

Summary

Building upon Creative Interdependence. Comparative Study of the Lithuanian Classical Drama

The present publication is devoted to comparative studies and it presents different forms of inter-textual and intercultural interaction: those are represented by the study of contacts of Lithuanian literature with West European literature – in terms of seeking to recreate the universal literary discourse models and historical poetic forms, as well as offering meaningful interpretations of the history of culture and highlighting inter-textual interaction within the context of Lithuanian literature. The book mainly refers to Lithuanian historical dramas since its birth at the end of the 19th century up to the ninth decade of the 20th century. Historical drama can be generally characterized by its developed ability to absorb other literary influences and accept all sort of cultural images. It presents a rich canvas in geographical terms, with its picturesque variety that uncovers the European political and cultural context of Lithuania.

The book does not aim to present a comprehensive description of historical dramas and cultural contacts or similarities within their exhaustive scope, its focus is rather on the creative output of separate most outstanding authors (like Vincas Krėvė, Balys Sruoga, Juozas Grušas, Justinas Marcinkevičius etc.), as well as on the works of their predecessors and contemporaries. This is a study of dialogic nature and this incessant

dialogue carries on between the Lithuanian classical drama and classical tradition in a wide sense.

Since the epoch of Romanticism established a very close relationship between literature and the history, there is a clearly marked tendency to attach all plays on historic (or legend-based) topics to the category of romantic portrayal, and it is often stated that the ideas of Romanticism in Lithuanian drama writing “have been alive for ages”. This kind of attitude requires conceptual re-consideration though there can be found arguments in its favour as well. We offer the point of view of the systemic typology of historic drama that is based on the discussion of at least two inter-related aspects: 1) the use and application of the forms of historical poetics, and 2) the reconstructions and interpretation of the cultural self-consciousness of the epoch under discussion. Not to the neglect of the ‘feeding’ literature, the receiving literature is given more attention in the present study, with the principles of chronological order and territorial wholeness observed. The present study repeatedly confirms the idea that comparative studies make up part of historical literary studies and are primarily oriented towards essentially literary, inner factors of development.

The playwright, as a rule, is torn among several centres of poetic influences; one and the same play may be oriented towards several targets, and the reconstruction of history in dramas is supplemented by the process of ‘creating’ history with the past reality ‘revived’ by enriching it with artificial forms and shapes in the attempt of bringing it closer to the West European cultural standards. The most favored period by Lithuanian authors is that of the Middle Ages though separate signs of the epochs of Renaissance, Baroque, and New Ages can also be traced. The early romantic drama introduces the reader to the kind of past that is hardly specific or – it coincides with the legendary medieval reality, which is being restored according to the heroic epic model. The most vivid medieval characters in the plays were created by Aleksandras Fromas-Gužutis, Marcelinas Šikšnys-Šiaulėniškis (in later times – by Maironis). Those are the characters of the fighting knight, chief of the tribe, or statesman, the senior one in governing or religious terms (the same characters remain

in all other artistic reconstructions of medieval history). Traces of epic representation with varying impact can be observed in all literary works that aim at reconstructing medieval history, and those epic traces should be treated as the fundamental worldview manifestations.

In the neo-romantic dramas of Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, Krėvė, Liudas Gira, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas the medieval images are presented in the form of pre-romantic gothic novel and melodrama narrative, that integrate the knights' novel poetic forms. The medieval reality here is a mere decorative background against which adventure, love affairs and unexpected turnings of fate take place.

Our focus of attention was on the processes of tragic discourse shaping the development and specificity of Lithuanian tragic drama. The classical form of historical drama is its targeted aim, and the historical drama is gradually moving in this direction throughout the whole period of its development. Some works of the early-period playwrights, namely, Fromas-Gužutis and Šikšnys-Šiaulėniškis, can be traced back to both ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespearean tragedy (though there have never been appropriate pre-conditions for the classicism-type tragedy or the bourgeois tragedy to appear in Lithuania). William Shakespeare was one of the most outstanding guiding authorities for the further Lithuanian tragedy development. Considerable attention to Shakespeare in Lithuania was provoked by a number of factors, essentially – by a rich heritage of national history (the time of action in both Shakespeare's dramas and Lithuanian plays approximately coincides). The genuine artistic nature of the dramatists themselves was another factor (most of the Lithuanian playwrights come from prose and poetry writing). The present study aims at disclosing the need for Shakespearean tradition in Lithuania as well as its incentives, its result-driven effect and limits of influence; Shakespearean periphrases in the plays of Krėvė, Sruoga and Grušas are discussed in greater detail.

Some of the most conspicuous traits of Shakespearean tragedy should be emphasized, like historicism, the social character of action of the hero, psychological underpinning of characters, and the polyphony

of style in portraying characters. The works of Krėvė often remind us of the most general pattern of Shakespearean tragedy, and *Skirgaila* is the most typical Lithuanian classical tragedy. Sruoga's works, in turn, abound in Shakespearean quotations, specific theme and motif explorations, and typical character drawing variations. The Shakespearean-type character-spread in Sruoga's plays is many-faceted and varied. Some of the characters are portrayed in full scope and colour, especially the central characters of the plays (like Jogaila in *The Giant's Shade*, bearing a close similarity to King Lear as well as Kazimieras Sapiega in the play under the same name). The similarity of other characters can be sort of traced to the Shakespearean types only on the dotted line (we mean here the resounding types of women characters in *The Giant's Shade* and *Kazimieras Sapiega* that remind us of Ophelia and Cordelia in Shakespeare's tragedies). Still other characters of Sruoga are shown as objects of conscious reasoning on openly disputable issues (like the Hamlet-type qualities in Jokūbas Sobieskis in the drama *Kazimieras Sapiega*). Comparative studies allowed to establish a different sort of similarity – in some cases it relies on the surface forms and sort of only reiterates the main line of the plot (like the case of the musical drama *Radvila Perkūnas* that presents a far-fetched resounding of *Romeo and Juliet*. In other cases – the similarity is based on inner elements that speak about creative use of the well-known source of literature, achieved with the help of the specific epoch-significant interpretive means (like the reflective aspects and shades of *Romeo and Juliet* in *Barbora Radvilaitė*). Sruoga creates a modernized tragedy that combines the elements of heroic drama, political satire, Shakespearean tragedy, and lyrical treatment. In this way, the writer conveys the picture of 14th–17th century reality that is full of life and contrasts.

While analyzing the modern expressive means of tragedy, in the chapter '*Interscriptum*' we focus on the literary works that do not have much in common with the Shakespearean tradition or historical portrayal in general. In the play *The Dress Rehearsal* of Kazys Binkis we come across a significant treatment for our study of discursive reflection on tragedy-based line of criticism. Binkis identifies the concern-raising point, which

brings together the line of tragic treatment and the mode of totalitarian thinking. Grotesque is the main means of expression in Sruoga's *Forest of the Gods* and it is employed to convey the horrifying experience that had been lived through in the Nazi concentration camp. The analysis of this novel enables to uncover the medieval, infernal motifs that resound to Dante and his *Divine Comedy*.

The unfinished drama of Sruoga *Barbora Radvilaitė* that displays the cultural utopia of Renaissance is as a kind of alternative to the *Forest of the Gods*, with its romantic idealism as an answer to the post-war divided world, to the dull 'culture' of shabby everyday existence, to the dehumanizing totalitarian system. This drama marks the beginning of cultural interpretations of the past. The Renaissance reality is related here to the high court culture, to the aesthetic values of living, to the ideas of individual's emancipation as well as to the acknowledgement of feelings. Shakespearean-type forms of dramatic portrayal make up a significant part of 'revival', and the synthesis of different forms of art is the exceptional feature of the conceptual treatment. The literary works of Sruoga and some time later – *Barbora Radvilaitė* of Grušas – offer a possibility of expanding the area of comparative study, with the issues of visual representation and theatrical portrayal compared and discussed.

At the time of 'political thaw', historical drama experienced a kind of revival and focused mainly on the inner, purely Lithuanian, dramatic inter-texts. *Herkus Mantas* of Grušas represented the revival of both heroic-epic portrayal and the kind of conflicts in the dramas of Krėvė. At the same time, *Herkus Mantas* reveals some new signs of the philosophical existentialism: the hero comes up with the ideas about the ruinous effects of all totalitarian systems, about the significance of resistance and withstanding, about the relationship between collective defence and self-destruction, idealism and fanaticism.

The works of Grušas display their close relationships to the works of Sruoga: Sruoga can be regarded as the author who readily lends impetus to meet the inner needs of drama plot development. The present study attempts to trace parallels in the treatment of *Barbora Radvilaitė* of Grušas

and the play under the same name of Sruoga, of *Švitrigaila* of Grušas and *The Giant's Shade* of Sruoga, *Requiem to Noblemen* of Grušas and *Kazimieras Sapiega* of Sruoga. Some parallels are also found between two dramas of Grušas *The Union* and *Barbora Radvilaitė*.

Under Soviet regime, the tragic interpretation of history was replaced by the mythical interpretation of reality, that being especially evident in the dramas of Marcinkevičius (*Mindaugas*, *Mažvydas*, *Cathedral*, *Daukantas*). At that period, the issues of creative personality, its spiritual freedom as well as the question of national leader-creator were raised as all these had been legally approved of and thus tolerated in the soviet environment. While exploring the dramas written in the Soviet times, our task was to discuss the world outlook hybrids that can be easily traced in those dramas: those of social realism, national romanticism, in places – some existentialistic intertwining. Those hybrids get shaped sort of unexpectedly – because of the surface similarity of these epistemes (though in terms of the post-modern treatment, the two are similar not on the surface plane but rather in their essence, and this kind of treatment offers a much broader scope of opposition than the Soviet system did). Therefore, the plays of Grušas and Marcinkevičius can be understood in entirely different ideological codes and the declared ideas can be easily moved from one ideological plane (at one's wish) into a different one. The analysis of these junctions makes it possible to demonstrate how Soviet literature balanced between formally recognized right to freedom, how the language of Aesop, and of compromise at the same time, got established.

It is obvious that reception is worthy of discussion on condition that it is fruitful, when it does not remain on the level of intention and does not merely rely on the imitation of certain technical steps or structural elements. It makes sense to assert that there are certain observable points (consistency of psychologically motivated portrayal, richness of the plot, stylistic complexity and many-faceted development of dialogue in Krėvė's and Sruoga's dramas) that do not give in to the Shakespeare (though while on the stage, the advantages may easily turn into obvious disadvantages). The Lithuanian authors did not blindly follow Shakespeare; they rather

borrowed the most general principles of his artistic thinking. Besides, they had absorbed other numerous influences in literature and theatre of later periods that have not been discussed in the present study.

However, some reservations have to be made while discussing the points of the scope of meanings and possibilities for their enrichment on the basis of experience acquired from classical literature. Even in cases like this, when the newly presented literary piece does not rise to the level of its former variant, the objectives of comparison, in the process of study, get oddly reversed, i.e., 'the giving side' is granted more attention, the scope of the 'donor' literary pieces becomes more evident which, consequently, adds to the extension of tradition. In turn, the processes in the receiving literature become more observable, with the pursued values and stylistic shifts more distinctly seen. For instance, the delayed reception of Shakespeare by Lithuanian literature is a sign of delay in our general cultural development. The comparative studies provide us with the insights into the Lithuanian consciousness of tragedy, with its strengths and weaknesses; this kind of study offers a new focus that is pre-conditioned by the change in the time and surrounding reality. The essential difference between Shakespeare and his Lithuanian adepts lies in the treatment of myths, their relationship with historical sources as well as with epic tradition. Shakespeare, in the Renaissance-typical way, modernized historical events in the past and enriched them by the universal humanistic ideas of peace, order, beauty, individual freedom, dignity. In Lithuanian dramas, on the contrary, the tendency of exploiting the archaic reality is very strong. The major Lithuanian myth, since the time of Fromas-Gužutis up to Krėvė, Sruoga, and Grušas, in fact, had little been changed and remained the one as shaped by the ideas of romanticism: the powerful Lithuanian state (in essence – the national-type state) and cultural identity.

National mythology did not inspire Lithuanian dramatists to rise to the heights of universals of tragedy, to take a more radical point of view with the aim of expressing more abstract ideas that would be more detached from the traditional heroes of the historic past and would give more freedom in the ways of depicting the individual. For this reason, the literary pieces of

Lithuanian authors often seem hermetic and far-fetched, they are genuinely our 'own' and might not be fully understood if transferred into another national environment; they might even look incorrect politically, with some gaps in the logic of naturally expected development of the plotline of tragedy. Another case of forfeit in Lithuanian dramas, especially in those created in Soviet years, is their easily foreseen biased engagement of the plot. The values in those dramas are not analysed and verified in the development of dramatic action but they are simply declared. Thus, the situations that could easily lend themselves to exploiting the complex ideological and cultural crossroads of historical development remain not fully explored in terms of value-based dilemmas in which those situations abound. Rather pompous representation is often chosen by the author instead of going into detailed exploration of potentially tragic situations, and, in this way, the tragic component is reduced to the hero's feelings of self-pity (which was very much favoured in Soviet literature), and all that, naturally, prevents from catharsis taking place. The authors evidently lack the critical appreciation of the notion of idealism itself as they do not view it as a significant additional assumption for the development of tragic situation or tragic paradox.

Translated by Birutė Bersėnienė