Few events in modern history have appealed to the imagination of so many poets and playwrights of diverse literary traditions as the overthrow in 1605 of Boris Godunov, a monarch with dubious claims to the Russian throne, by a pretender of lowly birth known to history as the False Dmitry. The pretender claimed to be the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, miraculously saved from the assassins sent by Boris to kill him fourteen years earlier.

Within a decade after the events in Moscow, there appeared in Spain Lope de Vega’s play *El gran duque de Moscovia*, based on a somewhat distorted account of the defeat of Boris and the False Dmitry’s short-lived triumph (he was deposed and put to death eleven months after his coronation). An even more distorted but still recognizable version reached England by 1618 in John Fletcher’s play *The Loyal Subject*, as was demonstrated by Ervin C. Brody in his comprehensive study of the subject, *The Demetrius Legend and Its Literary Treatment in the Age of the Baroque*. Published in 1972, Brody’s book, despite its title, also described the later treatments of the Boris Godunov and False Dmitry theme by German and Russian playwrights of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries (including its inexplicable popularity during the National Socialist period, when four dramas in German about the False Dmitry appeared in 1937 alone). This book supplemented and augmented the fundamental study published in the Soviet Union in 1936 by the noted Pushkin scholar Mikhail Alekseev, who also examined the dramas, novels, poems, and harlequinades the subject inspired in England, France and Italy.

Since about the middle of the nineteenth century, historians have repeatedly demonstrated that the responsibility of Boris Godunov for the accidental death of the young Tsarevich Dmitry in 1591 was a legend deliberately kept alive by Russian chroniclers to curry favor with the tsars

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1 Review of *Boris Godunov: Transposition of a Russian Theme*, by Caryl Emerson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Originally published in *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 July 1987, 762.
who reigned after the overthrow of the False Dmitry. The aim of this cal-
umny was to discredit in the eyes of posterity the two upstart monarchs: Boris Godunov, who did not belong to any of the Russian princely houses of ancient lineage, came to rule first as regent during the reign of Tsar Fyo-
dor (the feeble-minded second son of Ivan the Terrible and the husband of Godunov’s sister) and was elected to be tsar after Fyodor’s death; and the False Dmitry, who impersonated the prince supposedly murdered as a child on Godunov’s orders.

For about a century now, no responsible historian has believed that the real Dmitry was killed instead of falling accidentally on his own dag-
ger during an epileptic seizure, which is what sources dating from the time of his death show. Yet in theaters and opera houses all over the world audiences watch the guilt-ridden Tsar Boris agonizing over the failures of his reign and the misfortunes visited upon his family and his people in retribution for the murder of an innocent child that had enabled him to attain the throne. This is the situation depicted in two major nineteenth-
century works, Aleksandr Pushkin’s neo-Shakespearean tragedy (1825) and Modest Musorgsky’s Dostoevskian opera (two different versions: it was first completed in 1869, and then revised and published in 1874). The opera was based in part on Pushkin’s play, but the ultimate source for both the poet and the composer was the tenth volume of the monumental History of the Russian State by Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826).

Caryl Emerson’s book is an interdisciplinary and intergeneric study of ways in which the work of a historian is transposed into a work of litera-
ture and what happens when history and literature are adapted for the operatic stage. The author herself negotiates, with assurance and elegance, passages from one branch of scholarship to another, being equally sure-footed as a student of history, literature, and music. The dominant presence in her book is neither the historical Boris Godunov, nor Karamzin, Pushkin, or Musorgsky, though the last three are allotted a robust chapter each. It is instead Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), the philosopher, linguis-
\tand literary scholar, whose rapidly growing posthumous popularity in English-speaking countries was attested to in 1984 by the appearance of the excellent study of his life and ideas, Mikhail Bakhtin by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist.

Caryl Emerson is one of Bakhtin’s principal standard-bearers and popularizers in English. She has translated and edited his influential
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Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (first published in Russian in 1929) and is also the cotranslator (together with Michael Holquist) of The Dialogic Imagination, a collection of four Bakhtin essays. For a number of years now, two Bakhtinian concepts have been in common use among teachers of Russian literature: the polyphonic novel (as in the novels of Dostoevsky, where the views of several characters are given equal weight and validity); and carnivalization, a special form of comedy that occurs when the powerful and powerless characters switch roles, as they did in carnival celebrations and also in novels by Rabelais and Dostoevsky.

These concepts have now moved to fields other than Russian literature, and so have two others which are basic to Emerson’s book on Boris Godunov. Central to her approach are Bakhtinian “dialogism” (an artist who creates a work on a theme familiar to the audience is engaging in a dialogue with the artist who used this theme earlier) and “chronotope,” a term Bakhtin found in Einstein’s relativity theory and applied to literature to indicate that a literary work reflects the notions of time and space that are current in the period in which the writer lived. Chronotope was postulated by Bakhtin in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” a study of the Greek and Roman romances of the early Christian centuries. Emerson uses it as her main tool for investigating the transition of the theme of Boris and False Dmitry from one medium to another. “Chronotopes can never be abstract,” Emerson explains. “Therefore every chronotope inevitably contains an evaluation…, inevitably delimits and individualizes the perspective from which the story is told. It constitutes a justification for the unstated causality that joins a series of events into a plausible narrative.”

Her most cogent examples are found in the chapter on Karamzin. Before his career as a historian, Nikolai Karamzin was a much-admired writer of Sentimentalist fiction. His transition from the fictional to the historical mode of narration began, according to Emerson, in 1802, with a brief essay, “Historical Reminiscences and Observations on the Way to the Trinity [St. Sergius Monastery],” in which there is a portrait of Boris Godunov as an enlightened monarch who did a great deal of good for his country. Yet some two decades later, in the tenth volume of his History, which served as the main source for both Pushkin’s and Musorgsky’s works, Karamzin showed Boris as a guilt-crazed murderer.
Two historical developments had occurred and changed Karamzin’s idea of Godunov in the intervening years. In 1812, Russia was ravaged by the invasion of Napoleon, another parvenu monarch with no dynastic claims to support his right to the throne. Also, in an age when Shakespeare was regarded in both France and Russia as unsuitable for the stage and had to be performed in simplified and “regularized” neoclassical adaptations by Jean François Ducis, Karamzin was a longtime champion of the Bard in his original form. Back in 1787, Karamzin translated *Julius Caesar* from the English original and not from the French of Ducis, as was the custom at the time. Regarded as a willful eccentricity in the 1780s, Karamzin’s view that Shakespeare’s plays did not need tampering with came to be generally accepted in Russia by the 1820s. As Emerson rightly points out, Godunov the usurper of Karamzin’s *History* bears a strong imprint of Napoleon and of Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Richard III.

Pushkin, as Emerson sees it, “drew on particular incidents in Karamzin’s *History* and entered into a complex dialogue with the whole.” It was a case of a poet of the Romantic age rethinking the historical account permeated with the Sentimentalist outlook of Karamzin. Even though there is a section headed “The Shakespeare Connection” in the Pushkin chapter, Emerson underestimates the significance of Pushkin’s self-proclaimed intention to sacrifice on the altar of “our father Shakespeare” the neoclassical unities and poetics in which Pushkin had been brought up. The discussion of the neoclassical views on translation and adaptation of foreign plays is handicapped by Emerson’s failure (and that of the sources she cites) to realize that the tragedy *Dmitry the Pretender* by Pushkin’s eighteenth-century predecessor Aleksandr Sumarokov and Sumarokov’s emasculated version of *Hamlet* were conversions of the chronicle accounts and of Shakespeare into Sumarokov’s admired neoclassical models, *Le Cid* by Corneille and *Britannicus* by Racine.

The chapter on Musorgsky is perhaps the richest in the book. Drawing on the recent ground-breaking studies of the operatic *Boris* by Robert William Oldani and Richard Taruskin,2 Emerson finds that the difference

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2 Emerson later collaborated with Oldani on a comprehensive study of the opera: Caryl Emerson and Robert William Oldani, *Modest Musorgsky and “Boris Godunov”: Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Taruskin’s views of the composer and the opera can be found in Richard Taruskin,
between the 1869 and 1874 versions can best be explained by Musorgsky’s evolving concept of what an opera could be, by his withdrawal from Pushkin’s model of Boris to that of Karamzin, and by the fact that this music was composed in the age of Dostoevsky rather than that of Pushkin. All these things account for the opera’s revisions, rather than the usually cited pressures of government censorship and the operatic conventions of the time. This chapter also contains an extended and illuminating discussion of the operatic libretto as literature and its relationship to drama and prose fiction.

There are some problems in the transcribing and translating of Russian names and texts. The Russian word for Trinity, Troitsa, appears throughout in its dative case form, Troitse, because that is how it occurred in the title of Karamzin’s essay. The adjective tsarskii has existed for centuries in Russian with the meaning of “royal.” It is wrong to equate it, as Emerson does repeatedly, with “tsarist” (Pushkin’s Marina speaks to the False Dmitry about “your tsarist word alone” and we also read of Boris Godunov’s “tsarist dignity”). “Tsarist” and its related noun “tsarism” entered Russian usage after the October Revolution, with the meaning of “autocratic” or “despotic.” This is the meaning with which it was absorbed into English. It isn’t a synonym for “royal,” and couldn’t have been used in the seventeenth century. Pushkin’s chronicler Pimen was sent to the town of Uglich “to perform a certain penance” (poslushanie), which Emerson reads as “sent … on a vague suspicion.”

The worst single lapse occurs in the discussion of Pushkin’s dedication of Boris Godunov to the memory of Nikolai Karamzin. The play was dedicated to Karamzin because “it was inspired by his genius.” Caryl Emerson reproduces a garbled version of this dedication from a two-volume collection of Russian plays in English translation, which first appeared in 1961. In that version, the translator confused the two Russian equivalents of “his,” ego and the self-referential svoi, which must pertain to the subject of the sentence. So his translation began: “Alexander Pushkin, inspired by his genius, dedicates this work …” Instead of eulogizing Karamzin, this translation makes Pushkin brag of being inspired by his

*Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue*, foreword by Carol Emerson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also *passim*, Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).—Ed.
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own genius. Small wonder that Emerson could see this dedication as some kind of parody.

Such blemishes do not diminish the fact that this is an engrossing, many-layered and rewarding book.

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The subjects of dramatic theater, stagecraft and music drama intermingled in this review essay—along with readings of the writings of Aleksandr Pushkin—reflect many of SK’s principal interests. It is one in a series of pieces on poetic drama (e.g., plays by Küchelbecker, Lermontov, Kuzmin, Gumilyov and Tsvetaeva) and on the masterworks of the nineteenth-century Russian stage, represented above all by Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin, Aleksandr Ostrovsky, Lev Tolstoi and Anton Chekhov. SK was particularly delighted by the underground absurdist theater of the Soviet period, which was almost unknown to its contemporaries. For many years he taught popular, highly regarded undergraduate courses on Russian drama and on the life and writings of Chekhov, and he accumulated an immense store of knowledge about the subject. In light of these facts, it is regrettable that he did not write a companion volume to his book on the origins of Russian drama. The several articles on the topic collected in the present volume are partial compensation. The attention devoted in this review to problems of translation is a signal of an ongoing concern in SK’s writings about Russian literature and culture.

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3 Simon Karlinsky, Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).