

The Antitheatrical Paradox in Michel Marc Bouchard's *Les Feluettes, ou La Répétition d'un drame romantique*¹

As Jonas Barish's still indispensable book documents, a vital tradition of antitheatrical prejudice has marked the history of Christianity. Theatre has been condemned, in many different historical contexts and under various denominational guises, as a serpent in the garden, offering God's subjects pleasure while ultimately leading them to sin. But religious practice has meanwhile been consistently shadowed by its attraction and resemblance to theatrical performance. Barish provides an evocative analogy from *Paradise Lost*: like Milton's Adam and Eve, having to improvise their prayers so as not to fall into ritualistic repetition and yet also having to repeat the improvisation each morning (Milton V.145-152, Barish 95-96), Christian religious practice is characterized by its paradoxical relationship to theatre—falling into theatricality with seeming inevitability even while trying to assert the theatre's blasphemous implications.

The subtitle of Michel Marc Bouchard's play *Les Feluettes, ou La Répétition d'un drame romantique* (1987², published 1988) plays on these associations, emphasizing the connections between "répétition" (as both reiteration and rehearsal) and "drame" (as playscript and in the pejorative sense of hypertheatrical behaviour). The play enacts the mutual attraction and deep suspicion between Christianity and theatre—and it does so in a way which resonates with the history of antitheatrical prejudice in French Canada, where public theatre was banned in 1694 by the bishop of Québec, Monsignor de Saint-Vallier, and has been threatened many times since.³ Bouchard's play stages a 1952 performance by a group of prisoners of a series of events that occurred in 1912 Roberval—chief among these events

a staging of Gabriele d'Annunzio's (real) play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* at the (fictional) Collège Saint-Sébastien. D'Annunzio's work, which significantly was itself banned by the Vatican and specifically denounced by the Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Amette, before its première,⁴ therefore figures as a play-within-a-play-within-a-play.⁵ My goals in this discussion are, first, to situate the antitheatrical arguments voiced in Bouchard's play in the context of several important Christian writers and French Canadian clerics and, second, to offer a reading of the play as an embodiment of antitheatrical paradox, especially as this paradox relates to the gay desire which shapes the main characters and propels the action forward. The play concedes key principles of antitheatrical prejudice but celebrates the transformational potential—which it understands in religious terms—of both theatre and homosexuality.

A historically recurrent claim of antitheatrical writers is that actors, by having to imitate vice, will themselves fall into vice. This claim is central, certainly, to the Jansenist antitheatrical discourse that colours Saint-Vallier's writing against the theatre. The endeavour of actors, on these accounts, is intrinsically hypocritical and therefore sinful since it requires them to substitute the "true" selves given to them by God for false, other selves. For example, the well-known tract *Traité de la comédie* (1659) by Pierre Nicole allows no distinction between *sin* and *representing sin* and presupposes that the ability to perform a sinful act on stage can be equated with the capacity, and indeed the desire, to perform that act off-stage:

C'est un métier où des hommes & des femmes representent des passions de haine, de colere, d'ambition, de vengeance, & principalement d'amour. Il faut qu'ils les expriment le plus naturellement, & le plus vivement qu'il leur est possible; & ils ne le sçauroient faire s'ils ne les excitent en quelque sorte en eux-mêmes, & si leur ame ne se les imprime, pour les exprimer exterieurement par les gestes, & par les paroles. (spelling irregularities Nicole's; 41-2)

Given this attitude, it is unsurprising that actors carried with them social stigmas similar to those attached to prostitutes and Jews, two other groups whose lives, according to certain Christian views, were characterized by passionate dissimulation and wandering.⁶

In *Les Feluettes*, Père Saint-Michel tells his young actors that "[a]u théâtre, on peut tout faire, vous savez. On peut réinventer la vie. On peut être amoureux, jaloux, fou, tyran ou possédé. On peut mentir, tricher. On peut tuer sans avoir le moindre remords. On peut mourir d'amour, de haine, de passion" (31). He celebrates the potential of theatre that Nicole

warns against, without worry for the character's noxious effects on the actor. The play, however, does suggest the tenuous distinction between actors and characters in its repeated slippages from one ontological level to another in the complex dramatic structure. During a rehearsal of d'Annunzio's play, for example, the dialogue between Vallier (as the archer Sanaé) and Simon (as his captain, Sébastien) becomes doubly resonant:

Vallier: Ainsi, je m'avance vers toi avec passion et, comme emporté par une fougue qui jusqu'alors m'était inconnue, j'étreins ton corps. (*Vallier se colle au corps de Simon. Délaissant le ton théâtral:*) Dis-mois que tu m'aimes et je te tue!

Simon, refusant de reprendre les mots de Vallier: J'suis ben avec toé.

Vallier: Que tu m'aimes!!!

Simon: Tu ressembles à une fille quand tu fais ça. J'hais ça. "Que je suis bien!!!"

Vallier: ... Que tu n'as jamais été si bien avec quelqu'un d'autre?

Simon, tendrement: Que je n'ai jamais été si bien avec quelqu'un d'autre ... de toute ma vie. . . . *Vallier et Simon se caressent et s'embrassent.* (31-2)

As Vallier's "je te tue" reveals, the shift from a tone of heightened theatricality noted by the stage direction does not signify a tidy shift from "representation" to "reality" or from Sanaé/Sébastien to Vallier/Simon. Such a shift is also contrarily keyed by Simon's movement from Robervalois dialect ("ben," "toé") to standard French ("bien," "quelqu'un"). Indeed, the play's quick movements from class-marked dialect to standard French and to the *langage soutenu* of the tourist Lydie-Anne de Rozier and d'Annunzio's play seldom parallel shifts between ontological levels in the play's structure.⁷ Moreover, some of d'Annunzio's lines—for example, "Il faut que chacun / tue son amour pour qu'il revive / sept fois plus ardent" (d'Annunzio 252, cf. Bouchard 28, 107, 120)—are quoted multiple times in Bouchard's play, with slight variations and shifting ontological significance.

The antitheatricalist fear that represented vice will lead to genuine vice responds to the lack of practical difference between some acts and their theatrical mimesis. For instance, a staging of d'Annunzio's play necessitates an actor's partial nudity (in order to represent the iconographic Sebastian), and it requires men physically to enact the loves of both Sanaé and César for Sébastien. (This unsettling homoeroticism was obviated in d'Annunzio's première production: he had written the role of Sébastien to be originated by his friend Ida Rubinstein. Thus one Catholic taboo was replaced by another; Amette's denunciation specifically condemns the fact that Saint Sebastian was represented by a Jew [Rhodes 153].) Moreover, Bouchard's

play is tantalizingly ambiguous as to whether Vallier and Simon's love for one another grows out of their rehearsals or is merely conveniently enabled by them; in either case, the language and plot of d'Annunzio's play are vehicles for their love's expression. Following the antitheatrical argument, the mimetic reproduction of vice raises the spectre of further reproduction and contagion. The young antitheatricalist Bilodeau puts it this way:

A [i.e., Bilodeau's mother] l'a dit que plus vous faites des séances, plus vous êtes malades, pis qu'y'a des gars comme Vallier pis Simon qui sont en train d'attraper vot' maladie. Mme Lavigne pis Mme Scott, y disent que vous êtes comme la peste . . . pis quand y'a la peste en quecque part, ben y faut s'en aller, ou ben se débarrasser d'elle. . . . Roberval, à cause de vous autres [i.e., Vallier and Simon] pis du père Saint-Michel, ça pourrait être un autre Sodome. (35, 36-7)

In likening theatre to a plague, Bilodeau takes up a favoured metaphor of antitheatricalists (including Antonin Artaud, whom he predates⁸), highlighting a second characteristic charge: that vice represented—and therefore reproduced—by the actors will be transmitted to the audience, by introducing them to sins that they had not previously imagined or by causing them tacitly to approve of the sins by their vicarious participation. The Jansenist bishop Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, whose specific relevance to the interdiction against theatre in New France we should not underestimate, describes how the vice generated in the actor's body by his mimetic representation enslaves him and spreads to the spectator, whom it also transforms:

En imitant . . . on devenait esclave avec un esclave; vicieux avec un homme vicieux; et surtout en représentant les passions, il fallait former au dedans celles dont on voulait porter au dehors l'expression et le caractère. Le spectateur entrait aussi dans le même esprit: il louait et admirait un comédien qui lui causait ces émotions. . . . Ainsi tout l'appareil du théâtre ne tend qu'à faire des hommes passionnés. (53)

Similarly, in his 1694 *mandement*, Saint-Vallier had warned of a play's ability to instil vice in the unwitting spectator, even when it pretends to do otherwise. These plays, he writes,

ne tendent d'elles-mêmes qu'à inspirer des pensées et des affections tout-à-fait contraires à la Religion, à la pureté des moeurs, et à la charité du prochain, comme sont certaines pièces de théâtre qui tournent la piété et la dévotion en ridicule, qui portent les flammes de l'impureté dans le coeur, qui vont à noircir et à déchirer la réputation, ou qui sous le prétexte apparent de réformer les moeurs ne servent qu'à les corrompre et sous couleur de reprendre le vice l'insinuent adroitement et avec artifice dans l'âme des spectateurs. (303)

Nicole worries in particular that women will be so moved by the fantastic passions they see staged that they will be unable to carry out even their household affairs (“*petites affaires de leur ménage*” [61]). But if female spectators, in his view, are particularly vulnerable to the plague-like effects of theatrical spectatorship, male actors are more likely to suffer the insidious, feminizing effect of theatrical performance. Again, this notion runs through the entire history of antitheatrical writing, starting perhaps with Plato’s concern that men will be softened by the licence theatre affords them to experience womanish pity and other “irrational” emotions (295 and *passim*). Before women actually took to the stage, this concern was of course intensified by the requirement that male actors cross-dress in order to represent female roles. In English theatre history, for example, where women remained off the stage later than in France, the concern finds expression in the Puritans’ conflation of theatre with a host of other ills including (by the tally of Prynne’s *Histrio-Mastix* [1633]) “effeminacy, lascivious songs, fantastique costly apparell, Pagan Customes, . . . wanton Fashions, Face-painting, . . . Long haire, . . . Periwigs, . . . amorous Pastoralls, lascivious effeminate Musicke” and other “wicked, unchristian pastimes” (A3^v-A4^r). Indeed, various Puritan attacks on theatre, such as Stephen Gosson’s *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), are founded on the prohibition in Deuteronomy against men wearing women’s clothing (Barish 90).

Bouchard slyly sets his play in contexts that require all-male casts: in 1912, d’Annunzio’s play is staged in a *collège classique*,⁹ and, in 1952, Simon’s play unfolds in a prison. These twinned homosocial settings allow Bouchard to revive the homophobic concerns of centuries of antitheatricalists, for whom theatre becomes associated with a threat to masculinity that reaches its worrisome climax in the male actor’s giving over his integral self to an inhabitation by a character. According to this view, to act is to allow an act of metaphysical passive sodomy. Tidily, Bilodeau’s antitheatrical fervour in *Les Feluettes* becomes a strategy to overcome the town’s perception of him as effeminate—“Ouais, pis l’monde va arrêter de rire de moé pace que je joue tout l’temps des rôles des filles” (50), he reasons. This strategy requires the salvation of Simon from the homoerotic productions of Père Saint-Michel and the ravishing caresses of Vallier, the “feluette” of Roberval. Notably Vallier is also non-Québécois, a quality he shares with two other hypertheatrical characters: his mother, the Comtesse de Tilly, and the beautiful Lydie-Anne de Rozier, who Bouchard’s dramatis personae notes is a

“spécialiste du mensonge” (13). That their theatricality is aligned with their Frenchness and that the young Bilodeau disapproves of them so mightily—he refers to the French as a “[m]audite race d’importés” [35]—may not be coincidental. Later, post-Confederation antitheatrical writings by Québécois clerics perform a similar alignment, as Ramon Hathorn has demonstrated in his work on Sarah Bernhardt’s reception in Québec during her nine visits between 1880 and 1917. In various clerical declarations about these visits, the shared language between French actors and Québécois spectators is seen as the sheep’s clothing that disguises the insidious wolf of theatrical mimesis, which continues to be denounced along centuries-old lines.¹⁰ (The example of Bernhardt’s rough reception in religious circles also reminds us of the continuing interdependence of antitheatricalist and anti-Semitic discourses [Hathorn 110, 115].)

But *Les Feluettes* does not treat Bilodeau’s antitheatrical concerns as the paranoid or wrong-headed misapprehensions of a provincial philistine. After all, and as theatre historians too often forget, antitheatricalist arguments respond to a genuine potential of theatre: its power to induce thoughts and emotions that can motivate action in its audiences.¹¹ Theatre can, and indeed frequently does, broaden the potential of its spectators by expanding their sense of what is possible and by presenting them with models for behaviour; this notion is central to all progressive theatre aesthetics since Brecht and probably before, as well as to the antitheatrical arguments of Rousseau and Nietzsche, for whom the theatre threatened to teach men that they were capable of action and no longer only “material for a society” (304). Bouchard demonstrates that theatre can be strategic in the sense that antitheatricalists allege. After all, the entire 1952 performance, which the older Bilodeau is literally forced to watch, succeeds in coercing him to admit his culpability in the 1912 death of Vallier and the subsequent imprisonment of Simon, who has directed the 1952 performance. Simon’s theatrical strategy proves superior even to that of Hamlet’s mousetrap play, which it resembles.

Notwithstanding this strategic success, Bouchard’s play does not treat theatre primarily as a threat to social order. The motivational power of the emotions stirred by theatre can, of course, be mobilized to any number of ends. Elsewhere, *Les Feluettes* thematizes unambiguously the liberatory potential of both acting and spectatorship. As Vallier explains, his mother uses her imaginative role-playing as a therapeutic means to cope with the harsh realities of Roberval: “Elle n’est pas folle. Elle joue. Elle joue. Si elle

n'avait pas cru à ses histoires, elle n'aurait pu survivre dans la pauvreté et l'isolement où nous l'avons laissés mon père" (62). Not surprisingly then, unlike many of the other Roberval parents who forbid their children to act in Père Saint-Michel's play because of the skimpy costumes (34), the Comtesse embraces the priest's unorthodox stagings. Significantly, the 1952 Bilodeau admits that the theatrical Vallier was the only one capable of combatting a greater threat to 1912 Roberval, Lydie-Anne, who arrived from Paris in her balloon and seduced Simon: "Je ne sais pas pourquoi, mais y fallait que j'aie dit au Feluette que Simon pis la Babylonienne se mariaient. Parce que sa mère, a dit que Lydie-Anne, c'est la Babylonienne. Y avait rien qu'une personne au monde qui pouvait éviter à Roberval de devenir Babylone, c'était le Feluette" (71). The positive theatricality of the Comtesse, which the young Bilodeau had attributed to madness, enables her recognition of her foil Lydie-Anne's theatricality, which is based on falsity. Hence, the Comtesse can identify Lydie-Anne's role ("Babylonian") and thereby diagnose the whorish threat that she represents. Only Vallier, whom Bilodeau has viewed as part of the plague-like threat posed to the town's morals, can stop her. The salvational potential of Vallier's theatricality, therefore, becomes apparent to Bilodeau only in contrast to the dissimulation of Lydie-Anne, who incriminates herself with her confession that she loathes the truth: "J'ai horreur des moments de vérité," she declares (60).

In other words, Bilodeau learns from Vallier that to act—"jouer"—means "intervenir" as well as "exercer l'activité d'acteur," "feindre," or "affecter."¹² And it is precisely acting that is needed to save Simon from Lydie-Anne. The play's pivotal scene is a multiply embedded performance. Vallier infiltrates the couple's engagement party and begins "playing" César from d'Annunzio's play and challenging Sébastien's faith:

Vallier: Je suis l'empereur César et on vient d'amener devant moi le beau Sébastien, qui préfère une autre religion à la mienne.¹³ Tu te souviens de ton texte, Simon? . . . Salut, beau jeune homme! Salut, sagittaire à la chevelure d'hyacinthe! Je te salue, chef de ma cohorte d'Émèse. Par ma couronne, je t'aime aussi. . . . Je veux te couronner devant tous les dieux. (*Un temps.*) C'est à toi, Simon.

Simon, jouant Sébastien: César, j'ai déjà une couronne.

Vallier, jouant César: On ne la voit pas.

Simon, jouant Sébastien: Tu ne peux pas la voir, Auguste, bien que tu aies des yeux de lynx.

Vallier, jouant César: Et pourquoi?

Simon, jouant Sébastien: Parce qu'il faut d'autres yeux, armés d'une autre vertu.

Vallier, jouant César: Où sont-ils, les magiciens qui t'aident dans tes artifices et t'enseignent tes prestiges?

Simon, jouant Sébastien: Je n'ai d'autre art que la prière. . . . César, sache que j'ai choisi mon dieu. *Silence.* (92-94)

Simon, responding as Sébastien, seems to defend his heterosexual betrothal to Lydie-Anne. But the act of theatre has been successful, and he subsequently leaves her to go to Vallier's side and to declare his love. Joining Vallier in the bathtub, Simon continues to speak as Sébastien, addressing not César but Sanaé:

Simon: Je vais revivre[,] Sanaé. J'atteste mon souffle et le ciel que je vais revivre... Je vous montrerai mon visage tourné vers l'Orient. Alors vous serez prêts. Nous trouverons des voiles, des voiles gonflées...

. . . .

Vallier: ... des voiles gonflées par les vents certains, et des proues aiguës comme le désir de la vie belle! Nous serons libres avec toi. Libres avec toi sur la mer glorieuse. Ô aimé. Ô, aimé.¹⁴

Simon: Il faut tuer son amour afin qu'il revive sept fois plus ardent. (106-07)

The scene's resemblance to a baptism is clearly intentional, and the god that Simon has chosen is love for Vallier. Simon reframes the scene at the engagement party, revealing that he had responded not as a straight Sébastien to a gay César, but, as in d'Annunzio's text, as a Christian to a pagan. Thus paganism (under the emperor Diocletian) and heterosexuality (in 1912 Roberval) are conflated as oppressive, hegemonic forces, and they are set in binary opposition to a persecuted love that brings salvation: love for Christ and love between men, respectively. The heterosexuality that the Babylonian offers is revealed to be akin to paganism, and concomitantly Simon's embrace of socially marginal homosexuality is aligned with Sébastien's life-imperilling embrace of Christianity. The fusion of the two terms is complete—a fusion foreshadowed when, in an echo of Sebastian's tortures, Simon's father had whipped him for his participation in a homoerotic rehearsal (Bouchard 61).

Through *répétitions*—rehearsals—Simon comes to declare his love, which he does without hesitation in the final of his performances from *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien*, before his and Vallier's botched double suicide.¹⁵ And through *répétitions*—thematic reiterations—Christianity and homosexuality progress from overlapping to coextensive terms. The fuller impli-

cations of this progression have eluded many critics. Solange Lévesque, for example, condemns the play's message that "tuer ou être tué par celui qu'on aime constitue la plus belle preuve d'amour" ("À propos" 174). Similarly, reviewing the published English translation, Reid Gilbert sees it as continuing "the typical treatment of the homosexual (and especially the effeminate homosexual) as self-destructive and ultimately doomed" (80). Such readings miss Bouchard's most subversive trick: how deeply he infuses the play—which is set (1912, 1952) and was première (1988) in a predominantly Roman Catholic society—with a Christian and, indeed, pointedly Catholic regard for martyrdom, by the logic of which the greatest expression of love for Christ is death for Christ. Like d'Annunzio's play, Bouchard's play foregrounds spiritual salvation and not secular death: "Un homme qui croit fortement à quelque chose peut vaincre l'invincible, même la mort," as Père Saint-Michel puts it when helping Simon to understand the role of Sébastien (27). Accordingly, to quote Robert Wallace, we see "desire rather than death depicted" ("Homo" 220)—and, semiotically, we see the still-breathing actor whose body has never been touched by the flames which signify the character's end. Meanwhile, the mercurial dramatic structure, rife with the ontological border transgressions that have always inflamed antitheatricalists, serves partially to camouflage the play's unambiguous likening of gays in early twentieth-century Québec to Christians under Diocletian: in each case an ascendant (and clearly preferable, even "truer") practice or belief is suppressed by a governing (if outmoded) social force whose hegemony is on the wane. It is uncoincidental that, aside from the Baron de Hüe and his laughable wife, instances of heterosexual coupling are decidedly rare: Vallier's mother has been long ago abandoned by her husband, Simon's brutal and alcoholic father Timothée is a widower, and the expressly malignant Lydie-Anne, who had tried to ensnare Simon in her heterosexual trap, is written out of the play: we never see her again after she leaves at the end of the fifth scene. The epithet applied to her, "Babylonian," is now revealed as multiply resonant: "drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus," she is vanquished, as the righteous predict (Rev. 17:6).

And the righteous in *Les Feluettes* are unmistakably "les feluettes," as Lévesque and Diane Pavlovic note: "jeunes, beaux, sains, purs et innocents, nimbés de lumière, animés d'un Idéal dont la grandeur les auréole. Ce sont des Justes, qui ne rendent pas de comptes aux hommes mais à Dieu. . . . La loi des hommes n'est pas clémentine à leur égard mais ils la méprisent, sûrs de posséder la vérité supérieure d'un sentiment qui n'est accessible qu'aux

élus” (155). But who, precisely, are these plural “feluettes,” since the play’s plot offers us only one, Vallier? In exploring this question, Lévesque and Pavlovic note, first, that the play’s promotional material featured the entire cast in feminine white camisoles and, second, that male homosexuality is becoming the “thème dominant du répertoire québécois” (156). I would echo Wallace’s observation—he reproduces one of the publicity photos (*Producing* 214)—that the actors are clearly posed as themselves, “out of character” (215), and I would add that most of the actors are themselves gay.¹⁶ At three ontological levels (1912, 1952, 1987), a gay man (Père Saint-Michel,¹⁷ Simon Doucet, André Brassard) directs a story of desire between, and enacted by, gay men. If we follow Louis Althusser in imagining that we are constructed as subjects by responding to the call of interpellation, there is something sly in the play’s appeals to us from its monolithically gay perspective. We might say that it not only invites but in fact requires a gay gaze from its spectators.¹⁸

This spectatorial gaze is clearly focused: the 1952 play is written by Simon (in prison for Vallier’s death) expressly for Monsigneur Bilodeau, over whose shoulder we watch the various levels of embedded, homoerotic theatricality. Significantly, our proxy is Bilodeau, for of all the characters he is changed most dramatically as a result of the acts of theatre and spectatorship in which he engages. In 1912, he is notably absent from Père Saint-Michel’s rehearsal, forcing another boy to play d’Annunzio’s Syrian slave. But despite his fulmination against the stage, he is himself eventually forced to participate in theatrical performance when Simon ties him up like Saint Sebastian and kisses him:

Bilodeau: J’veux pas être malade comme vous autres. (Simon lui clôt le bec en l’embrassant.)

Vallier, déclamatoire afin d’enterrer les gémissements de Bilodeau: Des profondeurs, des profondeurs, j’appelle votre amour terrible. Encore! Votre amour! Encore! Encore! Votre amour éternel! (39, cf. d’Annunzio 257-59)

By the end of the play, his faith in antitheatricality is evidently shaken. He willingly revisits his earlier act of theatre in the climactic moments before the fire, asking the young Simon: “Tu me donnes-tu un bec . . . comme les becs de saints?” (119). The 1952 Bilodeau, meanwhile, engages throughout in the act of spectatorship with the older Simon. (The monsignor’s conversion from antitheatricality was underscored in Brassard’s production by the fact that he was one of only two actors on stage wearing proper costumes. The other was Père Saint-Michel, suggesting how theatricality inheres in

Christianity.)¹⁹ And as I have noted above, Simon's coercive act of theatre succeeds in that Monsigneur Bilodeau's spectatorship does elicit a confession of his culpability in Vallier's death:

Monseigneur Bilodeau: C'était Sodome qui brûlait et j'étais Dieu qui vous punissait en te laissant vivre, en laissant mourir Vallier.

Le vieux Simon: Pourquoi tu m'as pas laissé mourir avec lui?

Monseigneur Bilodeau: Je voulais que tu penses à moi. De n'importe quelle manière, je voulais que tu penses à moi et je savais qu'en prison, tu ne cesserais de penser à moi. Et j'ai réussi. (*Temps.*) Je t'ai aimé au point de détruire jusqu'à ton âme. (124)

Narrating the final plot points of the 1912 narrative for Simon—and us—Monsigneur Bilodeau moves fully from spectator to actor, participating in the action of Simon's 1952 play rather than merely watching it. Having made his declaration of love after a dramatic pause (“je t'ai aimé”), Bilodeau then demands, “Tue-moi! Tue-moi!” (124). It is significant that he asks Simon for the play's by-now-established proof of love. He simultaneously confesses guilt, begs for expiation, and, perhaps most significantly, articulates gay desire.

This moment has been facilitated, even enabled, by acts of theatre and spectatorship, reminding us that the play has embraced the principles on which antitheatricalists ground their attacks: precisely through countless ontological transgressions, we see actors transformed by their acting, spectators transformed by their spectatorship. At the same time, *Les Feluettes* defends theatrical mimesis. Arriving at the truth, which is the goal of Simon's 1952 representation of the 1912 events, requires theatrical staging. When Bilodeau attempts to stop this performance, Simon tells him “[t]’as pas d'affaire à arrêter l'histoire!” (32). Bilodeau's retort—“[v]ous appelez ça l'Histoire?” (32)—nicely embodies the paradox in which all antimimetic discourse is trapped: as various philosophical and theological traditions have shown, the means by which we apprehend the truth cannot be distinguished from the truth itself.²⁰ The truth that Bouchard's *Les Feluettes* disseminates, meanwhile, concerns the transformational, even salvational, potential of gay love. The play concedes and celebrates the famous Jansenist charge that “l'appareil du théâtre ne tend qu'à faire des hommes passionnés” (Bossuet 53), sustaining throughout the antitheatricalist insistence that spectatorship can make emotional—and, indeed, passionate—men. Idealizing homosexuality, it aligns Simon's subversive love with that of Saint Sebastian, unwilling to recant before the emperor. Doing so, it also suggests that all of its

feluettes—actors, characters, and audience alike—share the potential of another Christian persecuted under Diocletian: Saint Genesis the Actor, transformed by the experience of theatrical performance.²¹

NOTES

- 1 While I was finishing this article, I was fortunate to have the research assistance of Kerry Manders and Basil Chiasson as well as the input of my colleague Robert Wallace. I acknowledge them all gratefully.
- 2 The play premiered at Salle Fred-Barry in Montréal on 10 September 1987 in a much-celebrated production directed by André Brassard. The early production history of the play is covered by Wallace (*Producing* 212-15) and elsewhere. Bouchard's most successful play, it has been produced several times subsequently in both French and English, including recently at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre (2005). The English-language translation of the play by Linda Gaboriau, published in 1990, was adapted for cinema: John Greyson's 1996 *Lilies* was similarly successful, winning a Genie Award for Best Film.
- 3 In French Canada as in France, seventeenth-century antitheatricalist sentiment galvanized in response to Molière's putatively anticlerical *Tartuffe*, which the Church sought vigorously to suppress. As Leonard Doucette notes, "whereas in France there were too many dioceses and too many opinions for one firm policy to prevail, in New France the one all-powerful religious authority made compromise and equilibrium impossible" (170). Therefore, in an incident that Jean Béraud characterizes as "le plus fameux incident de notre vie théâtrale sous le régime français" (11), Molière's play was banned by Frontenac at the urging of Saint-Vallier, who wrote in his 1694 *mandement* on the topic that plays such as *Tartuffe* "ne sont pas seulement dangereuses, mais qu'elles sont absolument mauvaises et criminelles d'elles-mêmes et qu'on ne peut y assister sans péché, et comme telles nous les condamnons" (303). As various historians have documented, almost all public theatre ceased for the rest of the French regime; see, for example, Doucette (170-172) and Béraud (11-14). Jean Laflamme and Rémi Tourangeau's *L'Église et le théâtre au Québec* treats the Church's attempts to restrict theatrical activity in Québec from 1606 to 1962.
- 4 D'Annunzio's work was included in the Congregation of the Catholic Index of prohibited books. Accordingly, before the première on 21 May 1911 at Paris's *Châtelet*, Amette declared it offensive to the Christian conscience and forbade Catholics to attend (Woodhouse 257-58, Rhodes 153-54).
- 5 However, *Les Feluettes*'s ontological structure is not tidy. As Piet Defraeye and Marylea MacDonald articulate, structural descriptions such as "play-within-a-play-within-a-play"—or "poupées russes" (Isabelle Raynauld) or "double mise en abyme" (Solange Lévesque and Diane Pavlovic)—are helpful, but they do violence to the play's complexities: "ces notions . . . ne parviennent pas à rendre l'intégration et la répétition complexes de ces niveaux multiples" (Defraeye 130). To represent the play's structure, Defraeye and MacDonald offer instead a model of five concentric circles bisected by an ellipse (131). Their diagram cannily separates the fourth-century setting in which Sebastian suffered under Diocletian from the 1911 context of d'Annunzio's play. It is important to recognize

the difference between these contexts—recall that Christianity figures as a socially marginal belief in one and a socially dominant belief in the other—to appreciate fully Bouchard’s play’s meanings.

- 6 Barish documents well the ill treatment of actors and especially itinerant actors historically; see Barish (464-69) for an overview of the parallel treatment of actors and Jews.
- 7 Bouchard’s shifts in linguistic register are largely absent from Gaboriau’s translation. Moving from French to English, many of the play’s nuances are perhaps necessarily lost: not only the multivalence of the subtitle, which Gaboriau translates as “Revival of a Romantic Drama,” but also most of the historical resonances I trace here (as well as at least one that I don’t—i.e., the relevance of *duplessisme* to the play’s 1952 ontology).
- 8 I follow Barish (454-58) and Martin Puchner (7) in thus characterizing Artaud.
- 9 Another historically relevant detail: theatre played a central role in Jesuit schools, whose elaborate stagings inflamed the Jansenists in France (Barish 163). In early Canada, the pedagogical use of theatrical productions in the *collèges classiques* was dealt a decisive blow by Saint-Vallier, who banned such productions in 1699; pedagogical theatre would not reclaim its role in the *collèges* until the end of the eighteenth century (Galarneau 205-09).
- 10 For example, Bishop Taschereau warns against a “fournaise diabolique,” a troupe of “baladins étrangers” who have come to Québec to offer “un danger très grave qui menace vos âmes” (204). Hathorn cites various similar clerical declarations and contemporary newspaper articles, such as a 1905 *La Presse* report which notes that “[l]a grande faute des acteurs français, c’est de prendre le Canada pour la France et de ne pas faire de distinction entre deux milieux si différents” (“Nos lieux”).
- 11 On this potential of theatre, see Mette Hjort’s discussion of Puritan and Jansenist antitheatrical tracts in her *Strategy of Letters* (160-195).
- 12 The English verb “to act,” of course, similarly carries the connotations of “to behave like an actor” and “to intervene” (in the sense of carrying out an action)—as well as “to feign” or “to affect,” descriptions relevant to Lydie-Anne.
- 13 Significantly, Vallier’s pointed first line is his own; it does not appear in *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*. The rest of the text, with minor alterations, compresses a passage from d’Annunzio (199-206).
- 14 Another boundary transgression: Vallier joins Simon in speaking Sébastien’s line, which he fuses with lines from Sanaé and the Archers d’Émèse; compare d’Annunzio (250-52).
- 15 The progression is tidy. During their rehearsal in scene one, which I quoted earlier, Simon can do no better than “je n’ai jamais été si bien avec quelqu’un d’autre” (32). In scene five, he manages “Je t’aime, Vallier”—but only with “toute la difficulté du monde” (105). In scene seven, he is emphatic. Note the mixed registers:

Ast’heure, t’es mon amant, mon homme, mon amour. Seul, unique amour. Le soleil pis le lac sont nos seuls témoins... à la vie, à la mort. . . . J’vas avoir tout le courage qu’y faut. J’vas être aussi brave que toi. (*Il prend la lampe à l’huile et la fracasse sur le sol. Serrant Vallier contre lui:*) Je vais revivre, Sanaé. (120)

- 16 See Lévesque and Pavlovic 156 n.4. René Gagnon, the (straight) actor who played the Comtesse de Tilly to great acclaim in Brassard’s production, expressed discomfort with working with a predominantly gay ensemble. “Ça m’a dérangé au début,” he admitted to *La Presse* in a December 1988 interview, which characterized *Les Feluettes* as “une pièce audacieuse qui dans un premier temps, laissait croire à un théâtre essentiellement gay” (Beaunoyer D3).

- 17 Père Saint-Michel's sexual leanings are suggested by his fondness for homoerotic spectacle (all-male "spectacles à tendance érotico-ecclesiastique" [Bouchard 12]) and his prurient interest in Vallier and Simon's attic trysts (37). I read cautiously the young Bilodeau's accusation that the priest is "plus doux avec les p'tits gars" (35) given the pubescent Bilodeau's obsession with homosexuality.
- 18 See also Wallace's reading, in his "Homo Creation," of how Bouchard's play and others like it "homosexualize" the experience of spectatorship (219).
- 18 Lévesque and Pavlovic also evocatively describe the set for the production, which emphasized the parallels between a theatrical performance space and a church prepared for Mass (15-57).
- 20 For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, following both Kant and Schiller, sees representation as central to the apprehending of knowledge:

Thus the situation basic to imitation that we are discussing [i.e., theatrical imitation] not only implies that what is represented is there (*das Dargestellte da ist*), but also that it has come into the There more authentically (*eigentlicher ins Da gekommen ist*). Imitation and representation are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence. Because they are not merely repetition, but a "bringing forth," they imply a spectator as well. They contain in themselves an essential relation to everyone for whom the representation exists. (114-15)

Plato himself praises the carpenter's bed—which is an appearance or representation of an unknowable, essential "form" of bed (286-87)—while condemning imitative poetry as an illusion that cannot "lay a hand on truth" (291).

In the Catholic context, the representational aspect of the Eucharist ritual enacts the sacrifice of Christ. The host is meanwhile said to be simultaneously bread and Christ's body; this simultaneity embodies a paradox fundamental to Christianity, since Christ is believed to be both man and the divine represented as man.

- 21 The legend of Genesius holds that he spontaneously converted to Christianity (for which he was martyred) as a result of performing in an anti-Christian play for Diocletian. His story is dramatized in both Lope de Vega's *Acting is Believing* (1621) and Jean Rotrou's *Le véritable saint Genest, comédien et martyr* (1645). The title of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1952 study of Jean Genet, *Saint-Genet, comédien et martyr*, adumbrates the relevance of Genesius' story to protheatrical theory—and to gay theatre history.

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