Boris Godunoff, the Russian opera by Modest Musorgskii (1839-1881), is based largely on the Russian play of the same name by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), itself largely based on the now discredited historical account by Nikolai Karamzin (Ni-ko-LAI Ka-ram-ZEEN) (1766-1826) in volumes 10 and 11 of Karamzin’s History of the Russian State. The historical account, play, and opera tell the story of the coronation, reign, and death of Boris Godunoff (1552-1605), a “good” tsar with a tragic flaw: his ascension to the throne by means of murder.

Most historians today deem Boris innocent of the murder of the tsar’s young half-brother, a possible heir to the throne, but both Pushkin and Musorgskii were following the conclusions of their times. Therefore, they depicted a character tormented by guilt, a character on whom they could have based a tragedy in the classical Greek sense. However, the author and the composer chose not to work in that form.

In Greek tragedies, the characters take themselves, each other, and their situations absolutely seriously; they experience no ironic distance. The audience is likewise expected to experience no distancing effect, but rather to empathize with the characters. Comedies, on the other hand, deliberately insert an ironic distance between characters and audience. Even when not overtly funny, they are ironic, that is, comedic in the Brechtian sense.

The translator of the opera must be ever cognizant of the shifting balance between the tragic and the ironic, the sad and the funny, while simultaneously maintaining an overall tone into which these elements fit.
However much the audience may sympathize with a character, it also judges him or her.

Musorgskii’s operatic panorama includes many characters who cannot be viewed with anything other than ironic distance, and who view Boris himself through cynical eyes: drunk vagabond monks, hopelessly inept policemen, and the know-nothing obedient chorus. In this, Musorgskii takes his tone from the play by Pushkin, who at first called his work a comedy. (See Note 3 for details.) Consequently, Boris, who takes himself quite seriously, is nonetheless distanced from the audience by means of these framing views of him. The audience may be sympathetic to Boris, and may even momentarily identify with him, but largely views him with detachment. A translator of the opera must therefore be ever cognizant of the shifting balance between the tragic and the ironic, the sad and the funny, while simultaneously maintaining an overall tone into which these elements fit.

A Vagabond Monk, Patriotic and Comical

In Pushkin’s play, the character Varlaam (var-la-AM) sings a comic folk song about a monk in Kazan who meets some old women and shuts his cowl tight. He then meets some young brides and lifts his cowl up a little. Finally, he meets some pretty young maids, throws off his cowl and tells it to “Get lost!” Pushkin assumed that everyone knew the folk song in question and simply wrote, “Varlaam strikes up a song: ‘As It Was in the Town of Kazan.’” Musorgskii and the person who assisted him were confused about the song Pushkin referred to, and substituted another one which required revisions of its first lines in order to conform with Pushkin’s instructions.6 That is why Varlaam sings, not about women, but about the great victory over the Tartars in Kazan in 1552 by Ivan the Terrible. Here are some of the stanzas of the song in our English translation:

In Kazan, when the Tartar horde was humbled,
Tsar Ivan sat and feasted in the rubble.
No more would those savage Tartars spill the blood of Russian martyrs now that Ivan had won.

...Head on shoulder, stood Ivan in thought.
Full of rage, he was ready for the battle to be fought.
Said Ivan, “Bring me the gunner crews, men who know the way to set a fuse, and we cannot lose!”

Smoke rose high from the fuses in the powder casks.
Gunners braced themselves against the coming blasts.
Down the ditch the powder rolled upon its mission of doom, hey,
hot sparks fizzing in the smoky gloom,
and Kazan went boom!

...That’s how it was when Kazan was smashed to rubble... Hey!

Consider how this song is both similar to and differs from an American patriotic song such as “The Star Spangled Banner.” Both songs celebrate battles that were important milestones on the road to nationhood of the respective countries. Nevertheless, their music is entirely different. “The Star Spangled Banner” proceeds in a regular three-quarter rhythm—nothing inherently comic in that. The Kazan song, on the other hand, immediately presents the hearer with an odd assortment of short and long notes: Daah Daah Daah dah dah dah dah dah dAAAH dah. (See Figure 1 for musical notation.) The long next-to-last note of the musical phrase in Figure 1 is further emphasized by being a G natural, flattened from the G sharp that would normally be expected in the song's key of F-sharp minor. By its very rhythm and melody, then, the Kazan song has the staggering quality of drunkenness. And Varlaam is indeed drunk, a vagabond semi-literate monk. The song is genuinely patriotic and humorous and genuinely a folk song (although, as noted above, much reworked by Musorgskii).

What does this mean for the translator? Above all it means selecting the proper diction level.

Prior to Pushkin, neoclassical sensibilities called for everyone on the Russian stage to speak in an elevated diction. But Musorgskii went beyond Pushkin’s neutral mid-level diction, giving the common people cruder and genuinely a folk song (although, as noted above, much reworked by Musorgskii).

A translator of the opera must therefore be ever cognizant of the shifting balance between the tragic and the ironic, the sad and the funny, while simultaneously maintaining an overall tone into which these elements fit.

**Figure 1**

```
\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{The song as sung in Kazan.}
\end{figure}
```
Balancing Tragedy and Irony in Musorgskii’s Boris Godunoff Continued

But diction levels work differently in Russian and English. We decided to use a mid-level, mostly noncolloquial diction for Varlaam and other common people that could veer slightly toward the low as needed. We felt that too low or colloquial a diction in English would contrast too greatly with the higher diction of aristocratic characters, producing an unwanted humorous effect in certain scenes. Also, despite the overlap of some scenes and dialogue, the two versions of the opera are very different. By keeping to as neutral a diction as possible, we could minimize verbal differences between the two versions in our translation.

So, while there is no slang in the song, the sparks can “fizz” and Kazan can “go boom” rather than “explode.” Elevated diction is also precluded. Unlike in “The Star Spangled Banner,” phrases such as “at the twilight’s last gleaming” and overly poetic contractions such as “o’er” cannot be used.

As a mainly mid-level diction is the key to balancing patriotic and comic elements in this song, so will it prove to be the key to balancing shifts between the tragic and comic elsewhere in the opera.

The Anti-Greek Chorus

Boris Godunoff may be contrasted with Greek tragedy by comparing the opera’s opening crowd scene with that of Oedipus the King. In Oedipus, the crowd is lamenting a plague which has befallen the people and their land. The crowd in the first scene of Boris Godunoff also sings a lament. The time is 1598. Tsar Fyodor is dead and Boris, Fyodor’s regent and de facto ruler of Russia, has not yet made the transition to crowned tsar in his own right. The crowd implores Boris to become tsar, lest Russia, tsarless, be defenseless and unprotected:

- Great boyar, do not leave us helpless, we beg you!
- Ah, great boyar, do not leave us defenseless, have mercy!
- O do not leave us fatherless, unprotected and alone!
- Ah, who will save us?
- Our tears are bitter, our tears are bitter!
- Father, hear our prayer! Care for us!
- Care and provide for us!
- Our father! Our defender! Our father! Care for us!

Do these words signal a tragedy? The words imply it. The music allows for it.

The audience can feel for the plight of Russia at this point. However, unlike the elevated language of liturgy and poetryimploiring Oedipus to intercede with the gods, the language of the Russian chorus, in our translation, is in a neutral diction with relatively simple words. In contrast to Greek tragedy, Boris Godunoff has separated the audience from what the characters are singing, the ironic distance arising because the Russian chorus has been coerced.

The scene does not open with this lament, but with a solemn orchestral prelude outside a monastery. Boris is within and the crowd mills about. So far, a tragedy in the conventional sense could still be forthcoming. But then the audience hears these words spoken, or rather shouted, by a policeman:

- What is this? Why the devil aren’t you kneeling?
- Statues! Good for nothing! Come on!
- Get down!
- Lazy God-forsaken rabble!

Only then does the chorus sing its lament. By the way, while there is some historical evidence for Boris’s seeming reluctance to accept the crown, the scene owes more to Shakespeare’s Richard III than to history. Both Pushkin and Musorgskii loved Shakespeare.

As soon as the lament ends, the real feelings and concerns of the crowd emerge:

Various voices:
- Mityukh (mi-TYUKH)! Hey Mityukh! Why are we here?
- Really, I couldn’t tell you.
- We need someone to be Tsar of Russia.
- How dry I am! Curse all this shouting!
- Would someone be nice to me and let me have some water?
- Water for her royal highness!
- You should have brought your own or done a lot less shouting!
- That’s enough, you silly women! Now look who’s giving orders!
- Quiet!
- He thinks he is a policeman!

And so on. These are not tragic voices. While the people are indeed oppressed, they are wrapped up in their own trivia, not the tragic situation.

Not everyone agrees that a neutral mid-level diction is appropriate for this chorus. For example, Caryl Emerson translates the line that we have rendered “Really, I couldn’t tell you” as “The hell if I know.”’’ We stay more neutral in order to establish a Brechtian comic stance. Neutral diction allows the crowd, or at least some members of the crowd, their tragic moments. While some crowd members obviously do not even know why they are singing the lament, some may genuinely want Boris to accept the crown; and all, at least while they are singing, are swept along by the music and words, just as even those Americans suspicious of patriotic display may be swept along...
by a stirring rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner.” The lament is not funny, even if it is set within a distancing frame.

**Somewhat Elevated Diction**

Later in the scene, Shchelkaloff (Shchel-KA-loff), the Secretary of the Duma, or Council of Boyars, comes out of the monastery, and solemnly intones:

O ye Orthodox, ye faithful sons of Russia, the Patriarch and noble Duma are unsuccessful:

Boris will not accept the throne of Russia, and Russia laments in grief inconsolable.

O ye Orthodox, lawlessness reigns, evil triumphs, and even the earth groans in torment.

O Russian people, pray God Almighty to help us by sending forth the light of Heaven to alter Boris’s heart.

Considering his high rank, Shchelkaloff’s diction should be more elevated than that of the chorus. Again, he is not “comic” in the sense of being funny, but in the sense of being “distanced”: an unsympathetic and unbelievable politician telling the politically correct lie that Boris is not desirous of the crown. We ratchet his diction up, using a word like “inconsolable” (made even more high-toned by being placed after the noun it modifies) and an archaism like “ye” when he speaks in a quasi-religious context. However, the diction level should not be so high that it presents a humorous contrast with that of the crowd and the policeman.

**The Tragic Title Character**

What of Boris himself? Is he ironically distanced? Many 19th-century Russian critics deemed Pushkin’s play to be unstageable, and the role of Boris in particular to be unperformable because of the perceived ambiguity in the attitude of the play toward its title character. The opera is not as ambiguous because many of the “impossible” decisions as to whether, at any given moment, Boris is a tragic protagonist or a villain, a noble tsar or a base usurper, are made by Musorgskii’s music.

The opera audience first sees Boris in his brief appearance in the second scene, as he emerges from his coronation to the peals of the Kremlin bells and the crowd’s shouts of “Слава” (SLA-va, meaning “glory”). At this point, the audience can only consider him an ambitious politician at best and a murderous usurper at worst. Despite his pleas to God, the audience is unlikely to be won to full sympathy with him. There will be a later scene showing him with his family, and an even later death scene, both of which will make him far more sympathetic. However, in the first version of the opera, the scene with the Holy Fool comes between these two. The Holy Fool, emblematic of the tragedy of the entire Russian nation, explicitly calls Boris a murderer. His accusation precludes too much audience sympathy with Boris.

A translation must allow for all these shifts and possibilities. Boris is a tragic character, but he is viewed through an ironic lens. Fortunately, as for the performer and the stage director, Musorgskii’s music actually makes the translator’s job easier, despite the difficulties of fitting English words to music composed to a Russian text.

Here is Boris’s entire first speech in our translation:

My soul cries out! A dark foreboding haunts me and fearful presentiments oppress my spirit. Almighty One, Father who rules in heaven, look down on us, Thy servants; heed our tears and be disposed to let Thy holy blessing fall on my dominion. Make me as just and merciful as Thou and vouchsafe glory to my reign... Now let us kneel before the sepulchers of former Russian monarchs. Then all are summoned to the feast, all, from boyar to beggar, are my guests, all shall go in, all welcome at my table!

The incongruities in this speech and others are exactly what irritated Pushkin’s Russian critics. The role of a tsar is to be strong, not to be beset by a “dark foreboding.” (Consider how much it cost a politician of our own time, Jimmy Carter, when he gave his infamous “malaise” speech in 1979.) And the proper next step for anyone so praying to God is to fast, not to hold a gigantic feast. That is not piety, just the pandering of a politician. What part, if any, of the above speech is sincere? It is hard to know.
We believe that Boris is a tragic character who believes every word he says, however cynically his speeches are received by his onstage or offstage audience. It is his context, not his character, that distances him. Therefore, his diction must befit a tragic character and a monarch, a diction that is the most elevated of any character in the opera. He sings words that could never be assigned to the crowd: “foreboding,” “presentiments,” “vouchsafe,” and “sepulchers.” However, his diction level is not so high that the crowd cannot understand him. All the words, at least in context, are still comprehensible, though it is likely that the only part of the speech the people will remember, or perhaps that they even paid attention to in the first place, is the part inviting them to a free meal.

Conclusion
Thus, Boris in Musorgskii’s Boris Godunoff occupies a tragi-comedy. The music sometimes contributes to the comedy, as in the Kazan song, and sometimes indicates that even an insincere and coerced crowd has been momentarily caught up in a genuine lament. While there are humorous sections, much of the comedy is not funny but ironic. And to blend properly the ironic and the tragic in English, we were careful to give the common people a mid-level diction, not too low and mostly noncolloquial. They can then be taken seriously when they veer into the serious, while the more elevated diction of Boris can take on a tragic weight. Thus, the tragedy of Boris’s fate is preserved, as well as the distancing and comedic effect of the dramatic context into which he is placed.

Notes
1. In this article, the Russian names Борис Годунов and Модест Петрович Мусоргский are spelled in English characters as “Boris Godunoff” and “Modest Petrovich Musorgski” because the transliterations “Boris Godunov” and “Modest Petrovich Musorgskiy,” and the several more usual non-transliterator spellings, were all deemed unsatisfactory. To give an English speaker a reasonable chance of pronouncing the names approximately correctly, the names should be spelled “Baw-REESE Go-doo-NOFF” and “Mo-DYEST Pe-TRO-vich Moo-SORG-skee,” with capital letters indicating accented syllables. The spellings chosen for this article are therefore compromise, perhaps also unsatisfactory. Other Russian words and names are given similar English spellings, with the original Russian words and pronunciations sometimes also given when helpful.


This version was rejected in 1871 by the Repertory Committee of the Directorate of the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg on the stated grounds that there was no significant woman’s part in the opera. Another unstated reason may have been the fact that Pushkin’s play (second version) had finally had its premiere not too long before and had been a flop.


Musorgskii’s second version did more than merely add the Polish Act, with its two scenes and principal female character, to the first version of the opera. Several scenes were extensively rewritten, and one scene was replaced by an entirely new scene.


Pushkin’s title for this first version was Комедия о Царе Борисе и о Гришке Отрепьеве [Comedy about Tsar Boris and about Grishka Otrepyeff (GRISH-ka O-TRE-pyeff), or more smoothly in English, Tsar Boris and Grisha Otrepyeff, a Comedy]. The identity of the false Dimitrii, pretender to the Russian throne, was once widely believed to be Grishka (a diminutive of Grigorii [Gri-GO-rii] Otrepyeff, a novice monk. A few historians still hold this view. The real Dimitrii was Tsar Fyodor’s nine-year-old half-brother, who died in 1591, probably during an epileptic fit, though the received opinion in the time of Pushkin and Musorgskii was that Dimitrii was murdered on orders from Boris.


5. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the influential German poet, playwright, and theater director, wrote and directed plays intended to prevent emotional identification with stage characters in order to provoke a rational and critical response from the audience. For this purpose, Brecht employed “alienation” techniques such as actors directly addressing the audience, unnatural stage lighting, songs, and explanatory placards.


7. This translation and all other translations in this article, unless otherwise specified, are by the authors and are © 2009 by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter.

8. Emerson, 176.

9. Ibid., 170.


11. Emerson, 177.

12. Ibid., 105.