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## **From Medieval Miracle Play to Postmodern Metatheatre. The life-story of St. Sebastian on stage**

One of my most favourite paintings in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, is Botticelli's picture of Saint Sebastian which shows the well-known scene of this saint serenely enduring the pain of six arrows being shot into his body. In this paper I wish to follow how a 'life-text' became a legend through martyrdom and then how this legend served as suitable 'raw material' for artistic texts in different forms, such as paintings, miracle plays, a piece of music and ultimately how it was recycled in a late twentieth-century play.

The life story of St. Sebastian says that he was born in Narbonne, most probably his mother was from Milan – he went to Rome during the reign of Emperor Maximianus (who reigned with Diocletian) probably in 286 and died there around 288. A hundred years after his death he was already venerated in Milan, in the fourth century a cathedral was built in his honour and a monastery was founded next to it. In the early fifth century it was in this monastery that his legend was composed which abounds in miraculous events and details of his suffering. Sebastian originally served in the emperor's army as an officer but he was a devoted Christian, too, and wanted to convert his soldiers. The emperor's court sentenced him to death: he was bound to a tree in a field and the soldiers shot arrows at him. He seemed to be dead but he did not die and a Roman widow took him to her house and cured his wounds. When Sebastian was seen in public after his miraculous recovery, people thought he was immortal. He was sentenced to death another time – he was beaten to death and thrown in the drain. Another Roman woman took care of his corpse and buried him – January 20th is the day to commemorate his burial.

The legend expands on this life story and mentions Marcellianus and Marcus, two (twin?) brothers who were imprisoned because of their belief in Christianity – the emperor gave orders to behead them, their mother and father were pleading that they deny their beliefs and save their lives but Sebastian warned them not to give up their celestial crown despite their parents' weeping: at this moment a group of angels surrounded Sebastian, and a dumb woman regained her command of

speech. The woman's husband, seeing this miracle, wanted to release the two young men but these latter did not wish to be free - both of them were killed with spears, and the woman was also killed.

Sebastian then cured two young men of diseases and wounds – he also converted them to Christianity, together with the parents of Marcellianus and Marcus, and another 58 people who were all baptized. The ailing father of the two young men recovered immediately. After these events, hundreds of people wanted to be baptized, but a high ranking friend of the emperor ordered that many people be killed because of their religion and complained to the emperor about Sebastian's determination. Diocletian gave orders that Sebastian be tied to a pillar in the fields and for his soldiers to shoot arrows into his body, but he recovered from his wounds, went to the emperor's court again to preach about Christianity, but he was caught again and beaten to death. The legend, with details of saintly deeds, curings and other miraculous events, as well as the suffering, mysterious recovery from deadly wounds must have been a very popular story for medieval plays.

After several hundred years of suspended animation, the tradition of medieval drama was revived in the early twentieth century: Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote *Jedermann* in 1912, while Gabriele d'Annunzio published *Le martyre de Saint Sebastien. Mystère composé en rythme français* in 1911 and the same year Claude Debussy composed *Le martyre de St. Sébastien (musique de scène pour un mystère en 5 actes pour solistes, chœur et orchestre)*. D'Annunzio spent five years in France and wrote the libretto for Claude Debussy. The play is in five parts<sup>1</sup> (called 'mansions'), each related to a special space (*La cour de lys, La chambre magique, Le concile des faux dieux, Le laurier blesse, Le paradis*) – it has a very big cast, including groups of people like 'les gentils', 'les chrétiens', 'les vierges' (often acting as a chorus). The play starts with two paragraphs from 'L'ystoire de monseigneur Saint Sebastien jouée par les habitants Lanlevillar l'année courant M.V.LXVII au mois de may' (i.e. exactly 440 years ago), then the Nuncius, in a prayer-like text, lists places where St. Sebastien has a cult as well as artists who used this motif. The play is written in verse and abounds in long monologues in an exalted style, the language is very

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<sup>1</sup> As the Wikipedia says, D'Annunzio was part of the „più avanzate correnti di avanguardia – Decadentismo e Simbolismo”. From 1910 he spent five years in „esilio volontario in Francia [...] quando arriva à Parigi è una celebrità”. [Hhttp://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriele\\_D'Annunzio#TragedieH](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriele_D'Annunzio#TragedieH), data collected on April 7th, 2007.

musical. Here our main purpose is not to offer a full analysis of D'Annunzio's play: suffice it to emphasize that the Italian writer in this drama uses the medieval legend of St. Sebastian as basic motif and incorporates a short passage from a XVIIth century play about him.

D'Annunzio's play served as the 'play-within-the-play' for Michel Marc Bouchard in *Les Feluettes ou La Répétition d'un drame romantique* (1987). The subtitle contains two important elements for us: 'la répétition' has double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to 'repeating' a drama, in our case passages from the play by D'Annunzio – on the other hand, the French term indicates a theatrical rehearsal, which, indeed, is the context in Bouchard's drama. „Comme il y a trois occurrences différentes de la pièce enchâssée, c'est donc la répétition «répétée» qui caractérise l'intertextualité dans cette pièce.” (Huffman, 85) Bouchard's play is rich in theatricality: with a doubled 'play-within-the-play' strategy, he creates a character (Jean Bilodeau) who is at the same time a viewer on the stage and the character in the play presented to him. This play leads him (and us) back to his teen-age years when, as a high-school student, he acted in the school production of D'Annunzio's play about St. Sebastian. „Bouchard emprunte certaines sections du *martyre de Saint Sebastien* [...] les insérant de manière symétrique dans la pièce cadre. L'enchâssement de cette pièce est «parfait» et «multiple», car il est distribué sur trois scènes.” (Huffman, 85) Perfect incorporation means that the characters in the main plot can be differentiated as 'actors' and 'audience' in the inserted play, while a multiple incorporation means that this strategy occurs at more than one point of the play.<sup>2</sup> In Bouchard's drama the two levels, i.e. the play and the scenes borrowed from D'Annunzio, can be distinguished by the use of language: the Italian writer uses a highly stylized and poetic diction while the 'frame' is in colloquial Québec dialect. In the Prologue *Le Vieux Simon* outlines the situation: „J'ai moi si en dedans pendant des années pour quec-que chose que j'ai pas faite! Y'a rien qu'une personne au monde qui sait c'qui s'est réellement passé un matin du mois de septembre de 1912.” (22). When the young Simon was rehearsing in the role of Sébastien, his style was completely different – e.g. „Vous m'aimez, et vous n'exaltez pas mon mystère. Je vous dis que je vais revivre. N'avez aucune crainte.” (26).

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Forestier quoted by Huffman, 85.

The school performance is evoked by inmates of a prison, in a play conceived and directed by Bilodeau's ex-school mate Simon Doucet who was sentenced after Bilodeau's testimony at court (in a trial about setting an attic on fire and killing another school-mate who was also part of the cast in the play about St. Sebastian). The structure of the play thus is a complicated network of scenes set in the present, 1952, while other scenes re-enact the story of preparing for a school performance in 1912, including the rehearsals of the scenes from D'Annunzio's play together with the instructions and comments concerning the students' acting from their teacher, Le Père Saint-Michel. („je n'ai pas encore réglé de quelle manière nous allons nous y prendre pour les flèches. C'est un détail. Reprenez!" 29) The students are also worried about the reaction of the audience, both from their own community, Roberval, and from the supervising authority. (Simon: Pensez-vous qu'y va aimer not' séance, le député? Les gars qui s'flattent pis qui se menouchent sus une scène, ben c'est pas c'que l'monde de Roberval aime le plus. 29) The teacher has to worry about the quality of the acting by the students and about the audience, as well – his remarks show not only a high level of theatrical consciousness but he also comments on the difficulties he faces.

LE PERE SAINT-MICHEL Personne ne me comprend. J'essaie de monter des spectacles modernes. J'ai une fois de plus oublié que nous sommes à la merci d'un auditoire de colons qui n'aiment que les airs d'opérette, les comédies légères our les mélodrames. Le clergé, de son côté, ne veut voir que des saints et des saintes qui se font lapider, égorger, empaler, brûler, couper en morceaux... Je suis désespéré...

Mais le théâtre doit s'adresser à tout le monde. Au théâtre, on peut tout faire, vous savez. On peut réinventer la vie. (30)

This outline of Bouchard's play shows that it can be related to popular traditions of late twentieth-century playwriting, namely to the practices of intertext and metatheatre. Both terms imply a special attitude towards 'realism': namely its refusal. Apart from the above mentioned 'theatrical fashion' of the 1980s-1990s, it has its relevance in the general perspective of Québec culture. While English-Canadian writing tends to be more on the realistic side, in Québec it has traditionally adopted the non-realistic approach, be it early twentieth-century symbolism (E. Nelligan) or the frequent use of meta-fictional strategies since the 1960s ( just to mention the two extreme positions by highly nationalist H. Aquin, and haitian immigrant Dany Laferrière). This

generalization holds true for the theatre, as well – among other critics, Shawn Huffman devoted a chapter to this phenomenon in *Le théâtre québécois 1975-1995*, entitled ‘Les nouvelles écritures théâtrales: l’intertextualité, le métissage et la mise en pièces de la fiction’ in which he states that „le théâtre dans le théâtre [...] le jeu dans le jeu, est omniprésent dans le théâtre québécois des années 80”. (83) As far as our present play is concerned, this study comments that „De toute la production bouchardienne, c’est cette pièce<sup>3</sup> et *Les Feluettes* ou *La Répétition d’un drame romantique* qui représentent le mieux le phénomène du théâtre centré sur lui-même.” (78)

If we turn to current theories on this aspect of the theatre, we are faced with several definitions so let us have a look at some of these. Patrice Pavis in his dictionary of the theatre speaks about „quatre manifestations du métathéâtre: le théâtre dans le théâtre, l’image de la réception de la pièce, la conscience de l’énonciation et la mise en scène du travail théâtral de la mise en scène” (Pavis, 203-204). All these elements can be found at various points in Bouchard’s play. M. Schmeling’s starting point is that „la réflexion métadramatique fait du texte une sorte d’histoire littéraire dramatisée” (3) which implies a ‘forme autothématique’. By incorporating word-by-word passages from an earlier twentieth-century play, Bouchard satisfies this definition, as well. Schmeling looks at the problematics of the audience pointing at the basic difference between the real viewer and the actor-viewer who views the other actors onstage since the real viewer can respond freely while the actor-viewer’s reactions are determined by the text. (6-7) In *Les Feluettes* the number-one actor viewer is the Old Biladeau, while in the course of the play-within-the-play there are other characters whose fictitious position is that of the audience, e.g. the deputy visiting the school, the teachers of the school and the parents of the children acting.

Lionel Abel, in his seminal book on the topic considers the play-within-the-play as „only a device, and not a definite form” (60). In these works life is seen as theatricalized, the characters were dramatic before the playwright dealt with them – they were dramatized by myth, legend, past literature and they are „aware of their own theatricality” (60). Very often, the characters themselves are dramatists, „capable of making other situations dramatic besides the ones they originally appeared in” (62), like Hamlet or Tartuffe and many others. In our case, the Old Simon conceived a play based on the memories of a for

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<sup>3</sup> *La Contre-nature de Chryssippe Tanguay, écologiste* (KK).

him fatal childhood event and instructed the other inmates of the prison to act it out for the Old Bilodeau. The Old Simon is mythicizing this event and uses the legend of St. Sebastian as a reference for an adolescent homoerotic relationship.

Richard Hornby, when starting to analyse metadrama, refers to realism as the „touchstone of dramatic criticism and theory” for well over a century (13), but states right at the beginning that „no plays, however 'realistic', reflect life directly; all plays, however 'unrealistic,' are semiological devices for categorizing and measuring life indirectly” (14). His approach is based on structuralist and poststructuralist theories and suggests the „following axioms for relating drama to reality:

1. A play does not reflect life; instead, it reflects itself.
2. At the same time, it relates to other plays as a system.
3. This system [...] intersects with other systems of literature, nonliterary performance, other art forms [...] and culture generally (17)

In his view, drama „no matter now much it may seem to reflect life directly, is always reflecting it through the cultural system in which it functions.” (20) He seems to share the standpoint of New Critics who think that a play „reflects no external reality [...], but instead reflects inward, mirroring itself.” (20) The question gains complexity since drama is a subsystem of both literature and theatre with its nonverbal elements. (21) His categorization within metadrama are as follows:

1. The play within the play.
2. The ceremony within the play.
3. Role playing within the role.
4. Literary and real-life reference.
5. Self reference. (32)

These types can blend into one another or overlap. Hornby is convinced that „serious drama [...] always moves toward the metadramatic” and the „metadramatic experience for the audience is one of unease, a dislocation of perception” (32). For the first group, i.e. the play within the play, he outlines two basic modes: the 'inset' type, when „the inner play is secondary, a performance set apart from the main action” and the 'framed' type in which „the inner play is primary, with the outer play a framing device” (33). In both cases it is necessary that „the outer play have characters and plot [...] that these in turn must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a per-

formance. [...] there must be two sharply distinguishable layers of performance." (35)

*Les Feluettes* – at various points of the action – satisfies these five requirements: a play is being rehearsed within the play, which concentrates on ceremonies: a school ceremony with the students acting out a play, a crucial scene of which involves the ceremony of St. Sebastian's killing with arrows. Most of the roles in the play involve role-playing, be it the students rehearsing for the play about St. Sebastian or the inmates acting out these same scenes. Literary references are mainly to D'Annunzio's play, while real-life references include the situation outlined in the prologue, saying that Simon was convicted instead of Bilo-deau. Simon's actors share his fate: „Y ont tous été comme moi, victimes d'erreur judiciaire. Tu sais, on apprend beaucoup de choses en prison [...] On a travaillé pendant trois ans not' spectacle" (22). The last word from this cite is one of the many self-referential statements in Bouchard's play.

It has been a long way from the life-story of St. Sebastian through the legend, its theatrical adaptations to its recycling in a contemporary Québec play. In the new context, the old 'text' is seen-through a different prism, it is carrying new meanings with its accentuated theatricality and the frequent (hidden and less hidden) references to homosexuality. Bouchard's play can also be regarded as an example of late-twentieth-century North-American postmodern theatre by its stressed self-reflection, showing the process of theatrical representation and drawing attention to the reception of the play by the viewers.

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