Back to the future: Shostakovich’s revision of Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District’

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‘Librettology’ has begun to acquire a working vocabulary. Critics now investigate the relationship between a libretto and its literary source in terms other than fidelity; a text adapted for musical setting no longer disappears from the realm of the ‘literary’. Historians and musicologists are considering the role of opera librettos in cultural history, with special attention to librettos that rework historical, national or mythic themes. How operatic texts transpose and thus ‘re-accent’ a nation’s literary classics is emerging as a fruitful and still unexplored field.

Shostakovich’s musical version of Nikolai Leskov’s 1865 horror story ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District’ is arguably the finest re-accented classic by a Soviet composer. It is also politically the most notorious. An instant success with both public and critics at its 1934 premiere, the opera was savagely attacked a year later at Stalin’s initiative and withdrawn from the repertory for three decades; its fate has become an emblem of the pressures and trials of Soviet music. But this essay will not address that well-known history. Our focus here is the pre-history of the opera, its relationship to its source text, and its possible place in Russian cultural history.

These three concerns are connected by a larger question, for which Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District might serve as a case study. How are literary texts transformed into librettos for a modern opera? Most often the answer has been that opera simplifies the literary text. Proponents of this view point out that music added to a verbal text usually ‘slows down’ the meaning of words, breaks words up into syllables and intensifies them, while singing tends to stylise dramatic action. The most successful operas, therefore, are those that make their peace with (and perhaps even celebrate) convention and simplification, drawing

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on texts with concrete dramatic action, high passion and little philosophising.\(^3\) Other librettologists, however, have argued the opposite case, namely, that opera complicates. According to this school, music complements depth and dimension in a text. Therefore the best sources for opera librettos are not those that are immediately, dramatically stageable on their own terms but rather more ‘novelised’ literary texts like allegory, epic poem, romance and psychological narrative.\(^4\)

It is this second, ‘complicating’ school of thought that I would like to exemplify here. As a first step we must recast that familiar question of genre (what happens to a narrative plot when music is added to it) as a question of literary history – that is, we must set the plot into motion over time. For however simplified and stylised a libretto may appear when compared with its immediate literary source, a transposition becomes more complex when viewed in a larger cultural perspective. Simplification of a text does not necessarily result in a ‘simpler story’. When, as in the versions of Lady Macbeth, authors make rich use of irony (both of language and plot), a libretto can greatly complicate a literary tradition. With the Leskov tale as its base, then, this essay will consider some categories of operatic complication – and suggest possible cultural lenses for assessing it.

1

Nikolai Leskov spent the autumn of 1864 as his brother’s guest at Kiev University. There the thirty-two-year-old writer locked himself in the student punishment cells, hoping to work his nerves into the necessary state of frenzy to write ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District’. ‘Sometimes I was so terrified I could hardly bear it’, Leskov remarked to a fellow writer many years later. ‘My hair stood on end, I grew cold at the slightest sound made by the movement of my leg or a turn of my neck; […] from that time on, I avoided descriptions of such terrors.’\(^5\) In his subsequent work, Leskov did indeed avoid such harrowing themes. ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ is anomalous in Leskov’s literary production; his later novels and tales feature satirical portraits of nihilists, or – at the other end of the spectrum, under the influence of Leo Tolstoy – portraits of Russian pravedniki [righteous men]. But the particular terror of ‘Lady Macbeth’ is not solely a matter of plot. The four murders committed by Katerina Lvovna Izmailova could hardly shock the Russian reading public of the 1860s and 1870s, a public that relished Pisemsky’s brutal tales of village corruption and that was to turn Dostoevsky’s murder novels into bestsellers. What was so chilling about Leskov’s murder story was its mode of narration.

The story is narrated by a fellow resident of Mtsensk District, a decidedly

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\(^3\) See Gary Schmidgall, Literature as Opera (New York, 1977), 10–12.

\(^4\) This position is taken by Peter Conrad in his Romantic Opera and Literary Form (Berkeley, 1978).

\(^5\) Leskov in conversation with V. V. Krestovsky and Krestovsky’s stenographer I. K. Markuze, according to the latter’s memoirs (published in Istoricheskii vestnik, 3 (1900)). Leskov’s comments are reprinted in ‘Literaturnyi arkhiv’, Zvezda, 2 (1931), 224.
nowhere place in the Russian provinces near Ryazan. This narrator has a cunning
grip on his tale. He admits at the outset that he does not know how the elevated
epithet ‘Lady Macbeth’ came to fall on this ugly local scandal, and professes
horror at the events he relates. But he is not in any sense struck dumb. He
weaves these events skilfully, even lyrically, into a rich and placid folk narrative,
where sensuous imagery and strategically placed folksayings accompany the
most brutal acts. To further complicate the literary genre, Leskov, apparently
influenced by real-life prototypes, chose to present this curiously aestheticised
tale as a ‘sketch’ for notes to a court case.

The tale is told in a straightforward manner, with a minimum of flashbacks
or authorial speculations. For five years Katerina Lvovna has been the wife
of the wealthy merchant Zinovy Borisovich Izmailov. Childless, powerless,
hers barren state making her almost invisible in the household, Katerina lan-
guishes with Zinovy and with her father-in-law, Boris Timofeevich, a widower
of almost eighty. Desperately bored and restless, she takes advantage of her
husband’s absence one day to flirt with the newly-hired clerk Sergei. He visits
her room soon after, and they enjoy each other nightly until Boris Timofeevich
catches the clerk early one morning sliding down a pillar from Katerina’s room.
The father-in-law beats Sergei unconscious, promising him prison and his
daughter-in-law a whipping. But Katerina kills her father-in-law the next day
with rat poison, nurses Sergei back to health, and the two set up house.

Katerina begins to be visited in bed by a huge cat, whom she soon recognises
as the ghost of her father-in-law. Not unreasonably, Sergei begins to worry
about the return of Katerina’s husband – and one night Zinovy Borisovich
does indeed arrive, stealing suspiciously up to the bedroom door. In a scene
of unbearable provocation, Katerina fondles Sergei in front of her husband and
then, when Zinovy reacts violently, strangles him, finishing him off with a
cast-iron candlestick.

Katerina and her lover stow the corpse away in the cellar. Several months
after this second murder, Katerina discovers that she is pregnant; in view of
this potential heir and the inexplicable disappearance of her husband, she pet-
tions to have the family business transferred to her own name. But an unpleasant
complication develops: an heir to the property turns up in the person of Zinovy’s
young nephew Fedya Lyamin. Fedya moves into the Izmailov house. At first

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6 Apropos of this tale, Leskov’s son and biographer Andrei writes: “There is no question
that the plot of the story was not invented. In general and wherever possible, Leskov
preferred to construct his stories on the basis of authentic facts. He could easily have
heard something close to his “Macbeth” events during one of his countless journeys in
the Volga region […] He could also have heard it from his father, the president of the
Orlov Criminal Court, or he could have learned something similar from the cases in the
Orlov Criminal Court where he held his first job.” A. N. Leskov, ‘Kak N. S. Leskov
pisal “Ledi Makbet”’, in ‘Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda’: Opera D. D. Shostakovicha
(Leningrad: Gosudarstvennyi Akademicheskii Malyy Opernyi Teatr, 1934), 19. This
booklet, with eight essays and a libretto, was published by the Maly Theatre for its 1934
premiere. Henceforth referred to in Notes as LM.
Katerina accepts this claimant calmly, but Sergei complains; finally, during a Church holiday when little Fedya is ill in bed, the two of them suffocate the boy.

Their crime is discovered by a piece of hideous bad luck. Some churchgoers coming back from the service witness the murder through a chink in the shutters, and the crowd besieges the house. Sergei and Katerina are flogged and sentenced to exile. During interrogation Sergei breaks down and confesses; Katerina denies everything until Sergei gives them both away, and then she says only, ‘I did it for him’. So complete is her passion for her lover that she gives up her newborn son without regret, living only for her reunion with Sergei, shackled and branded, on the road to Siberia.

The final chapters are set among convicts on the march. Sergei holds Katerina responsible for his fate and resents her passionate attentions, amusing himself instead with two other women: the beautiful and promiscuous Fiona, and a much more discriminating little tart named Sonetka. Pretending affection, Sergei talks Katerina out of her last pair of woollen stockings – and then uses them to pay for Sonetka’s favours. Sergei and his new mistress mercilessly taunt Katerina, who falls more and more silent. On a ferry crossing the Volga, Katerina suddenly pulls Sonetka overboard. Both struggle with the waves, but Katerina – in Leskov’s memorable final image – ‘threw herself on Sonetka like a strong pike on a soft little perch, and neither appeared again’.

Those familiar with Shostakovich’s opera will recognise these characters and events. But, like most literary plots moved into opera, the libretto departs creatively from its source text. We might note two interrelated categories of infidelity: changes in plot and character, and – more subtly, often involving the musical line as protagonist or the orchestra as narrator – changes in authorial attitude towards the heroes and their fates. How do these two parameters work in Lady Macbeth?

2

Shostakovich and his co-librettist Aleksandr Preis make several crucial adjustments in the cast and narrative of Leskov’s tale. First, the role of the father-in-law Boris Timofeevich is vastly expanded and eroticised. The ‘old widower nearing eighty’ interested only in the honour of his house becomes a vigorous and aggressive competitor for Katerina’s favours. In his personality we see some

7 ‘Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda’, in N. S. Leskov, Sobranie sochinenii, I (Moscow, 1956), 143. In English see the translation by David Magarshack in Nikolai Leskov, Selected Tales (New York, 1961).
8 Galina Vishnevskaya discusses the character of Boris Timofeevich, as well as his subsequent desexualization in the 1963 version of the opera, in her autobiography Galina: A Russian Story (New York, 1984), 352–5.
interpolation of a comic character from Chekhov, and also the influence of a type made famous by the playwright Alexander Ostrovsky in his drama The Storm (1859): the strong-willed, sexually possessive parental tyrant who is a voyeur in the married life of a passive son. In a second major adjustment of the plot, Shostakovich eliminates all reference to the co-heir Fedya Lyamin. ‘I got rid of the murder of the nephew, which was committed entirely out of greed’, Shostakovich wrote in his 1934 essay, ‘My Understanding of Lady Macbeth’. ‘The killing of a child, however it might be explained, always creates a negative impression.’

In Leskov, this murder is especially repellent. Katerina, herself halfway through a pregnancy, approaches the young boy as he is reading the Lives of the Saints and suffocates him by forcing his face into a pillow pressed against her full breasts. That gruesome event is replaced in the opera by Act III (which has no counterpart in Leskov), a sequence of three comically grotesque scenes. In the first, a drunken peasant, looking for vodka in the cellar of the Izmailov house, comes upon the corpse of Zinovy Borisovich. In the second, a buffoon police force, passing the time by tormenting a poor nihilist over the question of immortality in the souls of frogs, is interrupted by the drunken peasant’s alarm – which is welcome, for it provides the police with a means to avenge themselves on Katerina and Sergei for not inviting them to their wedding feast. In the final scene, drunken wedding guests are toasting the health of the bridal couple when the police make their blistering, inarticulate entrance.

Act III comes to an end with that special mix of political terror and the absurd that Shostakovich had perfected earlier in The Nose. Katerina and Sergei are caught – but not through any moral or religiously marked act (in Leskov, the parishioners witness the murder of Fedya after evening mass on a high Church holiday). Shostakovich casts his scene more in the spirit of Gogol: crime is exposed randomly, farcically; the law-abiding world appears more ridiculous and self-serving than the two criminals. The operatic Katerina, more prone to repent than her Leskovian counterpart, immediately confesses when she sees that flight is impossible. Offering her hands to be bound, she begs Sergei to forgive her; he is restrained and beaten only when he tries to escape. The police are never obliged to make an arrest, present evidence, or embody (in any serious way) state authority. Like their famous operatic predecessors, those bumbling border guards in Boris Godunov, the police in Shostakovich’s Act III offer

9 Boris Timofeevich’s prurient insistence that his daughter-in-law take an oath of fidelity to her husband before he departs (Act I scene 1: ‘Molodye zheny nynche uzh slishkom tovo [...] randevu, sous provansal [...]’[Young wives nowadays are too [...] well, you know [...] rendez-vous, sauce provencale]) includes a quotation from Chekhov’s humorous story ‘In the Post Office’ (1883). A. P. Chekhov, ‘V pochtovom otdelenii’, Sobranie sochinenii, II (Moscow, 1960), 88–9.

10 The ‘older generation’ in Ostrovsky’s play is a mother-in-law (rather than a father-in-law), but erotic rivalry of the sort that we see in Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth is very clearly present. Act I scene 1 of the opera, in which a weak-willed son leaves home and a suspicious, strong-willed parent requires prostrations and vows of fidelity from the wife, has a direct parallel in Act II of The Storm (and no equivalent in Leskov).

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peripheral, light-hearted comic relief from the real drama that is soon to unfold in the soul of the heroine.

Act IV, however, is cast on an entirely different plane from the earlier scenes. There is no trace of buffoonery or comic stylisation; state authority, in the person of prison guards and the herd of convicts marching into Siberian exile and hard labour, is stern and ineluctable. What laughter there is has become exclusively ‘realistic’, that is, cruel and coarse. Competition for Sergei’s affections is simplified; the opera retains only Sonetka, the cruder of the two rivals in Leskov. And Katerina’s misplaced, enduring passion for Sergei becomes everyone’s target. The convicts celebrate with gleeful choruses each fresh humiliation she undergoes. Katerina is increasingly isolated on stage and, in a complementary move, spiritually elevated. Her conscience is finally given full voice.

At this point in Leskov’s story, Katerina, numbed by Sergei’s betrayal, glimpses in the black waves of the Volga the severed heads of her father-in-law, husband and nephew. But—recalling Shakespeare’s Macbeth in his final moments—Katerina cannot pray. She can remember only Sergei’s taunts about their past lovemaking, which confirm her in her despair. When Leskov’s heroine drowns herself and Sonetka, she does so in absolute fidelity to the terms she had laid down for Sergei after one of their early trysts: ‘If you are unfaithful to me, I will not part from you alive’ (Chap. 6). Shostakovich follows Leskov’s plot in the final scene, but in the operatic context such vengeful violence comes as a shock. Katerina’s inner life in the opera has developed in a direction out of keeping with Leskov’s narrative. The operatic heroine sings a final arioso (‘In the woods there is a lake’) which so hauntingly gives voice to her guilt that her subsequent death appears to be more self-punishment than revenge against her lover and rival.

This spiritual elevation of the heroine (which occurs not only at the end but throughout the opera) puts considerable strain on Leskov’s coolly detached and amoral tale. And yet in terms of its events, the opera—despite certain cuts—respects the basic contours of Leskov’s plot. The question of fidelity is complex, therefore, and has been variously resolved by the critics. We might begin by considering the status of Leskov’s tale at the time Shostakovich came upon it.

Despite the ideological embarrassment of Leskov’s work as a whole, ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ enjoyed a popular revival in the 1920s. A film was made of the tale in 1927. The story was reprinted in 1928 in the mass series ‘Inexpensive Library of Classics’, and two years later in a beautiful edition illustrated by the well-known artist, Boris Kustodieiev. By 1931, variants and parodies with Leskovian epigraphs were already making their appearance. Clearly the story combined many themes potentially attractive to the new Soviet mass market: a condemnation of the repressive world of the Russian merchant (the very capitalism that the Revolution had swept away), a call for woman’s liberation from

12 On the rediscovery of Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth’ around 1930, see L. Anninskii, Leskovskoe Ozerel’ye, 2nd expanded edn (Moscow, 1986), Chap. 2, 70–3, and Leskov (see n. 6), 19.
that world, and sufficiently graphic amounts of the violence, sex and murder necessary for a genuine bestseller.

Shostakovich was not alone, then, in his interest in Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth’. Still, for a post-revolutionary opera the tale was unorthodox enough to merit some frank talk in an editorial essay that prefaced the libretto issued for the 1934 Leningrad premiere. ‘How can such an opera be called “Soviet”?’ the editor asks. According to the theorists, Soviet opera should be broad in its topical and historical scope, heroic and public in its themes, and built on the mass choral scene supported by sober realistic recitative. ‘And now there appears a musical work by a Soviet composer devoted to narrow family events, to private fate, [with a source text] almost a hundred years old, a work with a singing musical style, a lyrical and chamber work.’ Yet thanks to the ‘April decision’ – he alludes to the 1932 Party Resolution that re-organised the arts, removing power from proletarian organisations and setting the stage for Socialist Realism – Shostakovich’s new opera can be considered authentically Soviet. Given the opera’s subsequent bitter history, this endorsement is not without irony. But these pre-1936 debates over the appropriateness and fidelity of Shostakovich’s opera merit some attention, however quickly they were overtaken by events; as steps in the translation and domestication of a borrowed theme, they fix in time a certain ideology and project its ideal readership.

One category of contemporary critic emphasised similarities in the treatment of the theme by Shakespeare, Leskov and Shostakovich. In a lengthy essay intended for audiences of the Leningrad premiere, Adrian Piotrovsky traces the transposition of Shakespeare’s cruel heroine (a power monger of ‘the bloody and passionate epoch of capitalist accumulation’ [p. 11]) through Leskov’s own vicious image, which reflected the latter writer’s ‘timid patriarchal ideals’ as a ‘fellow-traveller of fanatic reactionaries’ (p. 12). Piotrovsky dismisses all formal aspects of the work: the satiric sheath that Leskov’s narrator weaves around events, and its possible effect on the morality of the tale. But Shostakovich, fortunately, was able to unpack the true plot. Despite appearances, this plot is not erotic or (in a term preferred by the prim Stalinist press) ‘physiological’; it is a realistic story of human entrapment. Submitting Shostakovich to a curious misreading that in fact returns his version to Leskov, Piotrovsky insists that Katerina is a ‘self-willed, passionate and proud personality’ in legitimate rebellion against her world; therefore she experiences no guilt (pp. 13–14). The final convict scene contains ‘no bitterness, no pangs of an unclean conscience, but only sadness concentrated on a ruined life’ (p. 16).

Other early commentators who stressed similarity were more honest to the texts, and therefore more critical. In a lengthy analysis in *Sovetskaia muzyka*,

A. Ostretsov reprimanded Shostakovich for excessive fidelity to his source, for reproducing too conscientiously Leskov’s passive and socially inert view of the world. The pathetic heroine of that world could be embittered by her life, Ostretsov remarked, but she could not break out of that world and act; Katerina never gets beyond a ‘paralysed lament’. \(^{16}\)

Since that time, however, critical commentary has stressed the opera’s departure from Leskov. On the negative side, several Soviet critics – reviewing the laundered 1963 version of the opera – noted with displeasure the ‘tormenting’ quality of the whole and the ‘superfluous’, unmotivated murder-plus-suicide of the final scene. \(^{17}\) Defenders have been obliged to develop ingenious, even Byzantine arguments in order to justify Katerina’s villainous acts while at the same time demonstrating her moral growth. Alla Bogdanova, for example, interprets the heroine as an emblem of human openness: ‘Katerina Izmailova is neither a “bad” nor a “good” person, she is above all a person changing in front of our eyes’, and it is this very ‘process of development’ that Shostakovich celebrates. \(^{18}\) According to Bogdanova, the heroine’s flexible, rich and relatively leitmotif-free musical line reveals that Katerina, when alone and isolated from her corrupting co-actors on stage, is pure lyric and – by extension – pure at heart. Only in the presence of others does her sensitive nature absorb their musical colour – and, we should assume, their criminal inclinations (pp. 165–7). Other reviewers, more politically cautious, have asked if Leskov’s nasty plot can have any relevance to the officially optimistic Soviet 1930s. It can, one critic wrote ominously in 1966, only if Katerina’s crimes are seen as freeing gestures that liberate her from social depersonalisation and oppression; her murders ‘link the opera organically with the humanistic traditions of Russian realism’. \(^{19}\) Katerina Izmailova, ironic variant on Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, has thus come to embody both sinner and saint, both passive victim and political revolutionary.

Thus we arrive at our third, and in many ways most interesting, category of divergence: authorial point of view. We recall that Leskov subtitled his ‘Lady Macbeth’ an ocherk or ‘sketch’. By the second half of the nineteenth century, this term had come to designate a mix of eyewitness reportage and fiction,

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\(^{16}\) A. Ostretsov, ‘Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda’, Sovetskaja muzyka, 6 (1933), 17–18.
\(^{17}\) See, for example, Givi Ordzhonikidze, ‘Vesna tvorcheskoi zrelosti’, Sovetskaja muzyka, 9 (1966), 46; N. Shumskaja, ‘Traditsii i novatorstvo v opere Shostakovicha Katerina Izmailova’, Muzyka i sovremennost’, vyp. 3 (Moscow, 1965), 114.
\(^{18}\) A. Bogdanova, Opery i balety Shostakovicha (Moscow, 1979), 146–7. In her book-length analysis of the opera, Bogdanova traces the interaction between Katerina’s narrated fate and the others’ musical themes. Through most of the opera, Bogdanova suggests, Katerina is redeemed to the extent that she avoids contact with her environment; her musical line does not reflect others’ motifs. But at the end, Katerina purifies herself by having her fate (death by drowning) associated with the opening musical theme of Act IV, a theme depicting the suffering of convicts and, by extension, of all Russia. A. Bogdanova, ‘Katerina Izmailova’ D. D. Shostakovicha (putevoditel’) (Moscow, 1968), 84–5.
\(^{19}\) Ordzhonikidze (see n. 17), 40.
often characterised by a garrulous, gossipy narrator of humble origin who 'sketched in' a story amid many digressions and indulgences. Leskov appears to have drawn on this tradition for his 'Lady Macbeth', but with some ironic intent – akin, perhaps, to the travesty implied in the evocation of a Shakespearean prototype for his provincial heroine. The tone of Leskov's narrator is both 'folk-like' (that is, oral and coloured by folk expressions) and at the same time elevated, distanced; the tale is told from the outside, efficiently but sparingly, without relish.\textsuperscript{20} The narrator rarely reproduces an inner thought as direct discourse, assumes no responsibility for the tale, and demonstrates little sympathy for (or even interest in) the heroine.

How are we to understand the ethical stance of this narrator, and how might that stance affect the genre of the tale? Leskov's biographer K. A. Lantz suggests that 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk' was Leskov's answer to a charge against Russian folk culture made by one of Leskov's own characters in a novel completed the previous year, \textit{No Way Out}.\textsuperscript{21} In that novel, a doctor tells the story of a peasant woman who takes an axe and matter-of-factly murders her unfaithful husband and his mistress. Among those who hear this tale is the schoolteacher Zarnitsyn, who refuses to consider it 'dramatic':

You can't present any moral struggle here because it is all so coarse and abrupt. There's no struggle at all; the matter is simply decided. When the everyday life of a people is like that, it has no drama of its own, nor can it have any; such a people have criminal cases, but certainly no drama.\textsuperscript{22}

The doctor objects that there is indeed sufficient drama in Russian life, if only artists knew the proper forms for talking about it: 'You say that uneducated people have no dramatic conflict, but I will demonstrate that such conflict exists, and exists uniquely for every people [...] even though it's awkward to present in the theatre' (p. 181). According to Lantz (p. 45), Leskov might have intended his 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk' to be one such experiment in native, non-theatrical forms of expressing dramatic conflict.

In light of this thesis we might briefly consider the difference between Leskov's 'sketch' and its dramatic – or in this case its Shakespearean – subtext. The

\textsuperscript{20} As Leskov himself explained to A. I. Faresov, he took great care as a writer to reflect the social class and characteristics of his heroes in their speech patterns, but 'from my own person I speak through the language of the ancient folktales and through church-folk language, in purely literary speech'. A. I. Faresov, \textit{Protiv techeniia} (St Petersburg, 1904), 274. This passage is explicated by Boris Eikhenbaum in his 1927 essay on Leskov, 'Leskov and Contemporary Prose', trans. Martin P. Rice, in \textit{Russian Literature Triquarterly}, 11 (Winter, 1975), 215.


\textsuperscript{22} Nikolai Leskov, \textit{Nekuda [No Way Out]}, in N. S. Leskov, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii}, II (Moscow, 1956), 180. Lantz cites this passage on p. 44; my translation differs somewhat. In the novel this discussion continues for several pages, with the doctor defending the right of the Russian people to their own sort of drama and Zarnitsyn insisting that 'the educated people of all nations share a common sense of what is dramatic in life' (p. 182).
primary matter of all dramatic dialogue (including operatic dialogue and other performed verbal art) is direct discourse: words enunciated, unmediated, attached to actors in the drama. Within a given plot, however, the ratio of spoken words to performed deeds can vary widely. For Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, the shifting of this word-to-deed ratio as the drama unfolds constitutes the special terror of her role. At first her functions are simple: to talk Macbeth into the deed, and, on either side of the murders, to persuade him of their necessity by appealing to a sort of moral logic (‘Thou wouldst not play false/And yet wouldst wrongly win’). By the sleepwalking scene, however, words have lost the power to motivate or justify deeds; Lady Macbeth’s madness and off-stage suicide are (in the economy of the drama) pretty small fare, upstaged, even in Macbeth’s own mind, by the coming confrontation with Birnam Wood.

In recasting this famous plot, Leskov takes only the first and confident phase of Lady Macbeth’s stage life, the Lady as handmaiden to murder. By shifting the genre from drama to ‘sketch’ and handing the narration over to a laconic storyteller, Leskov is spared the task of relating the heroine’s words and unspoken thoughts. We have only her deeds, which are committed against the unchanging background of her sexual appetite and appear to generate no guilt. If we assume, along with Lantz, that the debate between doctor and schoolteacher in No Way Out motivated Leskov to seek ‘native, folk forms of dramatic expression’ in ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’, then the result of the experiment is, morally, pretty grim.

By the time Leskov wrote his tale, it was commonplace for Russian writers to invoke and domesticate Shakespearean characters as part of a general task of national self-definition. Turgenev, for example, had written stories with such titles as ‘King Lear of the Steppes’ and ‘A Prince Hamlet of the Shchigrov District’, in addition to an influential essay (1860) comparing Hamlet and Don Quixote as two spiritual options for the Russian intellectual. Now there was a Russian Lady Macbeth, from Mtsensk rather than Glamis or Cawdor. What seemed to mark her Russianness was the absence of any dramatic maturation, or of anything like a conscience. The horror is induced in the audience, not on stage, and whatever inner voice the heroine might have had is undeveloped or silenced.23

When Shostakovich transposed the story to opera in 1932, that silence was his first target. What had to be changed was precisely the immobility and stylised

23 In a sense, the text of Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth’ is all stage direction. In the words of one literary critic, ‘this story, as opposed to Leskov’s best works, contains no religious ideas which among all the moral lapses and evil doings – renew and revive the souls of the characters portrayed. It is as if the souls of his heroes do not participate in the course of dramatic action, which is described [solely] by external features. The image of the Russian Lady Macbeth, from the moment that she is drawn into her first crime, seems motionless and [thus] produces a melodramatic impression.’ A. L. Volynskii (ps. Akim Lvovich Flekser), N. S. Leskov (Peterburg, 1923), 117 (repr. of N. S. Leskov: Kriticheskii ocherk [St Petersburg, 1898]).
outer shell that characterised both Leskov’s narrator and his heroine. The opera would restore the Shakespearean depth and evolution of character that Leskov had so deliberately pared away. The lyricism of Leskov’s narrator – which had been directed at Katerina in the spirit of lyric irony, making her glossy and monstrous – would be stripped of its ironic potential and reinvested in the heroine herself. ‘In opera people don’t talk, they sing’, Shostakovich wrote in Sovetskoe iskusstvo in 1933. ‘Consequently, the text must be a singing one, it must give the composer maximum possibility for freely flowing song.’ This affirmation of an old-fashioned opera aesthetic appears to be a retreat from the abrasive declamation, vocal pyrotechnics and cacophonous wit of Shostakovich’s first opera, The Nose. But the new criterion of ‘freely-flowing song’ in this second opera applies almost exclusively to Katerina’s role. In a deliberate subversion of Leskov’s narrator, Shostakovich creates for her a passionately lyrical musical profile that continually undermines her criminal record. The orchestra is always on Katerina’s side, functioning as the narrator and conscience of the tale, lending its intonation – in particular the famous symphonic passacaglia between Acts IV and V – to render the heroine’s acts of violence pathetic and defensible. The characters surrounding her remain Gogolian and one-dimensional, either trivial or evil. Their words match their deeds, and both match their music, which is dissonant and grotesque in the service of what the Russians call razoblachenie, an exposure of moral corruption. When the others do become lyrical, melodious or romantic, it is a sign of their insincerity – and strident interruptions from the orchestra punctuate that fact. Uncorrupted ‘freely flowing song’ is the prerogative of the murderess alone. ‘It’s not worth debating at length how I justify all these acts’, Shostakovich wrote for the audience of the 1934 premiere, ‘these acts are much more justified by the

24 ‘[Leskov] finds no grounds at all on which to justify her [Katerina], not only morally but even psychologically’, Shostakovich wrote in 1933. ‘I am treating Ekaterina Izmailova as a complex, whole, tragic nature. This is a loving woman, a woman who feels deeply, in no way sentimental.’ D. D. Shostakovich, ‘“Ekaterina Izmailova”: Avtor ob opere’, Sovetskoe iskusstvo, 14 December 1933, as cited in D. Shostakovich, O vremeni i o sebe: 1926–1975 (Moscow, 1980), 35–6.
25 D. Shostakovich, ‘Plakat’ i smeiat’ sia’, Sovetskoe iskusstvo, 3 March 1933 (see n. 24), 34.
26 This move in Shostakovich from musical ‘realism’ to a more conventional napevnost’ or ‘song-like quality’ closely resembles the creative evolution of his great predecessor (and personal hero) Modest Musorgsky a half-century earlier, after his radical experiment in setting Gogol’s prose to music. Shostakovich’s several affectionately parodic quotations from Musorgsky’s Boris in his Lady Macbeth suggest that he might have had this parallel evolution in mind.
Two clear textual references to Boris are: (1) the workers’ chorus in Act I scene 1, singing a pseudo-lament over the departure of Zinovy Borisovich to the words, ‘Na kogo ty nas pokidaesh’ (an equally ironised song to the same text is sung by the crowds around Novodevichii Monastery in the Prologue of Boris Godunov), and (2) Sergei’s aside in Act II scene 5, when Katerina wakens him in bed to whisper of her husband’s return: ‘Vot tebe, babushka, i Yuriev den!’ (the folk expression Grigory uses in the Inn Scene after the Hostess informs him that ‘someone has escaped from Moscow’ and the police are erecting barriers at the border).
musical material, for it is my opinion that in an operatic work, music plays the main, leading, decisive role.28

Shostakovich’s provocative idea of ‘musical justification’ deserves some expansion. In a temporal narrative, the very idea of justification implies an act, perhaps guilt for that act, certainly responsibility for it. But Shostakovich seems to imply here that an orchestral ‘narrator’, freed from the constraints of the word (and of the event as well), need not be bound by justice, logic or ethics. Music knows its truths in a different way, knows something that mere acts of biography do not. Boris Asafiev probably had this in mind when he wrote of the 1934 premiere:

Without losing sight of the word for a single minute, Shostakovich is nevertheless not distracted by externally descriptive naturalistic tendencies: he does not imitate the meaning of words with his music, he does not illustrate the word but rather symphonises it, as if unfolding in music the emotion insufficiently expressed by words.29

Asafiev’s ‘symphonised word’ addresses a familiar, indeed an ancient problem: the insufficiency of words to express music and of music to express words. For our purposes the symphonised word might be analysed as a variety of polyphonic or ‘double-voiced’ discourse.30 As such it plays various roles in a texted musical composition, three of which might be distinguished in Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth. It can stylise a character, reinforcing with music the logic of that character’s thoughts and deeds (a technique used with the comic police force in Act III). In the other direction, the symphonised word can parody or undermine, putting the lie to a character’s acts (both Zinovy Borisovich and Sergei are parodied in this way, with orchestral crudities interrupting their sentimental words and musical lines). Or it can countermand the logical effect of a character’s action, by allowing actions not to add up or even to be explained away. As for this final ‘rehabilitating’ category of symphonised word, Katerina is the opera’s sole beneficiary.

‘Freely flowing song’, then, is Katerina’s domain, and she sings in opposition to her environment. She casts her lyrical confessions against the crudeness of her world, and against the parody embodied by the other characters. The heroine becomes most lyrical and victimised, in fact, precisely at the point where the most crimes have accumulated, in Act IV. Through the symphonised word and in defiance of its own source text, the opera enters the mainstream Russian tradition of purification through crime – and salvation through suffering caused

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30 I draw here on Mikhail Bakhtin’s typology for ‘double-voiced words’ as laid out in Chap. 5 of his Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics [1929, revised 1963], ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), 185–200. Although Bakhtin applied the terms ‘polyphonic’ and ‘contrapuntal’ to Dostoevsky’s novels, there is no indication that he had any strict musical analogy in mind.
by crime. To be sure, this experience is not fully expressible in words nor reducible to logic. But music can argue the case on a plane transcending both.

Misreading his Shakespeare, one Soviet critic concluded that Shostakovich’s Katerina was not so much Lady Macbeth as Macbeth himself. Shostakovich, apparently, knew better. In his 1934 essay he reports the opinion of a fellow musician who had attended a rehearsal of the opera:

The opera should not be called Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District but either Juliet of Mtsensk District or Desdemona of Mtsensk, since Lady Macbeth is an energetic woman. But it’s the other way around in your opera; this is a soft, suffering woman who arouses not terror but sympathy, pity, kindly feelings.

Shostakovich concluded with satisfaction that his aim had to some degree been realised.

There is a curious footnote to Shostakovich’s intent regarding Katerina Izmailova. In 1981, the emigre musicologist Solomon Volkov, soon to gain fame as editor (and – most likely – co-author) of Shostakovich’s purported memoirs, interviewed Mstislav Rostropovich on a wide range of musical issues. Rostropovich mentioned that Shostakovich had willingly agreed to do a third version of Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, inasmuch as the 1963 revision was, according to Rostropovich, ‘not so much corrected as simplified’. The problem was the character of the heroine.

Who is Katerina Izmailova? Is she, if you will excuse me, a swine or not a swine? Of course, a swine. She murdered one man, then another. And there’s basically no room for sympathy for her. But Shostakovich is constantly sympathising with Katerina. She has committed murder, she’s being driven into hard labour, and the choir sings about ‘heartless gendarmes’. [...] Shostakovich calls on us to pity the killer. [...] Did Shostakovich hate the social system so much that he justified a murderer? [...] The way I look at it, Shostakovich showed us a human anomaly.

These reservations concerning the character of Lady Macbeth sum up half a century of questions.

The ‘human anomaly’ of Shostakovich’s Katerina can now be considered in terms of the larger question of genre. Russian creative artists have long delighted in excluding their works from the generic categories accepted in Western cultures, and Shostakovich is no exception. He introduced his new opera as a generic hybrid, ‘tragic-satirical’. Some have been more conservative, calling

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31 Ordzhonikidze (see n. 17), 45.
32 Shostakovich (see n. 28), 7.
Caryl Emerson

it an ‘opera-tragedy refracted through everyday material’; others, emphasising the historical verisimilitude of the final act and its ties with Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*, prefer the category of epic-social drama. Ivan Sollertinsky, seeing in the opera not so much an evocation of the past as a hatred of the past, has described it as an alternation between the tragic and the grotesque.

The diversity of these labels is in part due to Shostakovich’s skilful dis-integrating of his source text. What Leskov had bound together through his narrator Shostakovich unbinds, achieving a separation (both musical and lexical) between Katerina and her parodied environment, undercutting her criminal acts with lyricism, and allowing her conscience to develop – although not to the point where it can forestall a final murder. Katerina’s inner moral life does evolve, albeit quite independently of her acts. But it evolves in a vacuum. Excepting the animal legitimacy of the lovemaking scenes, the world around the heroine is either unalterably evil (her father-in-law, the grim reality of hard labour) or unalterably ludicrous (the buffoonery of the police). These two worlds co-exist uneasily in the opera, and only Katerina’s integrity, itself an unstable quality, binds them together.

It is customary to stress the difference between *The Nose*, Shostakovich’s first opera, and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, his second and last. Indeed, the composer himself made a point of doing so. But the genre of ‘tragic-satirical opera’ might be easier to appreciate if we keep some lessons of *The Nose* in mind. As Shostakovich surely sensed, Gogol’s story is a gift for modernist opera: its narrator is never in control of his text, and at crucial moments a fog descends, ‘no one knows what happened next’. To reflect that discontinuity, Shostakovich employed a number of disorientating devices – including misplaced tessitura, an *entr’acte* for unpitched percussion, and cacophonous mob scenes in which, if properly performed, all voices are incomprehensible. The point of the narration is that narration knows no fixed points.

If Gogol provided the material for a tale that could not be told, then Leskov’s story, in contrast, is powerful precisely because the narrator remains as unreflecting as the heroine. His tale, as befits the notes to a court case, is dry and tightly controlled. Nowhere does the narrator invite the reader to investigate causes or discontinuities. This cold, matter-of-fact cohesion gives his tale an impenetrable sheen; surely it was this tone, successfully sustained, that made even the author’s ‘hair stand on end’. The opera embodied a very different aesthetic. In an interview for the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva*, Shostakovich asserted that ‘no artist, whether writer, painter or composer, can treat his characters indifferently. He must either love them passionately, or hate them

35 Ordzhonikidze (see n. 17), 40.
36 For more discussion of epic-social and other mixed genres, see Khentova, *Shostakovich: Zhizni i tvorchestvo* (Leningrad, 1985), I, 290–6; Bogdanova (see n. 18), 195–202.
passionately’.38 Shostakovich’s musical realisation of Gogol’s narrator in his first opera contrasts with his subversion of Leskov’s narrator in his second.

The composer’s own generic label, ‘tragic-satirical’, might be understood in several ways. Is this an alternation between tragedy and grotesque, as Sollertinsky has argued? Or might it refer to the tragedy of satire, the fact that acts of murder are committed to the accompaniment of frivolous galops and movie chase music – and then exposed randomly, absurdly, by drunken peasants on the prowl for vodka and by police buffoons? Or, in a final paraphrase, might the term suggest a satire on tragedy? Because one of the insidious aspects of satiric laughter – as Shostakovich surely realised in The Nose – is that it cannot be contained.39 In an opera like Lady Macbeth, with a parodic or mocking chorus in almost every scene, Katerina’s lyricism must be walled off and made monologic. It takes the massive shift of the final act – the reality of justice, penal servitude and utter loss – to mute the ironising effects of the preceding scenes and make possible the redemption of Katerina before her death. Until that moment she is, as it were, an embedded genre in her own opera; we cannot take her environment seriously enough to believe that it has victimised her.

To return to the question with which this essay opened: where might Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth fit in the larger context of Russian cultural history? Librettists building on well-known plots have a certain freedom, for they need not tell the whole story: they can presume that the audience is familiar with the earlier or original versions and may construct their operatic text in dialogue with those versions. By the late 1920s, Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ had been resurrected in print, illustrated by a master, and transposed into film; it was on its way to becoming a ‘classic’. But since Leskov’s tale – or at least his title – was itself an ironic variant on an earlier (and much more authoritative) work, Soviet readings of Leskov pulled in their wake rereadings of Shakespeare. ‘Reducing’ the tale to a libretto in fact worked to expand it, to liberate new potential in it.

In this connection one might mention four possible transforming mechanisms,
or filters, that function in the generation of versions and ‘creative departures’. These filters affect the way composers and librettists approach a source – and serve to realise that text, distort it or transfigure it.

One such filter might be called ‘technological’. Here, a literary text is re-conceptualised with the help of a later art-form – one either impossible or unavailable in the era of the source text. Take, for example, the question of Gogol and music. The nineteenth century witnessed many persuasive musical settings of certain sides of Gogol’s talent. Especially popular among musicians were Gogol’s lyrical, quasi-magical Ukrainian folktales. ‘May Night’ and ‘Christmas Eve’, for example, had received half a dozen amateur operatic settings before Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky produced their now-famous versions in the last third of the century. In the 1860s and 1870s, the more abrasively comic and misogynist side of Gogol found its realisation in Musorgsky’s experiments with declamatory musical language (his trial setting of Act 1 of Marriage, and his scenes for The Fair at Sorochintsy). But an operatic embodiment of the grotesque, surreal aspect of Gogol required a twentieth-century musical syntax and – quite possibly – the aesthetics of film. It could be argued that the first opera technologically competent to realise the irrationality, the narrative non-sequiturs and the montage-like fragmentation of Gogol’s Petersburg visions was Shostakovich’s Nose.

A second category of filter might be called ‘political’, and here Soviet culture is woefully rich in examples. Most famous, perhaps, is Prokofiev’s War and Peace – an opera conceived during the Second World War and, for all its enormous effectiveness as national spectacle, one that embodies the absolute ideological opposite of Tolstoy’s understanding of heroism, patriotism and the workings of war in history. Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth has also been subjected to a political filter involving Leo Tolstoy. One of the most awkward aspects of the opera for the critics (in both its original and revised versions) has been the absence of a positive hero. State authority is mercilessly satirised, the clergy is lampooned, and the convicts – that potential pool of political resistance – are presented as passive at best, degenerate at worst. Only Katerina has energy, and she uses it to fornicate and murder. Faced with this moral wilderness, Asafiev constructed an ingenious defence of the heroine as a polemic against Tolstoyan teachings of non-violent resistance to evil. ‘Only Soviet musical dramaturgy’, he wrote in 1934, ‘could get rid of this admiration for female non-resistance, and, what is more, could justify [the very concept of] resistance, albeit in a harsh, frenzied, erotic refraction.’

A third filter through which source texts pass might loosely be called the ‘national tradition’ that accumulates around certain themes. Here complex

41 Asafiev (see n. 29), 316.
'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District'
dialogues are possible. In Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth*, the traditional complex of themes most frequently invoked is that of zhenskaia dolia [woman’s lot]. By Leskov’s time – that is, the 1860s and 1870s – Russian art was celebrating this theme in various blends of political and domestic martyrdom. There were the heroic ‘wives of the Decembrists’ who loyally followed their husbands to Siberia in the 1820s. With the urbanisation of the Russian Empire came the virtuous inner-city prostitutes of Nekrasov’s verses and of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and the trapped wives of Russia’s still-medieval merchant class. Most famous among these merchant portraits was Ostrovsky’s drama *The Storm* – with its tyrannical mother-in-law, spineless husband and desperately unhappy, guilty wife Katerina Kabanova, who confesses to her family her love affair with the nephew of a local merchant and then throws herself into the Volga.

Not surprisingly, Russian writers were soon creating tough parodic counter-models to these virtuous female prototypes and their melodramatic plots. The Katerina Izmailova in Leskov’s ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ is clearly one such countertype,42 and the Katerina Maslova of Tolstoy’s last novel *Resurrection* (1899) is another. When Shostakovich took up Leskov’s tale in the early 1930s, however, he was clearly influenced as much by the Russian tradition of chaste female martyrdom – and by the recent Soviet expropriation of ‘Lady Macbeth’ for that tradition – as by Leskov’s parody of the tradition. The changes Shostakovich made in the character of his heroine were all in the direction of trapped innocence and ‘purification through suffering’, precisely those traits that Leskov had excised from his own tale.

The conservative cast of Shostakovich’s opera was also influenced by operatic precedent. In 1921 Leos Janacek had completed his *Katya Kabanova* based on Ostrovsky’s *The Storm*, and this Czech opera was completely in the sacrificial, self-abnegating tradition of its Russian source. The desperately sad aria that Janacek’s Katya Kabanova sings before her suicide, calling alternately on her lover and on death, recalls Shostakovich’s Katerina in the final scene, where, alone and abused, she sings of a forest and a lake where the water is as black as her conscience.43 The Katerina of Leskov’s tale had no such repentant moment.

A fourth and final filter is more literary, and concerns the way a nation’s classics are ‘read’ through later writers who have left a defining mark on their cultural period. Soviet music historians, for example, have proposed two ‘lines’

42 For more on the Leskov–Ostrovsky connection (with interesting information on the contemporary lubok [popular woodcut] series ‘About the Merchant’s Wife and the Clerk’), see V. Guminskii, ‘Organicheskoe vzaimodeistvie (Ot “Ledi Makbet” . . . k Soborianam)’, in V mire Leskova: Sbornik statei (Moscow, 1983), 238–47.

along which Tchaikovsky transposed Pushkin into opera. The first is the ‘Dostoevsky line’, which passes the ice-cold hero of Pushkin’s ‘Queen of Spades’ through Raskolnikov to achieve the melodramatic madness and suicide of the operatic Hermann. The ‘Turgenev line’, in contrast, features domesticity, self-discipline and patient longing – a filter that all but screens out Pushkin’s Byronic hero Eugene Onegin, transferring the emotional centre of the opera to Tatyana. Attempts to apply the same sort of lens to Shostakovich have proved disappointing, however, perhaps because of the greater complexity of his mixed-genre opera. In an interesting but ultimately unpersuasive essay, Solomon Volkov proposes a Dostoevsky filter for both *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth*. The fact of staging and singing removes the ‘absolute fantastic’ in Gogol’s story, Volkov points out; Shostakovich replaces it with criminality and mass psychosis, elements not from Gogol but from Dostoevsky. In *Lady Macbeth* as well, Shostakovich ‘passes his heroes through the police machine’ (p. 210) – thus rehabilitating them, and making Katerina less a criminal than a victim of society.

Such attempts to see *Lady Macbeth* through a Dostoevsky filter are rather common in the critical literature on the opera. They represent an intriguing – although to my mind an incorrect – juxtaposition of themes. If we remain, as Volkov does, on the level of plot (and in particular on the pathos of the final scene), the presence of Dostoevsky is indeed marked – first in Leskov’s text and, through it, in the libretto. It was to Dostoevsky, then editor of the Petersburg journal *Epokha*, that Leskov submitted his ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk’ District, and the tale appeared in that journal’s January 1865 issue. Dostoevsky had returned from prison camp and Siberian exile only five years earlier; he had already brought out his own quasi-autobiographical memoirs, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, and Leskov’s intuitions about criminal life apparently impressed him. Shostakovich, in turn, contemplating his own Act IV, most likely knew of Janáček’s 1928 opera based on Dostoevsky’s memoirs, *Z mrtveho domu* (*From the House of the Dead*).

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44 Boris Asafiev and Abram Gozenpud have advanced similar theses. For a critique and expansion of their work, see the discussion in B. Ya. Anshakov, ‘O nekotorykh chertakh khudozhestvennogo mira P. I. Chaikovskogo i osobennostiakh pereomysleniia pushkinskikh obrazakh v opere Pikovia dama’, in P. I. Chaikovskii i russkaia literatura (Izhevsk, 1980), 125–8.


46 See, for example, Khentova (see n. 36), 288; Ordzhonikidze (see n. 17), 40 (where the Dostoevsky connection in *Lady Macbeth* is found, unconvincingly, in the question both are presumed to pose: can one build happiness by criminal means?); a link is also suggested by Asafiev (see n. 29), 313, in his discussion of Katerina Izmailova’s fate as ‘the intensive growth of a woman-personality through involuntary crime’.

47 The story appeared in *Epokha* under the title ‘Ledi Makbet nashego uezda’ [*Lady Macbeth of our District*], and was signed by Leskov’s pen name of the 1860s, M. Stebnitsky.

Several decades later, in a letter to the prison specialist D. A. Linev (Dalin), Leskov remarked: ‘I wrote the whole thing “from my head”, without having observed any of it in real life, but the late Dostoevsky found that I had reproduced reality quite truthfully.’ Leskov’s letter of 5 March 1888, cited and discussed in Andrei Leskov, *Zbizz’ Nikolaia Leskova*, I (Moscow, 1984), 131.
These biographical and textual overlaps do not, however, constitute a persuasive 'Dostoevsky connection' in Shostakovich's opera. The tracking down of such plot parallels can in fact distract from larger and more legitimate juxtapositions. Let us consider from this perspective the central issue of Katerina's guilt. In defending his heroine as an energetic and talented woman perishing amid patriarchal cruelties, Shostakovich had to present her—paradoxically—as passive, as a blameless victim of her environment. The contrast with Dostoevsky could not be more acute. Throughout his mature life Dostoevsky tirelessly polemicised against those who (like Shostakovich in this opera) insisted that 'environment is to blame' for individual crime. The mark of a Dostoevskian work, after all, is not its setting or sequence of events, but its philosophical stance on human responsibility. Musorgsky's Boris Godunov is 'Dostoevskian' in this sense: there is choice, and thus there is guilt. Shostakovich, however, follows an easier path to his heroine's repentance. At the end of the opera his Katerina does indeed feel guilt (as Leskov's does not), but this is, ultimately, a rhetorical gesture. Her dominant stance has been that of lyrical and alienated victim. At her most repentant, she regrets that she was forced to murder; by her verbal laments but most of all by her music, the listener feels that her acts are somehow incidental, that her environment drove her to them, that her inner life still strives for purity. Whatever happens to her, she is not to blame. This might be a legitimate moral position, but it finds its absolute refutation in Dostoevsky.

In the broader context of its traditional Russian themes, then, the opera can be seen as defending the virtuous martyrdom implicit in a 'woman's lot' against attempts to parody that tradition. Those parodies, we should note, need not diminish women: on the contrary, they create potential for choice, moral responsibility and genuine change. It is a curious coincidence that both Leskov and Shostakovich, from very different perspectives, planned and then failed to complete ambitious cycles on the fate of Russian women. Leskov projected a cycle of twelve sketches, to be drawn from the life of women of various social classes. Shostakovich projected a trilogy (later expanded to a tetralogy) 'dedicated to the position of women in various epochs in Russia', which would feature heroic women from the anti-tsarist resistance and culminate in a Soviet female construction-worker on a Dnieper dam. After the political fiasco surrounding Lady Macbeth, Shostakovich never wrote another opera.

These four filters—technological, political, cultural-thematic and literary—can work great changes on a source text reconceptualized in a different time and medium. To be sure, operatic transpositions (and creative arts in general) cannot be analysed through such 'filters' alone; the discussion here has not even touched on the purely musical idiom and its own historical traditions.

48 The most famous fictional expressions of this conviction are Crime and Punishment and the second half of The Brothers Karamazov; for the same argument in essay form, see 'The Milieu', Grazhdanin, 1873, no. 2, in F. M. Dostoevsky, The Diary of a Writer, trans. Boris Brasol (Santa Barbara, 1979), 9–22.

49 'Tragediia-satira', interview (see n. 24); for the expansion into a tetralogy, see D. Shostakovich, 'God posle "Ledi Makbeta"', in Vercherniiaia krasnaia gazeta, 14 January 1935.
This essay’s task has been more modest: to make a case for the complexity of stories in ostensibly simplified, ‘reduced’ libretto form.

In creating his Lady Macbeth, Shostakovich was looking to the future of Soviet opera. But his source text, on a pre-revolutionary theme, had its own, already complex, history of allusions, and Leskov’s narrator did not conceal his ironic attitude towards both the plot and the genre of his tale. Shostakovich transposed Katerina Izmailova to save her from Leskov’s irony. He ‘ironised the irony’, as it were, on the (not unreasonable) Formalist premise that if parody of a tragedy produces satire, then parody of a satire can produce tragedy.50

But the tragic-satirical opera that resulted is itself complex and internally contradictory, yielding little of the ‘unity of effect’ that tragedy conventionally requires. Unlike the mixing of styles in Shakespearean drama – to evoke our original subtext – the mixing of pathetic and grotesque in this opera releases Katerina from all serious moral obligations. She is a tragic victim, but the victim of an environment so musically trivialised that for most of the opera we cannot take its threat seriously. Her criminal acts are real, but responsibility for them is not allowed to distort the lyrical purity of her line – so her inner life, like that of Leskov’s Katerina (but quite unlike that of their Shakespearean prototype), does not register change. It cannot learn or grow, but can only express its immediate need and immediate grief. Macbeth’s request to his wife’s physician that he ‘minister to a mind diseased, / Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow’ has no place in Leskov’s parody of Shakespeare, nor in Shostakovich’s counter-parody.

Here is where the orchestra, with its potential to ‘symphonise the word’, is so successful in its function as narrator. In its own way the orchestra is as successful as Leskov’s cool storyteller, although it works to opposite effect. Leskov condemns his heroine by stylising her outer surface, denying the reader access to anything but her appetites and the record of her murders. She is of a piece with her world. Shostakovich’s orchestral narrator, on the contrary, rehabilitates the heroine by continually revealing lyrical inner surfaces, hidden virtues that cannot be reflected in the outer deed. Where Leskov’s Katerina cannot be saved, Shostakovich’s Katerina does not need to be saved. Both images are static; in both short story and opera, the narrator’s primary function is to pre-determine the moral fate of the heroine. Thus, for all the dynamism of its music and the richness of its source texts, Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk does not succeed in returning its heroine to Shakespeare – which is to say, to a genuine struggle over unethical acts and their consequences. Despite the later scandals, Katerina Izmailova could qualify as a hero of the socialist-realist stage. And this, perhaps, is the most curious irony in this much-transposed tale.