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The Half-Forbidden Play in Soviet Shakespeare Criticism of the 1920-50s

The first Russian translation of Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* appeared in 1833 and before the end of the nineteenth century four other translations were published. Nevertheless, the comedy remained to be one of the less popular Shakespearean plays on the Russian dramatic stage. Russian literary and critical thought, on the other hand, paid attention to this play even before publication of the first translation.

Several prominent Russian men of letters, including Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Herzen, Apollon Grigoryev and others, expressed their special interest in *The Merchant of Venice*. For example, in Russian culture Pushkin's meditation on the essential difference between Shakespearean characters and personages of French Neo-classical dramaturgy is widely known:

Characters, created by Shakespeare, are not the types of only one passion or only one vice, as Molièrian ones, but the living beings, full of various passions, various vices. Molière's Miser is covetous and nothing more; Shakespeare's Shylock is covetous, clever, vindictive, philoprogenitive, witty. (Pushkin 180)

It may be said that all the interest in the comedy was often reduced to its brightest character – to Shylock; although his name was not frequently mentioned in Russian criticism, it was still more common than the title of the play itself. (Later during some performances in pre-revolutionary Russia, the play had the stage name "Shylock"). Besides, in some explorers' opinions, Shylock was for many years serving as a literary prototype of a Jew in Russian national literature (Aloe 21-28).

Speaking of the play as a whole, it can be said that the special theatrical and literary-critical interest in it emerged in Russia at the *fin de siècle*. Being in agreement with the conventional opinion, that *The Merchant of Venice* has no significant stage history in Russia, I would mention, nevertheless, a few productions. In 1898 the play was staged at the Moscow Art Theatre (MKhT) by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Alexander Sanin. The performance which was entitled "Shylock," was unanimously considered by contemporary critics "a failure" (Campbell 730). For some spectators, the single success of the performance was the acting of young Vsevolod Meyerhold in a short role of Prince Arragon (Andreeva 333-334). In 1916 *The Merchant of Venice* was

performed at the Malyj Theatre in Moscow (Shtein 1981: 131-134). In this production, two actors, Alexander Yuzhin and Osip Pravdin, played Shylock in turn and, as the contemporaries witnessed, played in quite different manners (Zograf 503-505, 525, 579). The comedy was also staged at the Saint-Petersburg's Popular (Narodnyj) Theatre, in Estonian town Tartu in 1888 (Ird 333-334), in Kiev in 1913, among others. Supposedly, this selected list could open the great stage history of Russian *Merchant of Venice*, but regrettably this history was suddenly interrupted for many years.

After the Revolution of 1917 the strict Communist control extended to book-publishing, literary criticism, acquisitions of libraries and repertoire of theatres. *The Merchant of Venice* was not prohibited *de jure*, but *de facto* it was considered to be an "anti-Semitic play" and very soon disappeared from the theatrical repertoire. Not so long after the revolution, the comedy was still being played by Malyj Theatre; in 1920-21 *The Merchant of Venice* was on at the Great Dramatic Theatre (BDT) in Petrograd and in 1923-26 it was staged in Armenia (Samvelyan 186-188, 202-206). Just then the stage history of the "anti-Semitic play" at the dawn of Soviet epoch was abruptly broken, and the non-declared taboo existed for the next 60 years or so. It is noteworthy that in a bulky and thorough monograph of Sofia Nels, *Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage* (1960), we cannot find a single word about *The Merchant of Venice*, even the above-mentioned rare performances of the 1920s are not recollected. It is obvious that it was a conscious decision of the author and the publishers acting under pressure of the censors.

It could be expected that the comedy would be included in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which was compiled by the Ministry of Education (*Narkompros*) on Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya's initiative, and would then be withdrawn from all Russian libraries. Meanwhile, Shakespeare as one of the greatest writers of the world was not dethroned by Soviet propaganda, and his literary heritage without any exceptions was officially recognized and traditionally praised. So though the comedy was not played on stage, it was published in the editions of the playwright's complete or selected works and was discussed in general monographs on Shakespeare in the 1920-30s.

We cannot find any special monographs or essays on this comedy in Soviet Shakespeareana of that period, but authors of the books, describing the evolution of the great British writer (V.Friche, I.Aksyonov, A.Smirnov, M.Morozov) did not ignore the play. As is widely known, the so-called *vulgar sociology*¹ prevailed in Soviet literary criticism of that time, and it was quite

¹ *Vulgar sociology* was one of very popular trends in Marxist aesthetics and literary criticism of the 1920-30s. It was based on the principle of a rigid determinism of any ideology by a contemporary mode of production and it represented an artist as a mouthpiece of a certain class or social group.

apparent in Shakespeare studies in general and in the analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* in particular.²

One of the leading figures in the early Soviet official literary criticism, Vladimir Friche, in his book on Shakespeare (1926) describes the conflict “Antonio – Shylock” in the context of the *class struggle* exclusively. In his opinion, Antonio is an embodiment of the “old, feudal dissipation,” but Shylock represents the bourgeois, “early capitalist” quality. “The struggle of Antonio and Shylock ends in victory of the old over the new...” (Friche 76). That is why, in the critic’s opinion, the play is not a *happy comedy*. As far as the national (racial) conflict is concerned, it is absolutely ignored by Friche. Such an approach with strict limitations was typical for a number of Soviet scholars. Nonetheless, there was some diversity in the interpretations of the comedy even within those narrow limits.

The first attempt to argue against Friche’s conception and, if only partly, to break out of the official ideology’s frames, was made by Alexander Smirnov who devoted several pages in his book *Tvorchestvo Shekspira* to discuss *The Merchant of Venice* (Smirnov, 1934: 70-75). The publication of the monograph was supported by Leningrad Great Dramatic Theatre (BDT), the leaders of which were dreaming to renew their production of the play and behind Smirnov’s research one could feel the Theatre’s desire to play this comedy on its stage. So the author argues (even if timidly) against the perception of the play as an anti-Semitic one, finding in it a “wonderful and deep humanistic approach to the racial problem.” Smirnov defined the play, as a whole, to be the piece of “the deepest ideological concentration” (1934: 70, 74-75).

To Smirnov’s mind, the “social collision” is the most important conflict in the comedy: “No doubt, that the main conflict here is not a racial one, as many bourgeois critics consider, but a social one.” Examining the collision “Antonio – Shylock”, the investigator remarks that the “superficial, racial reason is immediately [? - M.S.] replaced by a different – a class one...” (Smirnov, 1934: 71). However, unlike Friche and the authors of like mind, Smirnov does not completely ignore the racial collision. He enters into polemics not only with “bourgeois critics,” but also with Friche, as well as with his own early works. Of course, this polemics was restricted by the limits of *vulgar-sociological* method and was held within those limits. It is interesting that the most analytical contemporary review of Smirnov’s book was sharply critical and entitled: “Shakespeare Embraced by the Sociologist” (Kemenov 223-238). The reviewer himself obviously did not exceed the same limits, and his main “accusation” was

² Sigismund Krzhyzhanovskij’s article “Outlines of Shakespearean Comedy” published in the journal *Literaturnyj Kritik* (Krzhyzhanovskij 26-50) can be mentioned as the only exception, however, the author did not pay special attention to *The Merchant of Venice* there. The journal was created and headed in 1933-1940 by the well-known Marxist aestheticians and critics Georg Lucacs and Mikhail Lifshits, who were consistently struggling against the methodology of *vulgar sociology*. In 1940 *Literaturnyj Kritik* was invectively criticised and closed by Soviet authorities.

that “Smirnov did not understand the main quality of Shakespeare’s art – his deepest folk roots (*narodnost*)” (Kemenov 231).

Running a few steps ahead, I would say that a great connoisseur of Western languages and literatures, Professor Alexander Smirnov was by no means a strong supporter of vulgar sociologism or official Marxist-Leninist aesthetics; probably, he was a Marxist *malgré lui*. At the end of the 1950s, being a co-editor of the new edition of Shakespeare’s complete works in 8 volumes, he commented on *The Merchant of Venice* in quite another way, namely, getting rid of traditions of vulgar sociologism. There are also no traces of that methodology in Smirnov’s last book on Shakespeare (1963).

At the end of the 1930s the play completely disappeared from the Soviet scholars’ field of vision. For instance, the programme of the All-Union Shakespeare conference in April 1939 did not contain a single presentation on this play. Moreover, it was not even mentioned in the common discussion (Zubova 59-61). Looking retrospectively at those facts of Soviet scholarly life, we can notice that the approach to the comedy and the criteria used for its evaluation, began to undergo qualitative changes in the pre-War years.

An interesting comparison can be made between the approaches to this Shakespearean play in two countries which during the same period existed under similar totalitarian regimes: Soviet Union and fascist Germany. Unlike in Russia, in Germany this comedy had a rather rich stage history. For instance, before Hitler’s accession to power, in 1932, *The Merchant of Venice* was on the stage of sixteen (sic!) German theatres. During the Nazi period the number of the play’s performances decreased, but it was unexpectedly not at all forbidden. Goebbels’s Ministry adapted the comedy for the official anti-Semitic propaganda (Drevniak 250-253). Probably, just that notorious page of German theatrical history aroused after the Second World War productions of quite the opposite direction. It is enough to recollect the brilliant art of Ernst Deutsch and Fritz Kortner playing Shylock in the 1960s. Similar bright examples can be found in the post-war history of dramatic theatre in other European countries (King 211-232).

It is extremely significant how carefully certain newspapers and magazines in the USSR evaded the facts of German fascist ideologists’ usage of *The Merchant of Venice*. For instance, in 1936 the magazine *Internatsional’naja Literatura* [International Literature] published an article by an Austrian theatre director and playwright Bernhard Reich “Shakespeare on the Fascist Stage” (Reich 171-182). The anti-fascist views of Reich, who had been living in the USSR since 1926, as well as his knowledge of contemporary German theatre, could not be doubted, but writing for the Soviet magazine he had to obey the conventional rules, citing the Communist Party leaders, avoiding controversial topics and so on. To this day one can be amused reading his reference to the speech of one of the Soviet leaders Anastas Mikojan, who was then the Minister of Food Industry: “In his speech about the successes of Soviet Food Industry, comrade Mikojan presented the deep explanation of fascist psychology” (Reich

172). Meantime, every amateur of Shakespeare understood that a litmus paper for typical fascist appropriation of Shakespeare could be first of all *The Merchant of Venice*, but the comedy was not even mentioned in Reich's article. I assume that such an *omission* was done not by Reich himself, but by the experienced editors, who had shortened the author's text. As for Bernhard Reich himself, he was repressed in Soviet Union in 1937, like many other prominent emigrants-antifascists.

In April 1942, during the War between the USSR and Germany, a Shakespeare conference was held in Moscow by the "Shakespeare Cabinet" of All-Russian Theatrical Association (VTO). In his presentation on the possibilities of anti-fascist interpretation of Shakespearean plays, the head of the Cabinet, Mikhail Morozov, did not even mention *The Merchant of Venice* (*Internatsional'naja Literatua* 239-241). The play was not referred to in other conference papers as well. Full "oblivion" corresponded to the comedy's absence in the contemporary repertoire of Soviet theatres. However, at that time in other countries, theatrical companies staged *The Merchant of Venice*, creating anti-Nazi performances. Such was the case of the anti-Nazi production of the play in Stockholm (1944) directed by Alf Sjöberg. Sjöberg himself confessed that he had created his performance under the strong impression of *King Lear*, which the Swedish director saw in Moscow at the Moscow Jewish Theatre (GOSET) in the mid-1930s.³

Publication of the bulky collection of essays and articles on Shakespeare (*Shekspirovskij Sbornik*) in Moscow in 1947 was the first appreciable event in the post-war history of Soviet Shakespeare studies. One cannot, however, find a single sentence about *The Merchant of Venice* in any article of this volume. It was as if the comedy was excluded from the field of Shakespeare investigations in the USSR. At the post-war Shakespeare conferences in Moscow there were no presentations on this play either (Borovoj 40-46).

The post-war years were a starting point of a new phase in the Soviet appropriation of the play. The country was on the threshold of the premeditated anti-Semitic campaign, which was defined as "struggle against cosmopolitanism and obsequiousness before the West" (Azadovskij 83-135). If earlier *The Merchant of Venice* was not recommended for production as an "anti-Semitic play", since the late 1940s, when anti-Semitism became an essential component of the state politics, the play began to be even more persistently alienated because the words "Jew" and "Hebrew" are used in its text too often and not always with a negative connotation. Soviet ideologists feared that free interpretations of the play could be comprehended as a *sui generis* apology of ethnical Jews. If the earlier prohibition had several exceptions (some productions of the 1920s, scholarly interest and so on), the post-war non-declared taboo was

³ Gunar Sorelius talked about Sjöberg's production at *The European Shakespeare Conference* in Murcia in November 1999.

being carried out without any exceptions. Until the end of the 1950s Soviet criticism carefully bypassed the highly *explosive* subject.

The first signs of the awakened interest in the comedy appeared in 1958, during the so-called period of the *Thaw*. The third volume of the new edition of Shakespeare's complete works presented the comedy in Russian translation by Tatyana Schepkina-Kupernik, together with the above-mentioned Smirnov's article and comments on the play (Shekspir 535-549). In this article, Professor Smirnov made an attempt to overcome inertia induced by the vulgar-sociologist methodology.

The new volume of the works on Shakespeare (*Shekspirovskij Sbornik*), which was published in Moscow in 1958, contained an essay by Abram Shtejn on Shakespeare's comedies. The author paid some attention to *The Merchant of Venice* and the "tragic" figure of Shylock. Repeating Friche's old judgement that "Shylock embodies principles of all the bourgeois class society", Shtejn used the notion "bourgeois" in an absolutely negative sense. Although he made a feeble attempt to shift the main conflict of the play to the aesthetic plane, remarking that "Shylock is basically alien to the musical world of the humanists" (1958: 140), for the most part he stresses a different evaluation of this "tragic" personage: "bourgeois hard-heartedness of Shylock is hateful for the masses" (1958: 138). It is difficult to say which personages of the play Shtejn calls "the masses," but this *cliché* was very frequent in the Soviet official literary criticism and its inertia is quite apparent in the essay.

The signs of gradual overcoming of this inertia could be noticed in several papers and books, which appeared on the eve of Shakespeare's quadricentennial anniversary. First of all, Alexander Anikst's book *The Art of Shakespeare* (1963) must be mentioned. As a matter of fact, it was the first Russian real scholarly compendium on Shakespeare. Aware of the complexity of the main conflict in *The Merchant of Venice*, Anikst tried to interpret it from a position of historicism. The formulae, such as "Shylock, a bourgeois," were used by the scholar as a tribute to the tradition rather than as arguments, and this tribute was perhaps more important for the publishers than for the author himself (Anikst 232-249).

Alexander Anikst does not ignore the comical component of Shylock's character, but bravely – for his time – analyses the tragic essence of the personage. Besides, the scholar was not inclined to idealize the "winners" – young Venetians and Belmontians, who, unlike Shylock, have "music in their souls." Discussing two collisions in *The Merchant of Venice* and underlining that one of them is solved only formally, Anikst not only examined dramatic text, but also as an experienced theatre scholar and critic advised future theatre directors on the main hitches in staging the play, pointed out the main complications in process of performing that play. In the early 1960s Anikst could not yet expose all his thoughts on the comedy and his chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* contained quite a few *équívòkes*, although some things could be read between the lines as well.

It must be added that Anikst's book was the first, after a long break, to reflect the author's acquaintance with the contemporary state of the Western Shakespeare studies. In the 1960s such knowledge was becoming the norm for Soviet Shakespeareology, and this tradition was apparent in some later original essays on the comedies of Shakespeare. Among them let me mention the works of Alexey Bartoshevich (1987) and Irina Taitis (1986), which were already almost free from the remnants of vulgar sociologism. The absolute freedom of those remnants, and all kinds of official clichés, is characteristic of Leonid Pinsky's book *Realism of the Renaissance* (1961), where there are several original and deep remarks about *The Merchant of Venice*.⁴ Interpreting the character of Shylock, Leonid Pinsky without any exaggeration accentuated the tragic side of "dehumanisation of the personality" (81-84). Yet, Pinsky's works, as well as Anikst's books, already opened the new – chronologically and qualitatively – stage in the development of Russian Shakespeare studies.

The new quality of thinking and liberation from the official limitations as well as self-limitations characterise the best works in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian Shakespeareology of the last third of the twentieth century, in which *The Merchant of Venice* was discussed. However, the play was not performed until the end of the millennium. There were only two exceptions. The first one was the production of the famous Estonian theatre "Vanemuine" in Tartu (1958) directed by the prominent Estonian director Kaarel Ird and featuring an interesting actor Ants Lauter as Shylock⁵ (Meri 263-270). The second production was directed by Dmitro Aleksidze and staged by Sukhumi Georgian Theatre (1984), with a talented actor Georgij Kavtaradze as Shylock.

Both productions could only be performed on the national stages of outlying cities and not in Russian language. International character of Soviet theatre sometimes left loop-holes, allowing the evasion of non-declared prohibitions. (Nowadays, when Abkhasian-Georgian conflict is brought to a head, it is difficult even to imagine the existence of such a phenomenon as a Georgian theatre in the capital of Abkhasia!). Indeed, the Sukhumi performance did not become an All-Union cultural sensation because of the so-called "capital provinciality" of Soviet and Russian theatrical criticism: why this performance was created not in Moscow, Leningrad, or even in Tbilisi, but in small Sukhumi!

Two more productions were planned in the 1980s in the USSR. The Armenian National Dramatic Theatre was going to produce *The Merchant of Venice* with the great actor Sos Sarkisyan as Shylock, but this project was not realized. In the last year of the Soviet regime the play was being rehearsed in Klajpeda, but the first performance already took place in independent Lithuania in 1992.

⁴ Later Pinsky's thoughts on Shakespearean comedies were presented in his essay "Komedii i komicheskoe u Shekspira" (*Shekspirovskij Sbornik*. Moscow: VTO, 1967. 151-186). See also Pinskij 49-147.

⁵ Some years later Ants Lauter played an episodic role of the priest in the film *Hamlet* directed by Grigorij Kozintsev.

Speaking of the political reasons for preventing the staging of the comedy, it is necessary to underline that this taboo was not applied to all countries of the so-called “socialist camp”. For instance, the performance of Ivan Vazov National Theatre in Sofia (1992) was not appropriated as a breakthrough, because in the post-war Bulgaria the play was never forbidden and a certain tradition of stage interpretation already existed (Pancheva 247-260). The play was also produced in Poland (Ciechowicz and Majchrowski 191-207) and in some other countries of Eastern Europe. There, several theatre directors’ searchings were going on not only in the rigid context of modern political life, but also in correlation with the world aesthetic experience. The new productions also fed current literary and theatre criticisms with contemporary interpretations of the comedy.

In Russia this trend was revitalised only at the end of the millennium. The Moscow season 1999/2000 was marked by two productions of *The Merchant of Venice* (Bartoshevich 2003). Both performances were successful and were vividly discussed by critics, but... that is already a new stage in the history of Shakespeare appropriation in Russia and we’ll, perhaps, discuss it at a later time.

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