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### **Postmodern synthesis of shakespearean tragic plots in the plays of Koki Mitani (Japan) and Anne-Marie MacDonald (Canada)**

#### **Постмодерністський синтез шекспірівських трагедійних сюжетів у п'єсах Кокі Мітані (Японія) та Анн-Марія МакДональд (Канада)**

**Summary.** *A.-M. MacDonald's "Goodnight Desdemona ("Good Morning Juliet")" and K. Mitani's "University of Laughs" are postmodern receptions of Shakespeare's tragic plots. Shakespearean intertext is manifested in the plays at the level of the title complex, plot line, character system, and genre features of the texts. The intertextual dialogue of cultures contributes to the affirmation of ideas relevant in modern society (feminism, freedom of speech and creative self-realization). The genrological features of postmodern comedies of the "Shakespearean text" are an ironic attitude to the source material, at times close to parody; filling with new content and paradoxical interpretation of certain plot moves of the classical text; invariability of character types in the face of changes in external circumstances, as well as social and political conditions, internal psychological motivations; the possibility of reception of a new Shakespearean work on two levels – in connection with the classical pra-text and in the context of the classical text. Postmodern dramas based on Shakespearean plots are thoroughly psychological: they raise problems of the psychology of creativity, artistic ideas become projections of the author's psychological problems and social conflicts of the present. In MacDonald's play, the main character Constance's journey into the inner world of the work simultaneously becomes a self-analysis of her psychological problems, a cathartic allegory of a young woman's subconscious anxieties, doubts and desires. The reader/viewer of Mitani's play is centered on the psychology of creation: the relationship between the author and the censor, the psychology of personality and the psychology of relationships. As a result of*

*the interaction between the author and the censor, not only the text of the comedy is improved, and the inner world of the characters also changes.*

**Key words:** *comparativism, contemporary Japanese and Canadian dramaturgy, postmodernism, Shakespearean pretext, remake, psychology of creativity, cathartic allegorism.*

**Анотація.** *Твори А.-М. МакДональд «Добраніч, Дездемона («Доброго ранку, Джульєтта»)» та К. Мітані «Академія сміху» є постмодерністською рецепцією трагедійних сюжетів У. Шекспіра. Шекспірівський інтертекст проявляється у п'єсах на рівні заголовного комплексу, сюжетної лінії, системи персонажів, жанрових особливостей текстів. Інтертекстуальний діалог культур сприяє утвердженню актуальних у суспільстві ідей (фемінізм, свобода слова та творчої самореалізації). Жанрологічними особливостями постмодерністських комедій «шекспірівського тексту» є іронічне ставлення до періоджерела, часом близьке до пародіювання; наповнення новим змістом та парадоксальною інтерпретацією окремих сюжетних ходів класичного тексту; незмінність типів характеру персонажів за зміни зовнішніх обставин, соціальних і політичних умов, внутрішніх психологічних мотивувань; можливість рецепції нового шекспірівського твору на двох рівнях – у зв'язку з класичним пратекстом та як самостійної п'єси. Постмодерністські драми на основі шекспірівських сюжетів наскрізь психологічні: у них порушуються проблеми психології творчості, художні ідеї стають проекцією авторських психологічних проблем та соціальних конфліктів сучасності. У п'єсі МакДональд подорож головної героїні Констанції у внутрішній світ твору одночасно стає самоаналізом її психологічних проблем, катарсичною алегорією підсвідомих тривог, сумнівів і бажань молодої жінки. У центрі уваги читача / глядача п'єси Мітані – психологія творчості: взаємини автора та цензора, психологія особистості та психологія відносин. Через протидію автора і цензора не тільки удосконалюється текст комедії, а й змінюється внутрішній світ персонажів.*

**Ключові слова:** *компаративістика, сучасна японська та канадська драматургія, постмодернізм, шекспірівський претекст, ремейк, психологія творчості, катарсичний алегоризм.*

**Introduction.** One of the most popular postmodernist strategies for creating a new dramaturgical text involves the recreation of well-known and already mythologized texts from world culture. This is achieved through processes like recoding, dialogue, playful engagement with readers and viewers, and saturating the pre-text with allusions, reminiscences, and ironic contexts [4, p. 29]. As the Ukrainian researcher of world literary postmodernism, E. G. Shostak, astutely pointed out, "in the process of the postmodernist game, another perspective emerges," challenging the conventional sanctity of familiar ideologemes held by mainstream consciousness. This approach paradoxically reproduces cultural stereotypes through a playful reinterpretation [16, p. 128].

Both remakes, sequels, and prequels in postmodern dramaturgy are rooted in an ironic engagement with the works of world classics. Among the numerous artistic texts open to ongoing dialogue, encouraging playwrights and audiences to engage in co-creation, a universal prototype is the works of W. Shakespeare, which have been continuously reinterpreted and rewritten since their inception.

The innovative approach to reimagining Shakespearean plots, characters, and mainstream authorial concepts was pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s by renowned playwrights associated with the theater of the absurd, expressionism, "post-dramatic theater," and "total drama". Some notable examples include T. Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" (1966–1967) and "15-Minute Hamlet" (1976), E. Ionesco's "Macbett" (1972), J. J. Osborne's "A Place Calling Itself Rome" (1973, an adaptation of W. Shakespeare's "Coriolanus"), Heiner Müller's "Hamlet/maschine" (1977), and others.

World postmodern dramaturgy predominantly explores the plots and characters of "Hamlet" ("The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark"). Examples of this engagement include Nedyalko Yordanov's "The Murder of Gonzago" (1988), Janusz Andrzej Glowacki's "Fortinbras got drunk" (J. Głowacki's "Fortynbras się upił") (1990), Lee Blessing's "Fortinbras" (1991), V. Korkiy's "Hamlet.ru" (2001), L. Petrushevskaya's "Hamlet. Zero Action" (2002), B. Akunin's "Hamlet. Version" (2002), L. Filatov's "Hamlet" (2003), A. Barkalov's "Glumlet" (2003), and V. Ponizov's "Running from Elsinore" (2012). The enduring Shakespearean masterpiece "Romeo and Juliet" also captures the attention of contemporary artists. G. Gorin's "Plague on Both Your Houses!" (1993) serves as a sequel to Shakespeare's work, while I. Luchuk's linguistic joke "Romeo and Juliet" (2005) offers a unique perspective. Notably, Shakespeare's "King Lear" has also undergone various reinterpretations, including Edward Bond's "Lear" (1969–1971), A. Obraztsov's "Lear's Two Daughters" (1992), and A. Borovikov's "Lear's Shadow" (2013).

Simultaneously, another approach, involving the amalgamation of iconic Shakespearean tragedies into a postmodern synthesis, also garners attention. Canadian playwright Ann-Marie MacDonald experiments with the tragedies "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello" in her play "Good-night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)" (1988). Similarly, the Japanese author Koki Mitani (三谷幸喜 – みたにこうき, Mitani Kōki) combines the plots of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet" in his fantasy work "University of Laughs" (笑の大学, Warai no Daigaku, 1996) [5; 11].

**History of the issue.** The ideological and artistic originality of MacDonald's play has already been the subject of scientific research. In the monograph by M. Schrage-Lang and M. Hörnicke, the intertextual

connections of the work are analyzed (T. Stoppard, N. Jordanov, E. Bond, etc.) [10, p. 120-141]. Various journal publications over the years, as well as prefaces to editions of the play "Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)," have primarily focused on comparing the postmodern plot with the source material, seeking to identify similarities and differences [1; 2; 8; 9].

The Japanese-language segment of the Internet is predominantly filled with critical reviews of the theatrical productions of Mitani's "University of Laughter" and the 2004 film adaptation of the play (directed by Mamoru Hoshi) [e.g., 7; 13]. E. Vasiliev observes "University of Laughter" as a "theater within a theater" and delves into the examination of the play's genre features, particularly its metatheatricality [14, p. 193–199]. In an article by N. Yuhan, Mitani's play is compared with the drama "Franziska" by contemporary German playwright Thea Dorn, focusing on genre specificity, namely its status as both a metadrama and a remake [10].

The exploration of the postmodern synthesis of Shakespearean tragic plots in the works of Mitani and MacDonald has not yet been a subject of literary studies. Therefore, our work brings scientific novelty to this area of research.

The purpose of our work is a comparative study of the transformation of tragic Shakespearean plots in the comedies of K. Mitani (Japan) and A.-M. MacDonald (Canada).

**Methodology/Methods.** The work is based on comparative analysis (comparativism). In the study of these dramas as works of postmodernist literature, the method of poststructuralism and the method of analyzing the artistic text from the point of view of feminism (the so-called feminist text analysis) are partially applied.

**Results and Discussion.** A.-M. MacDonald, born in Germany, built her career in Canada. Since 1983, she has been involved in feature films, and her novels have consistently enjoyed popularity among readers. Since 1996, Ann has hosted a television program that focuses on biographies of Canadian celebrities. While theater plays are not at the center of her work, her postmodern comedy "Good Night, Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliette)" has gained her recognition well beyond the borders of her homeland.

The play's protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, is an assistant professor of English at Queen's University, engrossed in an original yet contentious research project. She aims to demonstrate that William Shakespeare's plays "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello" originally existed as comedies, concealed within a manuscript known as "The Manuscript of Gustavus". Constance, a young woman, harbors a secret and unrequited love for her project leader, Professor Claude Knight, who neither believes in

her nor supports her scientific concept. Suffering from disappointment, a loss of self-confidence, and waning hope for personal happiness and professional success, Constance discards her dissertation. Her feelings of despair miraculously immerse her in the plots she studies, bringing her emotionally closer to the main characters of Shakespeare's plays. She seizes the opportunity to intervene in the characters' actions, adjust the plot, and embark on a quest to locate the manuscript, thereby realizing her scientific concept.

The action of MacDonald's play unfolds alternatively in two distinct locations, namely on the island of Crete and in Verona, Italy. It also immerses us in two distinct Shakespearean worlds, those of "Othello" and "Romeo and Juliet". Constance plays a pivotal role by revealing Iago's plot to Othello, ultimately saving Desdemona. In response, Desdemona, overwhelmed with gratitude and sympathy for Constance, pledges to assist her in uncovering the true author of Shakespeare's plays, specifically, the architectonic character of the "wise fool" from Gustavus's manuscript. Iago, seeking revenge against Constance, manipulates Desdemona into believing that her new friend is practicing witchcraft and harbors intentions to win over Othello's heart. Despite her innocence, Desdemona's passion drives her to contemplate killing Constance. The narrative then shifts to Verona, continuing within the storyline of "Romeo and Juliet".

Shakespearean tragedy transforms into a situational comedy, where the characters exchange clothing, fail to recognize each other, and unexpectedly develop affection for the wrong individuals. Constance not only intervenes in the plot of the brilliant English playwright's tragedy and corrects it (preventing Tybalt from delivering a fatal blow to Mercutio during their duel) but also forges her own, entirely new, post-Shakespearean narrative framework in which characters from both original texts interact. Initially, the heroine disguises herself as a man and presents herself to Romeo as the male Constantine. As her true gender is revealed, Romeo finds himself falling in love with her.

In the following scenes, Romeo and Juliet become disappointed in each other, regret their marriage, and both fall in love with Constance. In the struggle for the heart of the new heroine in Shakespeare's world, Juliet emerges victorious because she convinces Constance that she knows the Wise Fool. Love knows no boundaries, and Juliet and Constance become a perfect match. The heroine discovers a page from Gustave's manuscript in Juliette's possession. The moment she touches this manuscript, Desdemona miraculously appears and attempts to kill Constance. Subsequently, Romeo finds his personal happiness with Desdemona. Eventually, Constance realizes that she can be both the author of Shakespeare's story and the Wise Fool. Her faith in herself returns, and the woman begins to

understand that the source of happiness, love, and creativity lies within her soul. She can create and re-create reality at will. Filled with newfound energy, she is transported to her office at England's Royal College. Now, she sees everything with different eyes, and her pen transforms into a golden quill – a symbol of creative success and the joy of creation.

McDonald actively engages in co-creation with Shakespeare as she reimagines the classic work, infusing it with new meanings and intentions. Her heroine intervenes in Shakespeare's narratives, striving to save the play's heroes from fatal errors and mistakes. Constance acts as a reader and admirer of Shakespeare, always sympathizing with Juliet and Desdemona, and dreaming of altering the tragic endings of these plots to bring about a happier ending. In the Canadian play, the heroine not only becomes the central character in the postmodern storyline but also, in her unique way of addressing the "Shakespearean question," asserts herself as a researcher of Shakespeare, the creator who is Shakespeare himself. The text demonstrates an ironic perspective towards the source material, evident through double coding, deconstruction, pastiche, and travesty.

Mitani is a renowned Japanese playwright, writer, screenwriter, film director, actor, and comedian – a multifaceted and talented individual. He has written more than 40 scripts for prime-time Japanese TV series and has directed 8 feature films. He is also a recognized comedian, having received the Kazuo Kikuta Theatre Award for his work.

Mitani's "University of Laughter" features two protagonists: Tsubaki Hajimi, the author of the comedy "Hamlet and Juliet," who works for the theater company "University of Laughter," and Matsuo Sakisaki, a censorship officer at the Metropolitan Police Department, who refused to allow a new work on stage back in 1940. The action unfolds in the interrogation room of the Metropolitan Police Department, where a verbal duel between two men facing each other takes place. The censor refuses to permit the comedy to be staged during the war and insists that the playwright must alter the text to make the play fit the times, making it serious and patriotic instead of funny. Tsubaki, in his quest to obtain permission for his troupe to perform and to tackle seemingly impossible creative tasks, tirelessly rewrites the comedy, attempting to improve the text. However, with each revision, "Hamlet and Juliet" becomes increasingly humorous and comical.

The "duel" between the author and the censor, initially rooted in the psychological realm, smoothly transitions into the moral and political arena. It becomes evident in the very first scene that Sakisaki has no connection to the world of theater; he lacks a sense of humor, regards comedy as frivolous, and believes it doesn't serve the modern societal needs of the genre. The censor insists on a remake that doesn't rely on Shakespeare's

"Romeo and Juliet" but on "Hamlet," as the theme of avenging the king's death aligns better with the prevailing spirit of the times. Throughout the process of revising and adapting Shakespeare's text, both the author and the censor undergo changes. Tsubaki ceases to flatter Sakisaki, ceaselessly offer gifts, or formally insert patriotic slogans into episodes that contradict the comedy's core idea and pathos. He straightforwardly informs the censor that his desire to make the comedy even funnier represents a rebellion against the system – a protest against the infringement of civil rights, freedoms, and creative expression.

On the other hand, the censor's inner world undergoes transformation in the process of communication with the playwright. Sakisaki reveals himself as a creative individual with a keen sense and deep understanding of art. His remarks contribute to making the situations more comical and artistically refined. The final scenes are poignant and psychologically calibrated. The playwright expresses his inner protest against Japan's pre-war political system, which prohibited the staging of comedies. The censor attempts to spare the author from being summoned to the front but ultimately fails. Instead, he earnestly pleads with the playwright to return from the war safely, promising to safeguard the manuscript of his play and even offering to take on one of the roles in a future production.

**Conclusions.** William Shakespeare's tragedies, as they function within the reader's consciousness and on the theatrical stage, have evolved into a collection of literary codes. When integrated into a new postmodern work, these codes are transformed into receptive techniques. The contemporary playwright crafts an original piece of authorship by embedding a system of signs in their text. These signs create readers' strategies of recognition and encompass the horizons of spectator expectations.

The creative styles of two postmodernists from different countries are unified by the fact that MacDonald and Mitani based their dramatic works on the plot of Shakespeare's most romantic tragedy, "Romeo and Juliet," a tragedy whose plot twists and turns are familiar to every schoolchild and evoke strong, genuine feelings and emotions. However, unlike, for example, G. Gorin's play "A Plague on Both Your Houses!", which explores the events in the city of Verona after the tragic death of Romeo and Juliet, Canadian and Japanese playwrights combined the romantic tragedy with another Shakespearean plot – "Othello" (McDonald) and "Hamlet" (Mitani). The melding of these "old" plots in the crucible of each author's creative energy contributes to the reimagining of the source text: there is a constant "game" with the reader, involving recognition and, at the same time, transformation of classical plots, pretexts, and character traits of famous heroes. In both cases, the authors engage in an explicit dialogue with the classical text, which is reflected in the titles of their works: in

both comedies, the names of two Shakespearean heroes are used in the titles (MacDonald features Desdemona and Juliet, while Mitani incorporates Hamlet and Juliet).

Through the inclusion of characters from various texts (Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello), as well as the portrayal of their creator (Shakespeare) within the world of the remake, we can observe the presence of genre principles characteristic of another contemporary genre – crossover drama. Furthermore, in the Canadian and Japanese "Shakespearean text", we find another significant aspect of modern remakes: the reinterpretation of classical tragedies with a comedic twist. Therefore, the scientific discovery made by Constance in the play "Good Night, Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)" is related to the notion that Shakespeare's tragedies were originally comedies. In the text "University of Laughter," a conflict arises between the censor and the playwright due to the genre designation of the work as a "comedy" and the associated pathos.

Among the genreological features of postmodern comedies within the "Shakespearean text," one can observe an ironic attitude toward the original source, sometimes bordering on parody. Additionally, these comedies involve the infusion of new content and paradoxical interpretations of specific plot elements from the classical text. Character types remain constant even as external circumstances, social and political conditions, and the internal psychological motivations of the main characters change. Moreover, these comedies offer the potential for experiencing a new Shakespearean work on two levels: in relation to the classical ancestral text and as an independent play.

Moreover, postmodern dramas based on Shakespearean plots are completely psychological: they raise problems of the psychology of creativity, their ideas become a projection of the author's psychological problems and social conflicts of our time.

In the play "Good Night, Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)", the main character, Associate Professor Constance, is both literally and figuratively immersed in Shakespeare's text. She is transported into classical plots and, in doing so, creates new plot twists and turns, attempting to solve not only her scientific problem but also to conquer her self-doubt, comprehend her experiences in love, and grasp her life's purpose. Her journey into the inner world of the work simultaneously becomes an introspection of her psychological issues – a cathartic allegory of her subconscious anxieties, doubts, and desires as a young woman.

MacDonald introduces a feminist discourse in the play, viewing "writing as a form of self-expression in which the narrative 'I' takes on a feminine identity when it reveals its gender and imparts internal, specific knowledge about womanhood" [15, p. 254]. The recreated plot embodies



the autobiographical nature of women's writing. The main character, Constance, much like the author herself, embraces love from both men and women (the author is a feminist and is married to the renowned screenwriter and director, Alice Palmer). In Mitani's play, the focus for the reader/viewer centers on the psychology of creativity, including the dynamics between the author and the censor, as well as an exploration of individual psychology and interpersonal relationships. "University of Laughter" is a comedy with three authors – Koki Mitani, a comedian, and a censor. Through the interaction between the author and the censor, not only does the comedy's text improve, but the inner world of each character undergoes transformation as well.

Therefore, A.-M. McDonald's "Good Night, Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)" and K. Mitani's "University of Laughter" can be regarded as postmodernist reinterpretations of W. Shakespeare's tragic narratives. The Shakespearean intertextuality is evident in these plays through the title structure, plotlines, character systems, and genre elements. The intertextual dialogue of cultures promotes the endorsement of ideas that hold relevance in modern society, such as feminism, freedom of speech, and creative self-realization.

A promising direction for future research would involve exploring issues related to the psychology of creativity, drawing from the work of Japanese playwright Koki Mitani and German playwright Stockmann Nies-Momme.

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