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**Rape and Resistance in *Lady Macbeth of  
Mtsensk: Understanding Dmitri  
Shostakovich's Katarina Lvovna as a Viable  
and Complex Character***

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Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* is a work rife with tensions: tensions between its source text and the libretto, between moments of stunning lyricism and satiric barbarity, between the sympathy and condemnation it instills in the viewer, and most infamously, between its moral agenda and that of the social context of its setting, Stalinist Russia. At the heart of the opera and its controversy is Shostakovich's heroine, Katarina Lvovna – the unflinching murderess of Nikolai Leskov's 1865 thriller *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, freely adapted and humanized by Shostakovich and Alexander Preis. Katarina is a bored and abused woman who embarks on a murderous path to protect her adulterous relationship with the worker and rapist Sergei, and she drowns herself and her rival, Sonyetka when Sergei sleeps with this other woman.

Katarina is an operatic heroine critics have sought to define and understand since the opera's 1934 premier.

Shostakovich was vocal about endeavouring to depict a strong woman, but many argue his musical treatment, which isolates Katarina as the only human capable of sensitivity in a world of barbarity, ultimately deprives her of personhood and gives her no identity beyond that of victim, providing an ethically dubious justification for three murders. Richard Taruskin describes Shostakovich's efforts to humanize Katrina and villainize her surroundings as "one of the most pernicious uses to which music has ever been put" and argues Shostakovich's musical justification of Katarina's deeds is morally equivalent to justifying the class-based murder or Stalin's regime.<sup>1</sup> He explains that the opera's "chilling treatment of the victims amounts to a justification of genocide."<sup>2</sup> James Morgan too exposes the "ethical queasiness" elicited from the "glorification of a murderer who claims for herself the role of victim."<sup>3</sup> Yet in their eagerness to problematize Shostakovich's project to musically depict Katarina as victim, these critics have failed to consider the changes Preis and Shostakovich made to the libretto, changes that can be viewed as legitimate expansions of Leskov's text. Though

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1. Richard Taruskin, "The Opera and the Dictator: the peculiar Martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich," *The New Republic* 200 (1989): 37.

2. *Ibid.*, 40.

3. James Morgan, "Shostakovich the Dramatist: The Nose and The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District," in *A Shostakovich Companion*, ed. Michael Mishra (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008): 329.

“problematic” and “heavy-handed” are certainly appropriate epithets to describe them, these changes merit more attention and certainly render the claim that the opera justifies genocide erroneous.<sup>4</sup> I argue that Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth* is a coherent retelling of the story that is not as distant from Leskov as these critics postulate. Some may consider the forces that motivate the changes in story and character dubious, or view the reworking clumsy at times, but the operatic story must be considered in its own right in order to understand the character of Katarina.

According to Pauline Fairclough, Vadim Shakhov argues that criticism has focused too heavily on the transformation from text to libretto, consciously or unconsciously considering Leskov’s Katarina as the ‘real,’ psychologically valid Katarina.<sup>5</sup> He argues that the operatic heroine represents a new and viable psychological construct one that is, I argue, invited by the source text.<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of Catherine Clément, I seek to unpack Katarina as a new and viable character by examining what is said and done in the libretto. Clément explains in her spirited *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*: “Initially this is not to be about the music... I am determined to pay attention to the language, the

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4. The adjectives in “” are used by Taruskin as well as Emerson and Morgan.

5. Pauline Fairclough, “Facts, Fantasies and Fictions: Recent Shostakovich Studies,” *Music & Letters* 86 (2005): 458. Vadim Shakhov’s work “Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda Leskova I Shostakovicha” is not available in translation as a result I was not able to incorporate the details of his argument into my work

6. *Ibid.*, 458.

forgotten part of the opera. The part that always keeps to the shadows.”<sup>7</sup> Like Clément, I am less interested in musical mechanisms and political subtext as in the words, actions and images of the libretto. Firstly, I will analyze the narration of Leskov’s story and seek to demonstrate that its patriarchal oriented mode of narration invites a retelling of the story. Instead of viewing this retelling as politically motivated satire, I will explore the reality of Katarina’s deeds and motivations and argue that her psychology is both complex and coherent, and that her final murder suicide resists the male-defined identities that have been imposed upon her throughout the opera.

Shostakovich explicitly endeavored to breathe new significance into Leskov’s story. In the program notes for the 1934 Lenigrad premier, he writes: “Leskov, as a brilliant representative of the pre-revolutionary literature, could not correctly interpret the events that unfold in his story.”<sup>8</sup> Shostakovich and Preis’ narrative is the story of an “intelligent, talented and interesting” woman brought to cruel acts by her “nightmarish circumstances.” Shostakovich viewed her as a “positive character” whose crimes represent a “protest against the tenor of the life she is forced to live.”<sup>9</sup> Taruskin views this spiritual elevation of Katarina as a complete imposition upon Leskov’s story. According to Taruskin, “Leskov cast Katarina as a she-devil pure and simple”

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7. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 12.

8. Taruskin, “Opera and Dictator,” 36.

9. *Ibid.*

and he does not see Leskov's Katarina as a nuanced character.<sup>10</sup> Leskov's Katarina is not as clear-cut as Taruskin believes, and several key aspects of the novella's narration invite the possibility of further nuance to her character. Many critics outline the detached nature of Leskov's narration which is meant to recall a procurator presenting a sketch for notes in a court case. Most critics, however, align the voice of the novella with Leskov himself - Emerson is the only critic among the sources I consulted to fully acknowledge the narrator as an individual with an ethical stance and an ironic intent.<sup>11</sup> She asks, "How are we to understand the ethical stance of this narrator, and how might that stance affect the genre of the tale?"<sup>12</sup> She does not dwell or provide much evidence to answer her own question and fails, in my view, to flesh out the implications of Leskov's choice of narrator. I will examine the implications of the novella narration to more fully answer Emerson's question. Chammot 1922 translation opens:

In our part of the country you sometimes meet people of whom, even many years after you have seen them, you are unable to think without a certain inward shudder. Such a character was the merchant's wife, Katerina Lvovna Izmaylova, who played

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10. Richard Taruskin, *On Russian Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008), 304.

11. Caryl Emerson, "Back to the Future: Shostakovich's Revision of Leskov's 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1989): 61, as well as Morgan, "Shostakovich the Dramatist," 331.

12. Emerson, "Back the Future," 67.

the chief part in a terrible tragedy some time ago, and of whom the nobles of our district, adopting the light nickname somebody had given her, never spoke otherwise than as the Lady Macbeth of the Mzinsk District.<sup>13</sup>

Two aspects are of note in this passage. Firstly, the narrator identifies as a resident of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mtsensk District and, if literate and if relating evidence as in a police report, is most likely male. He is thus aligned with the patriarchal forces that oppressed Katarina which, though muted in comparison to Shostakovich's, are undoubtedly present in Leskov's story.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, her identity as "Lady Macbeth" is imposed upon her. We are told she is never referred to otherwise, thus her identity as Katarina Lvovna is completely subsumed by and equated to that of another female murderer who is an archetype of female lust for power and serpent-like skills of coercion. Just as men take ownership of her person and body, so they take ownership of her story, denying her an individual path to tragedy and instead subsume it under patriarchal ideas of what motivates a women to murder.

Under these considerations, Leskov's narrator is unreliable and his telling of the story may not be as objective as many critics maintain. For example, Emerson states that the tale is told with minimal "authorial speculations," yet the narrative is sprinkled

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13. Nikolai Leskov, "The Lady Macbeth of the Mzinsk District," in *The Sentry, and Other Stories*, trans. A. E. Chamot (Wesport: Hyperion Press, 1922), 49.

14. Morgan, "Shostakovich the Dramatist," 342.

with generalized statements concerning the nature of woman.<sup>15</sup> When Sergei expresses his desire to be Katarina's husband, the narrator explains that marriage is "a desire that is pleasing to every woman, no matter how intimate her relations have been with the man."<sup>16</sup> Fiona, a convict who sleeps with Sergei but has no representation in the opera, embodies "the simplicity of the Russian woman, who is even too lazy to say, "go away" to anybody and only knows that she is a woman."<sup>17</sup> These generalized interjections suggest the narrator possesses a very simplistic and sexist understanding of his female characters. The reality of the narrative is slanted to perpetuate a certain image of women. I argue Leskov's choice of narration opens the possibility that aspects of Katarina's story have gone unreported. As a member of his own patriarchal society, the narrator perhaps cannot acknowledge rape, struggle for agency and nuanced forces that could drive a woman to murder. There is space for the reader to imagine an alternate reality – a story whose events and tone would change when opened up to Katarina's perspective.

Shostakovich's rendition of Lady Macbeth is a viable alternate telling that expands upon Leskov's story and is not arbitrary in its removal and addition of certain passages. Shostakovich and Alexandre Preis chose to remove the character of Fedia (the child who is to inherit the Lvovna business and his brutal murder by Sergei and Katarina). Shostakovich explains "the murder of a child,

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15. Emerson, "Back to the Future," 61.

16. Leskov, "Lady Macbeth," 78.

17. *Ibid.*, 120-121.

however it may be explained, always makes a bad impression” and critics seize upon this statement to demonstrate the extent to which Shostakovich’s Katarina is censored and problematically redeemed.<sup>18</sup> Shostakovich may have been right that depicting a child’s murder on stage would confuse his project for the audience; however, Fedia’s murder does not contradict Katarina’s humanization and complexification. Morgan views this murder as the moment when the reader loses all sympathy with Katarina.<sup>19</sup> However, the lead up to Fedia’s murder illustrates aspects of Katarina’s moral isolation and provide further merit to Shostakovich’s project. Sergei is the engine of greed that drives this brutal murder. In a manner reminiscent of Lady Macbeth and her desire to “pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth’s] ear,” Sergei carefully suggests that, when the business is given to Fedia, he and Katarina will not have the same happiness -that their affairs “will turn to ashes.”<sup>20</sup> Katarina is slow to understand his concerns with material wealth. She asks, “How so? Why should we not have happiness?” And in response to his suggestion that they will “sink even lower than before” she responds, “What do I care, Serezha?” Sergei concludes that Fedia’s death would result in their infinite happiness.<sup>21</sup> The image of Fedia selfishly ending her happiness festers in Katarina’s mind and she is eventually driven to murder. My point is

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18. Taruskin, “Opera and Dictator,” 36-37.

19. Morgan, “Shostakovich the Dramatist,” 330.

20. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 112.

Dmitri Shostakovich and Alexander Preis, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, trans. Edward Downes (New York: G Schirmer, 1983), 99.

21. Leskov, “Lady Macbeth,” 99-100.



not that Sergei's manipulations render Katarina blameless, but that this passage illustrates the extent to which Sergei and Katarina operate on different moral planes.

Sergei values material gain and power (hence why he loses interest in Katarina when she is no longer the rich merchant's wife) - whereas Katarina is driven by a conception of love and happiness that no one understands, a conception that is mercilessly mocked by Sergei and the convicts at the end of the story. She is a woman profoundly isolated at every point in the narrative: isolated by the derision of her husband, by her conception of love and happiness not shared by her partner, by her criminal deeds and by the mockery and cruelty of her fellow convicts. Though assigning Katarina the only instances of lyricism and introspection has problematic implications (as Taruskin and Morgan argue), such separateness does have a manifestation in Leskov's tale. Even if Shostakovich desires to victimize Katarina and villainize the autocratic regime, around her feels Stalinistic, a reworking of the story is invited by incongruous elements of the narration.<sup>22</sup> It is not inherently problematic but indeed astute and logical to humanize and present the opera from Katarina's perspective.

In contrast to my argument, Taruskin argues that Shostakovich music imposes Katarina's moral high ground on a story that does not support such a "colossal

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22. Taruskin, "Opera and Dictator," 37.

moral inversion.”<sup>23</sup> However, Shostakovich’s reimagining of Katarina is not limited to eliminating a murder and endowing her with musical lyricism. The operatic Katarina is a new and viable person: changes in the libretto not frequently elaborated upon by critics complicate Katarina’s psychology. The most significant example of a libretto change is Shostakovich’s rendering of Sergei’s possession of Katarina an explicit rape, the implications of which are not discussed by any of the critics I encountered. Appallingly, this scene is often addressed in the scholarship as the “consummation scene” or “the seduction scene.”<sup>24</sup> The exchange before intercourse contains protestations on Katarina’s part. Whether or not Katarina is initially attracted to Sergei or whether she derived pleasure from intercourse (directorial choices productions are free to make) has no bearing on the fundamentally non-consensual nature of the sex. The experience of such a personal violation changes Katarina’s journey: her path of destruction can be viewed as a quest to reclaim a violated self. I view Katarina’s struggle to assert an active self as the thematic crux of the opera and the heart of Katarina’s complexity.

The moment Sergei “seizes” Katarina, she implores him desperately to let her go with a shrieking “pusti!” (let go!).<sup>25</sup> In a style similar to Aksinya’s frantic

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23. Ibid.

24. Elizabeth Wells, “‘The New Woman’: Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13 (2001); cf. the lectures of Robert Greenberg, *Great Masters: Shostakovich – his Life and Music*, Great Courses (2002), Lecture 1: “Let the Controversy Begin,” Lecture 3: “Lady Macbeth.”

25. Shostakovich and Preis, *Lady Macbeth*, 13.

shrieks in the gang rape scene (Act I Scene 2), Sergei states, “I’ll show you who’s strongest,” and Katrina’s fears and protests are overwhelmed by Sergei’s force and the frantic orchestral interpolation. The trombone glissando marks the end of intercourse and the exchange occurring immediately after it is highly significant. In a frail, unaccompanied line, Katarina sings, “Now go away, for God’s sake: You know that I am married.”<sup>26</sup> Sergei laughs: “Ho, ho! That’s what they all say, these married women – but they still want to jump into bed with me. Ho, ho!”<sup>27</sup> Her pain, confusion and individual will are completely derided and undermined by Sergei’s laughter. His ridicule discounts any personal trauma, as her behaviour is subsumed into his conception of female “easiness.” Using Sergei’s logic, conceiving intercourse as unwanted would confirm Katarina’s identity as a passive woman- weak-willed and understood only by men. We know from Katarina’s earlier arias that she longs for agency and an individual self. Thus her next words, “I have no husband, all I have is you,” rather than illustrating the extent to which she desired intercourse, represents an attempt to *reclaim* the intercourse as a personal choice.<sup>28</sup> All of Katarina’s subsequent actions are pushed by her desire to articulate an individual self, to protect the life and lover she has chosen for herself. It becomes psychologically imperative to accommodate all actions and events to her vision of her life as personally chosen.

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26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 14.

28. Ibid.

Her desire for agency is apparent in her opening aria, in which she defines the selves of others in terms of task. She laments “Ev’ry tiny ant has its task to do, the cows in the barn give us milk. At the mill the men fill the flour sacks. I alone here have no work to do.”<sup>29</sup> Her unhappiness stems from a lack of direction or purpose in a world that does not demand any meaningful challenge of her. She exists only as “the merchant’s wife”- her life and identity framed only in reference to Zinovy Ismailov.<sup>30</sup> Yet her words are not only a lament, but also an expression of restlessness. Her first words are a question: “Ah, why can’t I sleep” and she tries in vain to escape into unconsciousness. Framed within Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, these are loaded words indeed, as the inability to sleep in Shakespeare’s text provides an important metaphor for distressed and diseased conscience. Why, at this point, is Katarina unable to sleep? Is it simply, as she explains, because she slept all night? Or perhaps it is a sense that her pent-up desire for agency will soon burst and she will seek to break down the “firmly locked” doors that enclose her.<sup>31</sup> Yet her desire to assert self will find agency only in response to male aggression – rape, the most profound violation of self, ignites her hitherto dormant desire to articulate self. One of the acute tragedies of the opera is that Katarina does not succeed in emancipating or articulating herself; rather, she appropriates the rhetoric and violence of her surroundings. One of Katarina’s most commanding and audacious moments is her exchange with Zinovy when he

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29. Ibid., 1.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 10.

returns home and proclaims that he knows “All! All! All!” about her affairs. She yells to Zinovey “I can’t even call you a man, you’re just a lump of wood – puny feeble, as cold as a fish.”<sup>32</sup> Yet the seeming forcefulness of her words is undermined by the fact that she reiterates an insult given to her by Boris earlier in the opera. In Act I, scene 1 he derides Katarina for being unable to bear children and, with sexually charged malice, declares she is “as cold as a fish.”<sup>33</sup> In confronting and insulting her husband, Katarina embodies the new woman she wishes to become with Sergei: a woman who chooses her lover, retaliates against her oppressors and realizes her own goals. Yet she is just reflecting and propagating the derisions of her abusers.

This appropriation is most apparent in Katarina’s obsession with violent love-making that grows after the rape. In Act II Scene 5, she wakes up Sergei and implores “Come and kiss me! (Sergei kisses her) No, not like that: kiss me so that you make my lips burn... and the icons will fall off their ledges!”<sup>34</sup> After the appearance of Boris’ ghost and the murder of Zinovey, as if to dispel and overpower these events, she entreats Sergei to “kiss [her] hard” and hold her with force. These violent desires are estranged from her Act I lament in which she yearns for someone to “kiss and caress [her] white breasts.”<sup>35</sup> What has driven Katarina’s desires to shift, and to measure the strength of love by its physical force? I argue

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32. *Ibid.*, 28.

33. *Ibid.*, 2.

34. *Ibid.*, 25.

35. *Ibid.*, 11.

that Katarina's penchant towards violence can be traced to her rape and the coping mechanism it engenders. Because Katarina is driven to view her rape as a personal choice, rather than accepting Sergei's derogatory assertion that she is a weak-willed woman like any other, Katarina latches on to the violent sex that was forced upon her. She is empowered to make Sergei her husband, and live and love on her own terms, ("we'll live together in honour... I'll make you my husband: I'm afraid of no one."<sup>36</sup>) and yet her desires are dictated and shaped by male violence. Despite the agency proclaimed in her statement "I will make you my husband," Katarina's behaviour and desires are at every point in the control of men. Her deeds are reactionary. Her murders are committed in response to male violence and the desire to eliminate them spurned by rape. Morgan argues that Katarina serves only to reflect the horror of her surroundings and that this deprives her of humanity and undercuts her image as a powerful heroine:

By constructing inhumanly oppressive surroundings for [his] heroine, [her] forces her to assert her humanity, her desire for freedom and love, by means of adultery and the murder – two crimes that in popular consciousness are inextricably linked, and that point, ultimately, to their perpetrator's loss of humanity. As a product of her environment, Katarina is ultimately deprived of her own personality, reduced to

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36. *Ibid.*, 24.

the sum of the social pathology around her.<sup>37</sup>

While Morgan is right to outline an overarching passivity in Katarina's attempts to assert self, this does not necessarily indicate that she has fallen into an archetype of female behaviour or that she is ultimately deprived of personality. I have argued that Katarina's path of destruction is initiated and dictated by a rape, a specific and individual trauma. Her struggle in the first three acts can be viewed as a deluded quest for an expression and reclamation of self. In this light, her struggle becomes more personal and psychologically complex. Though Shostakovich stated that Katarina's crimes are a "protest against the tenor of the life she is forced to live, against the dark and suffocating atmosphere of the merchant class," there is room to interpret her tale as a personal tragedy.<sup>38</sup>

In framing her struggle in the first three acts as an individual but deluded quest to articulate self, the question of whether Katarina ever articulates a genuine self can be posed. I argue her final act of murder suicide represents a resistance to articulate either male defined categories of appropriated murderess or passive victim. Taruskin, Emerson and Morgan discuss the tensions inherent in Shostakovich's project to depict a woman who embodies both a powerful heroine and oppressed victim. They argue that, instead of constituting a feminist reworking, *Lady Macbeth* reassigns to Leskov's Katarina

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37. Morgan, "Shostakovich the Dramatist," 331.

38. Taruskin, "Opera and Dictator," 37.

a martyred identity familiar to classic Russian heroines. Through her lament in Act IV, they argue, Katarina is sanctified through crime, rendering her death an “act of self-punishment [rather than] revenge against her lover and rival.”<sup>39</sup> In assigning her these tropes familiar to female identity (slave of passion, repentant sinner, martyr), Morgan proposes that “Shostakovich is not providing a feminist reevaluation of Katarina so much as he is beginning the process of reintegrating her into the traditional pantheon of Russian heroines.”<sup>40</sup> In simultaneously pushing Sonyetka and plunging herself into the Volga river, Katarina chooses neither murder nor self-destruction, but both in equal measure. In fully embodying both tropes of female identity, Katarina asserts an act that is new and resists archetype. Choosing murder would represent a continuation on the path of destruction her male surroundings have dictated for her, confirming her identity as a crazed love-slave, a malleable pallet on which the horror of men is painted. Suicide represents a complete abandonment of the course set in motion - a renunciation of the love and pain she has experienced, and an act of self-purification that recalls her initial passivity.

These two polar stances recall the contrasting ways in which Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Lady Macbeth cope with the encroaching reality of their deeds. Lady Macbeth, isolated and rendered ineffectual in her maddened guilt, jumps off a tower offstage. Whereas Macbeth, fixated on his enemies, commits to the forward

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39. Emerson, “Back to the Future,” 64.

40. Morgan, “Shostakovich the Dramatist,” 330.



momentum of his deeds declaring in his final speech to Macduff: “I will not yield.”<sup>41</sup> Katarina embodies the psychology of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, a refusal to choose either archetype by embodying the apotheosis of both. Her polar trajectories of “sinner and saint, both passive victim and political revolutionary” reach their ultimate end but collide in an act that denies either archetype resolution or confirmation.<sup>42</sup> Katarina frustrates her narrative arc- she has refused the world and its attempts to define her. She has created a space of ambiguity, and has made herself unreadable. The rest of her world cannot recognize it; they will call her Lady Macbeth for generations to come, but there is a certain articulation of self in her final act. It is not eloquent or musical, it may not have been intended as resistance, but it is an action that resists the project to hoist social messages on her story.

Confused as to whether Katarina is “a swine or not a swine,” Rostropovich, suggests, in what would appear to be a dismissive tone, that Shostakovich has depicted a human anomaly.<sup>43</sup> His suggestion may in fact be correct. The question should not be whether Katarina is a swine or not a swine, victim or perpetrator – she refuses such binaries. Katarina is a woman who simultaneously embodies polarities in ways that are ambiguous and perhaps beyond understanding. The question instead lies in the consequences of human capacity for polarity, the nature of self-articulation, and

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41. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 209.

42. Emerson, “Back to the Future,” 66.

43. *Ibid.*, 71.

how a human can articulate the extremes of abused and abuser. Although it has been argued that the incongruities of the heroine are indicative of a composer and librettist with confused and dubious goals, I prefer to expand upon Shostakovich's initial assertion that Katarina is complex, talented and interesting.

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