (Chernikóvsky), a Jesuit
A poet
Adventurers in the Pretender’s service
Ladies
Soldiers, menservants, maidservants
To the memory
precious to Russians
of
Nikoláy Mikháylovich Karamzín
this work,
inspired by his genius,
is dedicated
with veneration and gratitude
by
Alexander Pushkin*
A Comedy

concerning
Tsar Borís
and
Grishka Otrépyev.
1825.*
Scene 1*
Moscow, the Kremlin Palace – 20th February 1598

Princes Shúysky and Vorotýnsky.**

VOROTÝNSKY
  Our orders are to keep an eye on Moscow;
  it seems, though, that there’s no one left to watch:
  the city’s empty; everyone’s gone off
  after the Patriarch* towards the convent.
  What’s your assessment? How’ll this turmoil end?

SHÚYSKY
  How will it end? It isn’t hard to tell –
  the mob will howl and wail a bit again,
  Borís will frown a bit more in reply
  (how like a drunkard pressed to take some wine!),
  till, overcome at last by his compassion,
  he’ll humbly condescend to take the crown.
  Then… then he’ll be our ruler once again,
  just as before.

VOROTÝNSKY
  But it’s a good month now since
  he shut himself up in his sister’s convent
  and seemingly renounced all worldly business.
  The Patriarch, the boyar-councillors* –
  none of them’s yet got him to change his mind;
  Borís won’t listen to their tearful protests:
  their prayers, the lamentations of all Moscow,
  the Grand Assembly’s* voice – he spurns them all.
  His sister too they’ve begged and begged in vain
  to give her blessing* to Borís’ accession;
  but the Tsaritsa, widow now and nun,
  is firm as he and equally unyielding –
under Borís’s influence, no doubt.
What if the Regent really has grown weary
of the anxieties of sovereign power
and won’t agree to ascend the vacant throne?
What’ll you say then?

SHÚYSKY
I’ll say that it was pointless,
if so, to shed the young Crown Prince’s blood;
Dimitry could have then remained alive.

VOROTÝNSKY
A shocking crime was that! But is it true
Borís put the Crown Prince to death?

SHÚYSKY
Who else?
Who offered bribes in vain to Chepchugóv?
Who charged the Bityagóvskys and Kachálov
with their mysterious mission? I was sent
to Uglich to make on-the-spot enquiries
into the affair; I found the clues still fresh:
the whole town had been witness of the misdeed;
the evidence of all the townsfolk tallied;
on my return a single word of mine
could have exposed the wretch for what he was.

VOROTÝNSKY
Then why did you not bring about his downfall?

SHÚYSKY
I must confess that at the time his calmness,
his unexpected shamelessness confused me.
He looked me in the eye with perfect candour
and questioned me on each particular –
and face to face with him I just repeated
the nonsense that he’d prompted me with himself.
SCENE 1

VOROTÝNSKY
Shame on you, Prince.

SHÚYSKY
What else could I have done?  
Revealed all to Feódor? But the Tsar  
saw all things through the eyes of Godunóv,  
heard all things with the ears of Godunóv.  
Suppose that I’d convinced him of it all,  
Borís would soon have unconvinced the Tsar,  
and then I’d have been placed under detention,  
and in good time in some dark prison cell  
I’d have been quietly strangled, like my uncle.*  
I do not mean to boast, but this is certain –  
when the time comes no death will make me flinch;  
I am no coward, but nor am I a fool,  
and I’ll not volunteer for execution.

VOROTÝNSKY
A shocking crime! Mark what I say: I’m sure  
the murderer must be tortured by remorse –  
that innocent child’s blood’s no doubt the reason  
that keeps him now from mounting Russia’s throne.

SHÚYSKY
He’ll not be stopped by that: he’s not so squeamish!  
Think what an honour for us and for Russia:  
yesterday’s slave, a Tatar, son-in-law of  
butcher Malyúta, butcher at heart himself –  
this man will take the monarch’s crown and mantle...*  

VOROTÝNSKY
Yes, he’s not nobly born; we are more noble.

SHÚYSKY
So one would think.
VOROTYNSKY

We Shúyskys, Vorotýnskys... princes by birth, and let us not forget it!

SHÚYSKY

Princes by birth, and of the line of Ryúrik.

VOROTYNSKY

You know, Prince, we ourselves would have a right to succeed the late tsar.

SHÚYSKY

Yes, a better right than Godunóv’s.

VOROTYNSKY

Indeed that’s so.

SHÚYSKY

Well then, if Godunóv keeps up these crafty tactics, why don’t we rouse the people to our own ends? If we can once detach them from Borís, they’ve real princes in abundance: they can choose which of us they like to be their tsar.*

VOROTYNSKY

It’s strange: we heirs of Rýurik* are not few, but we can’t well contend with Godunóv. No longer do the people see in us the sons and grandsons of their warrior-chieftains. We long ago were stripped of our domains; it’s long we’ve served the tsars as lowly vassals; while he by fear and love and his prestige has had the wit to hold the people spellbound.

SHÚYSKY (looking out of the window)

He’s had the nerve, that’s all, while we... But stop,