



**Lesia Ukrainka**

*Apokryf*

**His Beatitude  
Sviatoslav Shevchuk  
and Oksana Zabuzhko**

*Chotyry rozmovy pro  
Lesiu Ukrainku*

[Lesia Ukrainka. Apocryphon. His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk. Oksana Zabuzhko. Four Conversations About Lesia Ukrainka].

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*Reviewed by Dariya Syroyid*

This unprecedented and well-timed edition, published last year (2020) by Komora Publishing House, may be the first book of its kind in Ukraine and worldwide. At the least, its main interlocutors – the Primate of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church and writer Oksana Zabuzhko – do not remember any other case when a church leader spoke with a writer (or any other person of renown) about literature in public. I suppose that the reader will also not be able to recall such an example.

The volume consists of two parts – the first comprises four conversations concerning Lesia Ukrainka and her “early Christian” dramas. The second contains seven examples of Lesia Ukrainka’s *oeuvre* meticulously prepared by Hanna Hadzhylova – the book’s academic editor. The introduction to this part indicates that the texts were published according to final version manuscripts if available; in other cases, first editions were used. The following texts are presented for the reader’s disposition: *Oderzhyma* (A Woman Possessed), “*Shcho dast nam sylu? Apokryf* (What Will Give us Strength? An Apocryphon),” a letter to Ahatanhel Krymskyi, *Rufin i Pristsilla* (Rufin and Priscilla), *Na poli krovi* (In the Field of Blood), *Yohanna, zhinka Khusova* (Joanna, Wife of Chuza), *Advokat Martian* (Martian the Advocate). The choice of texts is conditioned by important areas for reflection and designed to involve readers in the discussion (special thanks to the publishers for the two bookmarks that the book is equipped with). Such an open form of the book means that these four conversations only mark the beginning of an extensive re-reading and re-thinking of Lesia Ukrainka’s *oeuvres*.

Another specific (and successful) idea of this book was preserving the naturalness of the recorded conversations, which resonate with spontaneity and are always vivid. Such an arrangement brings the readers back to the intellectual tradition of the dialogue. Each of the four parts has a provisional plan conditioned by its texts, but the course of the discussions often holds surprises. The discussions are presented only by date, and not according to topics, problems, or questions. The first part is dedicated to *In the Field of Blood* and *A Woman Possessed*; the second and third – to *Martian the Advocate*, *Rufin and Priscilla*, and *Joanna, Wife of Chuza*; the fourth is about *Rufin and Priscilla*. The range of works and issues considered, however, is much broader.

The main goal (or rather one of the goals) of this book was to explore Lesia Ukrainka's relations with Christianity. Some historical facts invite such an approach: Moscow's synodal censorship banned these works as "atheistic" during the writer's lifetime, and later, in Soviet times, these plays were used as argumentation for Lesia Ukrainka's "anti-Christian" position, although the dramas themselves were not recommended for reading or staging in theatres. The writer's voyage beyond the biblical canon, through the use of apocryphal material and the creation of her own interpretations of biblical narratives for the development of her ideas are questions that still need qualified explanations in historical, theological, literary, and many other respects. Thus, words spoken by His Beatitude Sviatoslav can provide a key to understanding these texts: "I would like to call Lesia Ukrainka an apologist of Christianity, not in the sense of a doctrinal system, but as a live communication with God" (p. 25). Furthermore: "For Lesia Ukrainka, Christ is not an idea but a person" (p. 17).

One of the issues that was touched upon in this dialogue concerns the meaning of apocryphal literature. Lesia Ukrainka herself characterized her poem *What Will Give us Strength* (about the carpenter who made the cross for Christ and who experienced the suffering of Christ very personally and dramatically) by the word "Apocryphon." Moreover, the word appears in relation to Lesia Ukrainka's works not only as the title of this book, but for example, as the title of a theatrical performance at the *Les Kurbas Theatre* in Lviv, based on two dramas: *In the Field of Blood* and *Joanna, Wife of Chuza*. Important discoveries and explorations of biblical and apocryphal texts at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries are mentioned very pertinently in this discussion. Not less significant is an emphasis on the current state of Apocrypha research. This includes the consideration of critical editions by Constantin von Tischendorf (*Evangelia Apocrypha*, 1876) and Richard Adelbert Lipsius (*Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 1891, 1898, 1903) and translations of these texts, for example, *Neutestamentliche Apocryphen*, published in 1904 by Edgar Hennecke. Moreover, we cannot forget about the five volumes from Ukrainian manuscripts collected, commented on, and published by Ivan Franko (*Apokryfy i lehendy z ukrainskykh rukopysiv*, 1896–1910). Currently, we are experiencing a time of the "reconsideration and reappraisal of many of our long-held, often misguided notions concerning apocryphal texts," as stated by Janet Spittler in her review of *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian*

Apocrypha (2015; RBL 01/2017). Furthermore, this considerable interest in apocryphal literature provides reasonable grounds for reinterpreting Lesia Ukrainka's dramas.

Another important point of conversation consists of emphasizing the metaphorical sense of the early Christian Church in considering Lesia Ukrainka's personal experience, for example, the analogy between the "Ukrainian catacomb Hromada" (Oksana Zabuzhko) and the early Christian Community.

Many interesting issues are raised in discussions about Lesia Ukrainka's "early Christian" works: the role of woman in the Church; the institutionalized Church and Christianity as live communion with God; the motive of the lone prophet and the theme of death; fidelity to a person and an idea; the act of stoning in the Bible and the use of this image in Lesia Ukrainka's works; various aspects of martyrdom and friendship. I do not think it makes sense to talk about the flaws of this book. It can be said that many other questions, problems, and aspects of reading could be added to the discussion. Plenitude was not, evidently, a goal of the *Four conversations*; their aim is instead to take a step towards a further understanding Lesia Ukrainka's dramas, offering new reading keys and inviting more comprehensive deliberation.