

A. Luis Pujante

Intellectuals vs. Stars: The Case of Novelli's Shylock*

I

The dissatisfaction, aversion or sheer hostility of philosophers and intellectuals with regard to the theatre or some aspects of it is age-old and has been extensively documented by Jonas Barish. It begins with Plato's critique of drama and does not seem to have died out. After Plato, Barish continues with Aristotle's disapproval of his master's view of mimesis, which he regards "not as a menace but a source of value" (28). Yet Aristotle had his reservations against theatrical performance – or at least some of his observations can be interpreted as such –, and these are not mentioned or discussed in Barish's scholarly study. At the end of Part 6 of his *Poetics*, in which he describes tragedy, Aristotle concludes:

Spectacle, while highly effective, is yet quite foreign to the art and has nothing to do with poetry. Indeed the effect of tragedy does not depend on its performance by actors, and, moreover, for achieving the spectacular effects the art of the costumier is more authoritative than that of the poet (29).

Thus, if tragedy is so powerful in itself as to be independent of performance, there is strictly no need to see it in the theatre, and one can experience tragedy

* This paper is part of Research Project HUM-2005-02556/FILO, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science and FEDER.

by reading it. But there is more. In Book III of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that in his time actors had more power than the poets. Strictly speaking, it is not absolutely clear if he actually means power, force, influence, efficiency or capacity, and the various translations consulted render the original “δύναται” in different ways.¹ At any rate, it may be useful to bear in mind P. Ghiron-Bistagne’s division of the history of Greek actors into the following periods: (1) “Les inventeurs (circa 560–450)”; (2) “Les disciples des poètes (circa 450–400)”; (3) “Vedettes internationales (circa 400–350)”; (4) “Les courtisans d’Alexandre (circa 350–320)” and (5) “Formations des sociétés d’artistes dionysiaques” (circa 320–280)” (Ghiron-Bistagne 135–171). With this in mind, let us remember that Aristotle (384–322) lived between the period of the “vedettes” and that of the “courtisans”, and was in a position to observe the greater power or influence of actors over that of playwrights in his own lifetime.

It is clear then that the adverse attitude of intellectuals to theatrical performance or some aspect of it is as old as theatre itself. We could even say that it is in the nature of the theatrical to awaken dissatisfaction or enmity in the intellectuals or a significant number of them. It is, however, arguable that the complex range of adversity could be classed under such an all-embracing heading as “anti-theatrical prejudice”, as Jonas Barish does. Not only is this a misnomer, but it is also a misconception. If a prejudice is an opinion formed beforehand, especially one based on inadequate facts, we cannot find prejudice in many of the opinions gathered in Barish’s scholarly study, in which intellectuals reason out their opinions on the basis of facts. It is quite another thing if their opinions are convincing or acceptable, but this does not prevent them from being well-founded.

Nor can we say that a negative opinion against a specific aspect of acting or performance involves a condemnation of the whole activity. Besides, criticism of actors, particularly of theatrical stars, has been expressed in different ways *by theatre people themselves*. Stanislavski’s Method taught the actor to avoid histrionics and self-exhibition, to seek naturalness. In this respect, there is an implicit criticism in Hamlet’s (Shakespeare’s?) advice to the players, who should “speak no more than is set for them” and warns against excesses that prevent playing from holding “the mirror up to nature”. One could even go further back and quote Aristotle again on actors in Greek drama: “So tragedy is something like what the older school of actors thought of their successors, for Myniscus [who acted for Aeschylus] used to call Callipides ‘the monkey’, because he overacted, and the same was said of Pindarus” (*The Poetics* 113).

¹ Thus the following: “at the present day actors have greater influence on the stage than the poets” (Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric* 347); “les acteurs font plus pour le succès que les poètes” (Aristotle, *Rhétorique* 39); “tienen más fuerza los actores que los poetas” (Aristotle, *Retórica* 179).

II

Barish might have considered including the Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) in his *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* on the basis of his “Shylock”. In this essay, which was first published in Spanish in 1910 and later in English translation in 1963,² Ortega criticised a production of *The Merchant of Venice* that gave top priority to the acting star at the expense of the overall dramatic effect. The star was Ermete Novelli (1850–1919), who was reputed to be one of the greatest masters of Italian dramatic art. He had been playing character and leading comedy parts in the best companies between 1871 and 1884, when he created his own in 1885. In 1900 he founded a repertory company, the “Casa di Goldoni”, on the lines of the Comédie Française. He became a theatre star and was celebrated as such both on Italian and European stages. He had great success in Paris in 1898 and 1902, and in 1910 he played Shylock and Lear for two well-known silent filmlets.

It was in 1910, too, that Novelli's company played *The Merchant of Venice* in Madrid, with Novelli himself as Shylock. Like other Italian stars (Adelaida Ristori, Ernesto Rossi, Tomasso Salvini or Eleonora Duse), Novelli had played Shakespearean roles in Spain before (Petrucchio in Madrid and Barcelona; Othello, Shylock and Hamlet in Barcelona). In what is still the most documented work on Shakespearean performance in Spain, Novelli is described as follows:

Stature, a full, flexible voice with a pleasant timbre, clear diction, complete mastery of the stage, natural movements, outstandingly expressive facially and in his gestures, warmth, an open heart – Ermete Novelli had everything it took to win over the audience.³

Yet Novelli did not succeed in winning over one particular member of the Madrid audience in his 1910 performance of Shylock. José Ortega was not amused by Novelli's Shylock – or, for a different reason, by the rest of the actors. Ortega, who admired Shakespeare's conception of the historical Jew in Shylock, disapproved of the histrionic and anti-historical treatment given him by Novelli and criticized the audience for not being more demanding. He began his essay by pointing out the difference between Novelli and the rest of the company:

² See Ortega 1970. First published in *El Imparcial* 14 July (1910): 3; repr. in J. Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas*, I, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1961: 522–526.

³ “Estatura, voz copiosa y flexible, timbre grato, dicción clara, dominio absoluto de la escena, movimientos desembarazados, expresividad notabilísima en gestos y ademanes, simpatía, corazón abierto, todo lo reunía Ermete Novelli para hacerse suyo al público” (Par 141). The translation is my own.

Some nights ago I saw *The Merchant of Venice* at the Lara. Novelli, with a face like that of an enormous chimpanzee,⁴ played the Jew splendidly in Titian-like hues and lineaments. The rest of the actors committed a collective crime which I will not allow to pass without protest. (329)⁵

For Ortega the reason for this imbalance between the accomplished main actor and the mediocrity of the remaining company lay in the fact that these Italian companies were formed by “a sole actor backed by non-entities” (in the original: “una unidad seguida de muchos ceros”; literally: “a number one followed by a series of zeros”). In other words, the Italian companies, at least Novelli’s, were based on the star system, which, to his mind, was fatal for such a play as *The Merchant of Venice*.

Ortega’s starting point here, as in many of his other books and essays, is the crucial importance of the classics, without which there can be no cultural pedagogy. “All men have brought, or were able to bring, their own share to the great edifice of culture; but there are great men who have brought the plan, the main idea of the construction.” These men, the classics, “are an invitation to historical humanity, and, like foremen, they direct us to posts in the common tasks”. Thus Shakespeare’s creative art is classical, “because he neither tells us anecdotes nor takes picturesque profiles out of the tapestry of life”. One could question this generalization, but I think we understand Ortega’s main point, i.e. that in his most characteristic and successful works Shakespeare creates

a small universe, a microcosm, enclosing, in a condensed form, the complete substance of the real world, the macrocosm, a world of less intensity, precisely because it is more extensive, where, in order to unite two energetic emotions, we have to go from one to the other in a senseless journey which takes ten or twenty years (330).

Shakespeare is also a successful artist, Ortega goes on, because, like Rubens in his paintings, he distributes the aesthetic weights very carefully, thereby achieving perfect balance. *The Merchant of Venice* is such a work, and Shylock here is the regulating weight. If because of the orientations or the trends of such companies, the actor playing Shylock weighs much more than the others, the performance fails. Novelli’s Shylock displayed indisputable virtuosity, but upstaged the other figures, and in the context of the play’s complex structure, he proved disproportioned and grotesque. The overall result was responsible for the frivolous atmosphere that flowed from the stage to the audience. In other words,

⁴ Is there a tendency to associate certain actors with monkeys? Remember Aristotle’s quotation at the end of the previous section.

⁵ Some of these extracts from LeWinter’s English translation have been slightly corrected for accuracy and clarification purposes.

it was the star system embraced by this company and embodied in Ermete Novelli that created what for Ortega was a grotesque imbalance that was fatal *both for the play in general and for the figure of Shylock in particular*:

If Antonio, Portia, Bassanio, and Jessica do not enter the realm of our perception, the money-lender will become for us no more than a shaggy old dog that barks at passers-by from his kennel.

And, for the love of Shakespeare, Shylock means far more than that! (330–331).

But what does or did Shylock mean for Ortega that escaped Novelli? The question was to be addressed in the second part of his essay.

III

As John Gross has rightly observed in his discussion of Ortega's essay, Shylock was for the philosopher a butt of antisemitism, "both as the inescapable context of the play, and as a disease that was still running its course in the real world" (Gross 229). Indeed, Ortega devoted the second half of his essay to reminding us of what for him was "one of the worst evils of history": "The poor wandering Jew who trudges, his head bent, over the roads of history, under the weight of infinite misfortunes is as legendary as the millenium. He is, however, alive" (331). As the English translator of Ortega's "Shylock" points out, one characteristic of the philosopher's work was his "inability to refrain from preaching."⁶ It is in this second part of his essay where Ortega most clearly displays it. Let us then avoid the preaching and try to stick to the main facts.

Firstly, Ortega remembers his personal experiences in Germany, i.e. having seen the *historical Jew* in a shop in Leipzig and walking in Frankfurt. He then tells how a Jew entered into conversation with him in a railway compartment on a journey to Berlin, and how, when the German passengers heard he was a Jew, they started with jokes and insults against him. But Ortega was afraid and did nothing:

I was ashamed and did not defend him, and the other night, seeing *The Merchant of Venice*, the small Jewish seller of watches appeared in my memory, and looked into me with his eyes of a malignant bird, and I felt a pain in my heart (Ortega 331).

⁶ See note to Ortega's "Shylock", LeWinter 327.

He then goes back to the Middle Ages, and reminds his readers of how the Jews were discriminated against in Majorca; then, to the nineteenth century, and the expulsion of the Jews under Tsar Alexander III, followed by the pogroms in Kishinef and Bialystok. Finally, to St. Petersburg, in which the following conversation was reported to have taken place between a Jew and a chief of police:

“You can put up with dogs in Petersburg... I have eight children to support, I earn my living with great difficulty. Please, let me stay, and I will walk on all four like the dogs!” “No,” Gresser [the chief of police] answered, “you are a Jew. You are less than a dog. Make a Christian of yourself.” (333)

One does not have to be reminded that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock is called, or said to be called, «dog» o «cur» quite a few times, more specifically «the dog Jew» o «currish Jew», and that he is obliged to become a Christian. Not that this Russian chief of police knew his Shakespeare, and was vaguely quoting him, but that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare was echoing an age-old insult and an ancient demand that had been heard in Christian countries for centuries, and was still common.

Embracing humanistic ideals, being well informed about antisemitism and, though not a Jew, sensitive to it, Ortega could not help complaining about the grotesque and frivolous treatment given the Jew and the play by Novelli and his company:

Signor Novelli, Signor Novelli, why transform Shylock into a picturesque figure? In the Venetian Jew Shakespeare conjures up a millennial pain: with poetic licence, unflinchingly, he portrays the cruel image of hate among the races, and of enmity among their Gods (333).

IV

Commenting on Aristotle’s remark that in his time actors had more power or influence than playwrights, it has been pointed out that here he was formulating one of the most general rules in the history of theatre, i.e. that a period of great playwrights is succeeded by one of great actors.⁷ If this is true, it needs to be qualified, if only in the sense that in some periods theatrical splendour has depended on the existence of great dramas written to be played by great actors. However, when the playwright is a long-dead classic like Shakespeare, and the period the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it is true that the nature of

⁷ See Wartelle in Aristotle, *Rhétorique* 99.

the performance of his plays was decided by the stars of the day who were also managers of their companies: apart from Novelli, and to name but one instance, in England Henry Irving's fidelity to the text was often questioned. Speaking of his Shylock, G. B. Shaw remarked that Irving adapted characters to his own personality and plays to his own style, and Gordon Craig observed that he imposed a distinct unity of tone on his productions, but he did so "for the sake of the actor, himself" (qtd. in Craik 81–82). One could also add the way Irving adapted Shakespeare in order to shine jointly with Ellen Terry (Craig's mother) in plays where there was a strong male and a strong female character.

The case of Ortega against Novelli seems to be just one more at the time in which the power of the stars was also being challenged or questioned. Thus G. B. Shaw tried to fight the star system, the French novelist Anatole France remarked that it was not the bad actors, but the good ones, that spoiled plays, because "their egregious individuality spills over and drowns everything", and in the world of the theatre some directors like Gordon Craig wanted to do away with the "sickening egoism" of theatre stars (later, however, to be replaced by that of theatre directors) (Barish 343). As far as Ortega was concerned, he was not the kind of intellectual who would by mentality or temperament disdain acting and the theatre. On the contrary, he was interested in it; he even theorized sympathetically on both in his *Idea del teatro*.⁸ As has been shown, his "Shylock" does not show an anti-theatrical prejudice, but simply expresses a criticism of theatrical stars whose personality spills over and drowns the performance.

The question remains whether Novelli could have avoided this trivialisation and offered a *Merchant of Venice* that was more in line with Ortega's views. Obviously he could have, had he considered them as relevant for his production, but it seems they were not among his priorities – if such considerations had entered his mind at all. But there may be another explanation for Novelli's production, apart from the power of actor-managers at the time. Novelli could afford to adopt his approach and his Shylock because he was showing it before the Holocaust and in certain European countries in which this play would touch a less raw nerve than in others. The situation seems to have changed in recent times, but *The Merchant of Venice* is the Shakespearean play that has most suffered harmful repercussions since the rise to power of the Nazis and in the aftermath of World War II. Novelli's *Merchant* did not meet with racial sensitivities in Italy, France or Spain, but when the play was to open the 1905 season in Odessa, a local Zionist leader persuaded Novelli to open it with a less inflammatory work – not that it mattered, as later that year the Jews there suffered the feared pogrom (Gross 229–230).

⁸ Originally a public lecture delivered in Lisbon and Madrid in 1946, and published posthumously (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1978).

Had Ortega lived in our times, he would have approved of Michael Radford's 2004 *Merchant of Venice*. Not that the "aesthetic weights" of the play are perfectly distributed in the film – the emphasis is on the serious element of Shakespeare's play, thus placing it in the tradition of "The Tragedy of the Jew" – but neither Radford's chosen approach, nor the cast and the cinematographic element made any star shine unduly or grotesquely bright. Also, he would have liked the three-minute introduction, spoken and visual, to the intolerance towards the Jews with which the film starts, where books in Hebrew are burnt and a Jew is thrown into a Venetian canal – not much perhaps, but at least an eloquent sample of their "millennial pain". And Ortega would have warmed to Al Pacino's Shylock, whose "bated breath and whispering humbleness" eloquently showed that "sufferance is the badge of our tribe". A star no doubt, but, unlike Novelli, or Kenneth Branagh for that matter, an actor who was not his own director.

Works cited

- Aristotle, *Retórica*. Transl. A. Tovar. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1985.
- Aristotle, *Rhétorique* III. Transl. M. Dufour and A. Wartelle. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1980.
- Aristotle, *The "Art" of Rhetoric*. Transl. J. H. Freese. Cambridge, Mass., & London: Harvard University Press & W. Heinemann, 1975.
- Aristotle, *The Poetics*, "Longinus", *On the Sublime*, Demetrius, *On Style*. Transl. W. H. Fyfe. Cambridge, Mass., & London: Harvard University Press & W. Heinemann, 1973.
- Barish, J. *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: The University of California Press, 1985.
- Craik, T.W., ed. *The Revels History of Drama in English*. Vol. VII: *1880 to the Present Day*, London: Methuen, 1978.
- Ghiron-Bistagne, P. *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976.
- Gross, J. *Shylock. Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- LeWinter, O., ed. *Shakespeare in Europe*. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963; repr. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1970.
- Ortega y Gasset, J. "Shylock." *Shakespeare in Europe*. Ed. O. LeWinter, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
- Par, A. *Representaciones shakespearianas en España*, II, Madrid & Barcelona: Victoriano Suárez/Biblioteca Balmes, 1940.