

Keywords: comedy; Plato; Tertullian; Prynne; Rousseau

Radical condemnations of theatre aimed at denying its legitimacy and excluding it from social life have been made throughout the history of the West. Sometimes these have been the consequence of hostility to art in general, while in other cases they have been directed exclusively to theatrical practice. In this entry we will limit ourselves to attacks on the theatre that have been theoretically motivated, be these philosophical, moral, or religious, rather than with more general hostilities to theater which have also been found in many eras and cultures (not only Western) and which have often been based on prejudices against actors' lifestyles, males interpreting female roles, or, more specifically, aesthetic criticisms aimed at the effectiveness of scenic representations compared to, for example, the reading of the texts. Seen from this broader set of prejudices – which, since Barish 1981, goes by the name of *Antitheatricality* – the condemnations of the theater with which we will deal may have drawn on some of these arguments, in particular suspicion towards the lifestyles of the actors. However, this does not mean that separating issues pertaining to the figure and sociology of the actor (see Maugras 1887; Levine 2004) from a conceptual negation that invests the very essence of the theatrical representation is without merit.

The Platonic condemnation.

Aesthetic reflection in the West begins with the Platonic condemnation of art, with the more specific condemnation of the theater, whether tragic or comic, taking on a particular importance. First of all, since he denies art the ability to access truth, which is proper to philosophy, Plato's criticism (427–347 BC) of the arts has an ontological basis. In book X of the *Republic* it is stated that artistic imitation is two steps away from the true being: if this imitation can be identified with the idea, for example, of a bed, the craftsman will already move away from the truth by building a simple material replica and transitory of the idea, but a painter will go even further, managing to produce only a simulacrum, a deceptive image. Imitation is opposite to true knowledge. This criticism is immediately extended to other forms of imitation, such as poetry in general, and in particular to the author of tragedies who, as an imitator, will be «third starting from the truth» (598 e).

Still in the *Republic*, in book III, the ontological argument is added to the one developed on a pedagogical basis. Regarding the educational value of poetry Plato argues that training based on knowledge of poets who have composed false fables is not suitable for guardians and rulers of the ideal state. Poets, and primarily Homer, attribute unbecoming behavior to gods and depict them as adulterers, deceivers, and quarrelsome; they depict angry or wailing heroes, rather than virtuosity; they are thrilled by laughter rather than displaying solemn and serious attitudes, and as result poets need to be excluded from the ideal state: «True, if a man, then, it seems, who was capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us ...» [*Republic*, 398 a]. Plato's specific criticism of theatrical forms takes on a particular importance within the overall condemnation of imitative poetry as it is precisely here that he focusses his attention.

Plato distinguishes three forms of narration: one that is fully imitative, in which narrators express themselves through their characters; a simple one, in which poets express themselves directly, and a mixed one, in which poets express themselves both through their characters and in the first person. The first is proper to tragedy and comedy; the second to choral songs, such as the dithyramb, the third to the epic since we find both dialogues among characters and descriptions of the poet in the Homeric poems. In this tripartition, the most severe verdict is reserved for theatrical representation, the most imitative kind of narration,

as it presupposes an ability to identify with the different characters thereby risking the dissolution of personal identity.

«(i)f, then, we are to maintain our original principle, that our guardians, released from all other crafts, are to be expert craftsmen of civic liberty, and pursue nothing else that does not conduce to this, it would not be fitting for these to do nor yet to imitate anything else. But, if they imitate, they should from childhood up imitate what is appropriate to them, men, that is, who are brave, sober, pious, free and all things of that kind; but things unbecoming the free man they should neither do nor be clever at imitating, nor yet any other shameful thing, lest from the imitation they imbibe the reality ... We will not then allow our charges, whom we expect to prove good men, being men, to play the parts of women ...» (*Republic*, 394 c-396 d).

It is not surprising that Plato contrasts the philosophers, the 'lovers of wisdom', to those who «delight in beautiful tones and colors and shapes and in everything that art fashions out of these», but whose thought is «incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of beauty in itself» (*Republic*, 476 b).

According to Plato, along with ignoring truth in favor of fiction, the theater presents another serious risk, i.e. to excite the passionate part of the soul to the detriment of the reflective one. Instead of teaching us to master emotions, tragedy enhances them. When we listen to Homer or a tragic poet imitate a hero venting his pain, we are led to follow him and surrender ourselves to the same feelings, and, what was previously considered a weakness in everyday life, is now appreciated on stage and we end up praising those who best make us experience these emotions. «And so, in regard to the emotions of sex and anger, and all the appetites and pains and pleasures of the soul which we say accompany all our actions, the effect of poetic imitation is the same. For it waters and fosters these feelings when what we ought to do is to dry them up, and it establishes them as our rulers when they ought to be ruled ...» (*Republic*, 606 d). This is why theater should not be admitted in the ideal state: if this happened, both pleasant and painful emotions would dominate instead of the law.

The Fathers of the Church.

While an effective answer to the Platonic criticism could be found in the defense of imitation and the claim of the cognitive value of the tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*, nothing similar can be found in violent attacks on the theater launched by the first Christian thinkers, and which, in fact, led to the end of ancient theater and the abandonment of Greek and Roman theatrical buildings. Theatrical performances, which were one of the salient phenomena of the ancient world and appear closely linked to pagan cults, had to necessarily be rejected by early Christians Church fathers. Traces of condemnation are to be found among the early Church fathers, finding a particularly radical and uncompromising formulation in *De Spectaculis* authored by Tertullian who lived between 150 and 220AD.

Although it is not possible to find an explicit interdiction of the performances in the Scriptures, for Tertullian the incompatibility of the theatre with the new faith was clear: indeed, it is precisely by refusing to participate in theatre that the true Christian was recognized. The force that attracts towards depictions of pleasure must always be condemned and rejected since it is an almost invincible attraction towards sin. Furthermore, the performances had always been connected to paganism, as evidenced by the fact that almost all the places used for performances were dedicated to some or other pagan deity – the shows were seen as idolatry enslaved to the devil. «We have the case of the woman – the Lord Himself is witness – who went to the theatre, and came back possessed», and when the Devil was upbraided, he answered, «And in truth I did it most righteously, for I found her in my domain», i.e. the theatre.

Strengthened by the degeneration of popular performances in the imperial age, Tertullian lumps all forms of spectacle in antiquity together in a single bundle in his attack: gladiatorial games, equestrian games, athletic competitions, pantomimes and stage performances all fall equally under his anathema, and a similar fate to that reserved for the circus is ascribed to

the theatre. All spectacular forms are in fact founded on passion and subvert the spirit equally: «... where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest ...» (Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, 15, trans. P. Schaff). The public rushes to the shows in a frenzy, and comes out strengthened in its evil inclinations, having witnessed performances full of obscenity. Theater occupies the privileged seat of impudence, it does not hesitate to even display harlots on stage, and, «You have the theatre forbidden, then, in the forbidding of immodesty. If, again, we despise the teaching of secular literature as being foolishness in God's eyes, our duty is plain enough in regard to those spectacles, which from this source derive the tragic or comic play» (Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, 17).

And, precisely when discussing the highest theatrical forms of antiquity, Tertullian moves from moral arguments to a refutation that concerns the essence of the theatrical representation. Tragedies and comedies represent foul, violent, lascivious events. But what we reject in real life cannot be tolerated even in representation: Tertullian roots out any difference between art and life, between representation and reality. The simulation must always be condemned: «The Author of truth hates all the false; He regards as adultery all that is unreal. Condemning, therefore, as He does hypocrisy in every form, He never will approve any putting on of voice, or sex, or age; He never will approve pretended loves, and wraths, and groans, and tears» (Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, 23).

The English Puritans.

In subsequent history it frequently happened that the hope of a return to the original purity of the faith and opposition to the exteriority and opulence of the Catholic cult was accompanied by a revival of the condemnation of the theater. This was the case, for example, with the Puritan movement that spread throughout England towards the end of the 16th century and in the following century, in order to eliminate the residues of 'papism' and compromise between the Anglican church (split off from the Roman church under Henry VIII) and Catholicism. Strongly inspired by Calvinist principles, moral intransigence, and close to the spirit of the original Church, the English Puritans revived many of primitive Christianity's reasons for condemning the theater, giving rise to a significant corpus of anti-theatrical literature (see Spinucci 1973).

One of the first examples is Stephen Gosson's work of (although, strictly speaking, only loosely connected to Puritanism), *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582). For Gosson, aware of Tertullian's arguments, theater is idolatry, mixing good and evil, and, by encouraging fiction favors the corruption of customs, in particular by allowing male actors to dress up as women and to play female roles.

A few decades later, in 1633, William Prynne's truly mind-boggling tome, *Histriomastix* appeared – the title itself taking up 42 printed lines. This was a comprehensive collection of all the theological, philosophical, moralistic, custom related arguments used against the theater, a text Barish defined as «a gigantic encyclopedia of anti-theatrical learning, which lashes out at every form of theater in the most ferocious terms, in a style of paralyzing repetition from which everything that can resemble a nuance has been carefully excluded» (Barish 1981, p. 83). 'Mastix' in Greek means 'lash', 'scourge', as the title immediately explains, and of which we give a 'taste': «*Histriomastix*, il flagello dei recitanti ovvero la tragedia degli attori, diviso in due parti, nelle quali è ampiamente dimostrato, con diversi argomenti, tramite le concorrenti autorità e risoluzioni di molti testi della scrittura, dell'intera Chiesa delle origini, sotto la Legge e il Vangelo, di 55 Sinodi e Concili [...] di 40 filosofi, storici e poeti pagani [...] che le rappresentazioni sceniche popolari (che sono le Pompe del Diavolo alle quali rinunciamo con il Battesimo, se crediamo ai nostri Padri) sono spettacoli peccaminosi, pagani, dissoluti, indegni di Dio, forieri di pericolose corruzioni, condannati in tutte le epoche [...] e che la professione di scrittore per il teatro, di attore, insieme al comporre, al recitare, al frequentare spettacoli sono cose contro la Legge, infami e sconvenienti per i Cristiani».

Prynne's personal vicissitudes were intertwined with those of the Puritan opposition to the theater: imprisoned after the publication of the book, in which hints at the "harlots on the

stage” had been seen, probably wrongly, as an allusion to the queen who had taken part in a play at court, freed a few years later, he found himself in contrast with Cromwell, who had also favored the Puritans, and ended up taking sides with the restoration and return of King Charles II. While the Puritans had obtained the official closure of London’s theaters in September 1642, «refuge for lascivious exuberance and frivolity», the Restoration of the monarchy brought their reopening in 1660, an event celebrated in Richard Baker’s 1662 book, *Theatrum redivivum*, which was conceived as a replica of Prynne’s *Histriomastix*.

The Jansenist controversies in France.

Jansenism, which flourished in France during the 17th century, was also understood as a religious reform movement oriented towards a return to the purity of faith and the rejection of worldliness and ostentation. Contemporaneous with the great flowering of classical French theater, with Corneille, Racine and Molière, Jansenism gave rise to a series of opposing positions and continued to do so throughout the century. Thus, once again, after the Puritan opposition that flourished in parallel with the great season of Elizabethan theater, we notice a characteristic synchronization between the great theatrical seasons and anti-theatrical positions.

The first signs of the controversy (for an overview, see Phillips 1980) already occurred in the first half of the century with the writing of A. Rivet’s *Instruction chrétienne touchante les spectacles*, to which the *Apologia del teatro* by G. De Scudéry responded (both texts are from 1639). However, it is above all after the middle of the century that the controversy produced the most arguments. With a distance of only one year between them, the *Traité de la comédie et des spectacles* by Armand de Bourbon, prince de Conti (1666) and the *Traité de la comédie* by Pierre Nicole (1667) were published. In both it was not only comedy, in the strict sense, that was targeted, but theater in general and even fiction as such: Conti openly declared that he had targeted not only comedy but also tragedy, tragicomedy, pastoral care and all the performances theatrical, Nicole also extends his condemnation to the novel, substantially including all imaginative works which feed what Nicole elsewhere stigmatize as «public poisoners».

The accusation concerning the falsity and deception inherent to theatrical performance (to which Corneille had replied ahead of time in *L’illusion comique*, 1634) takes up arguments already present in Tertullian. If you take pleasure in representations of disorder and wickedness, Nicole writes, it is because you do not hate them completely in reality, otherwise you would not even tolerate them: “when you experience extreme horror for something, you do not take pleasure in seeing it represented” (Nicole 1667, p. 101). However, this line of criticism was soon eclipsed by the central accusation against theater, that of fomenting passions rather than educating or suppressing them. Conti, having above all the passion of love in mind, observed that theater, “in painting the passions of others, moves our soul in such a way as to give birth to our own passion, and then, once inflamed, refines and heats them up” (Conti 1666). Nicole notes that it is prohibited to stimulate lust and love in ourselves and others, and admonishes theatre for arousing passions without simultaneously providing an antidote. The distinction between reality and fiction is not eliminated by the audience alone, but also by those who do the acting: “The profession of the actor – we read in the treatise on comedy – is a profession in which men and women represent the passions of hatred, anger, ambition, revenge and above all love. They would not be able to do it if they did not, somehow, excite these passions within themselves, nor if the passions were not imprinted on their souls” (Nicole 1667, pp. 83-85).

The controversy about the theater was rekindled at the end of the century by the publication of a publication by Father Francesco Caffaro, in which the legitimacy of theatrical performances from a Christian point of view was supported. This somewhat cautious rehabilitation of the theater provoked the vehement reply of Jacques-Benigne Bossuet in the *Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie*, of 1694, where among other things we read: «counterfeiting or imitating something, takes on its spirit and character: we become

slaves with a slave, vicious with a vicious man; and, above all, passions whose expression and character you wish to manifest externally must be formed internally» (Bossuet 1694).

Rousseau.

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letter on the Performances*, published in 1758, it is not only possible to detect the echo of these discussions, dating back to a little more than half a century earlier, but also see it as a sort of record of the arguments produced against the theater dating back as far as Plato, so much so as to give the Rousseauian text an exemplary character and have him qualify as «one of the most avid enemies that theater has ever had» (Barish 1981, p. 259). The next opportunity for the drafting of the *Letter* was offered to Rousseau by D'Alembert's article in volume VII of the *Encyclopédie* dedicated to the city of Geneva, the cradle of Calvinism, and where a theatre had never been built before due to the fear that the licentious behavior of the actors could constitute a bad example for citizens. D'Alembert set out primarily to challenge existing prejudices about the morality of theater people by denying the merits of these prejudices on the one hand, and, on the other, suggesting possible means of controlling the actors' conduct. Rousseau's long reply did not fail to also take the question of the immorality of the actors into consideration, pointing out the condition of the actors in ancient Rome, and reiterating that «the condition of the comedian is a one of license and immorality, where men are devoted to disorder and women lead scandalous lives» (Rousseau 1758, p. 86). However, Rousseau's reply translated into a theoretically position which largely ignored the contingent issue (the usefulness of opening a theater in a city that had, until then, been prevented) and examined the nature and the aims of theatrical representations in general.

Platonic distrust of imitation still lay at the center of Rousseau's condemnation. This is demonstrated by the fact that, at the same time as the drafting of the *Letter on the Performances*, Rousseau wrote *On theatrical imitation*, an essay extracted from Plato's Dialogues confirming the opinion of the Greek philosopher that mimesis is always far from the truth that aims to purports to represent. In the *Letter* this basic criticism is surpassed by mistrust, which closely resembles that of religious writers with regard to the effects and purposes of the theater: «Performances are made for the people, and it is from their effects on the latter that they can determine its qualities» (Rousseau 1758, p. 40). The performance is essentially entertainment, and its aim can only be pleasure: «If utility can find a place in it, all the better, but its main purpose is pleasure and, as long as people amuse themselves, this goal is easily reached» (*ibidem*).

The easiest and universally followed way to achieve this is to leverage the *passions*. «The performance, in general, is a picture of human passions, whose original lies in all hearts; however, if the painter did not bother to flatter these passions, the spectators would soon be depressed and would no longer ask to see themselves in a way that would lead them to self-loathing» (Rousseau 1758, p. 41). In this way Rousseau prepares a refutation of the argument defending the theater elaborated centuries earlier by Aristotle with his theory of catarsi: through fear and piety passions go through a process of purification. But, Rousseau objects, theater does not have the power to change feelings, to purify them; it can only indulge them and even magnify them; «The general effect of theatre is to strengthen the national character, encourage natural inclinations, and give new energy to all passions» (Rousseau 1758, p. 42). To purify the passions by strengthening them is a contradiction, because it assumes that the spectator's passion is different from that of the character on the scene. But the very fact that the passions are maintained and persist in the spectator, even at the end of the performance, shows that the conviction of the defenders of the theater, that it acts as a regulator of our emotions, is in vain: «theater purifies the passions that we do not have and fosters those we do» (Rousseau 1758, p. 43). The pity that tragic events should arouse in us is transient and ephemeral, while the other passions are violent and tend to persist. This applies in particular to the most universally represented passion, the one that has always animated the theater and dominates unchallenged in both tragedy and comedy: love. The interest of the events is always brought to lovers, and it is not worth arguing that

the passions represented are imaginary because, trusting on a fake model, one ends up arousing a true passion. The love represented gives rise to the need for lived love: «Paint love as you wish: it either seduces or it is not love. If it is badly depicted, the work is poor. If it is well represented, love makes everything that accompanies it fade» (Rousseau 1758, p. 70).

Both tragedy and comedy fall under Rousseau's interdict. The danger of the former is clear – it represents human monsters, capable of the most terrible deeds and horrors that the people should not even suspect possible; but comedy is equally pernicious. Indeed, it is even more so in so far as it influences subtly. While comedy is said to use the weapon of ridicule to combat vice, it nevertheless must represent it to do so, and making it ridiculous does not lead to hating it. «The more enjoyable and perfect a comedy is, the more it leads to disastrous effects on customs» and this also applies to the great Molière, «a school of vices and bad habits, more dangerous than the same books in which you plan to teach them» (Rousseau 1758, p. 53).

The *Letter on Performances* can therefore count as both *summa* and epilogue of a two-thousand-year old sentence against theater: after that, starting from Romanticism, there have certainly been more or less intense controversies and even violent attacks against theater, but these have been disputes of a more limited scope, and often internal to the theater itself (as criticisms of certain ways of understanding the theater to the detriment of others), or claims of the superiority of the literary text over stage representation, or even of radical protests of traditional forms of stage representation. However, these have been quite different from the condemnations based on *principle* as discussed above.

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