

The Foibles of Society in  
Michel de Ghelderode's Theatre

"Men are not gentile creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked," wrote Freud in Civilization and its Discontents.<sup>1</sup> "They are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressivity in him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. Homo homini Lupus" (Freud, p.58). Michel de Ghelderode depicts just that side of men and society in his theatre. In all his plays, he presents his spectators with a series of stock characters whose names, like Molière's Monsieur de Pourceaugnac of George Dandin, are their destiny, and each of whom represents an entire category, a class or an institution of society.

The army, for instance, is represented by the deserter of A Night of Pity, by the cowardly and grotesque General Mac Boom of Pantagleize, as well as by the three soldiers of La Balade du Grand Macabre who bear the descriptive names of Schobiak, the rogue, Shabernack, the ragamuffin, and Ruffiak the Pilferer. We quickly perceive that these characters seem to be possessed with a need to contradict the very meaning of their profession by being exactly what an army needs the least: deserters, cowards, pilferers, and ragamuffins of all sorts.

Representatives of order are no less repulsive. There is an enormously grotesque policeman in Faust, the thick and cunning Posaune in Pantagleize, and in

Le Ménage de Caroline, a gendarme whom the author describes as: "The gendarme in all his sinister splendor: busby, boots, moustache, straight look, sparkling sabre. In one word, The Gendarme."<sup>2</sup> When he talks, it is "with the tiny voice of a eunuch, contrasting with the enormous body from where it sprouts" (V, p.201). As for Lamprido, in La Pie sur le Gibet, he is a drunkard and moreover "treacherous, cunning, libidinous, cowardly" (III, p.13). Again we may observe that the representatives of order are just what they should never be.

Physicians in Ghelderode's plays seem to follow the same pattern. Cloribus in Miss Jairus is pompous, self-seeking and ignorant; Jehan Efront, in D'Un diable qui prêcha merveilles is a necrophagous poisoner and Mops, in La Farce des Ténébreux, is libidinous and angry.

As for the executioners, they are the scarlet-clothed strangler "with huge fingers" (I, p.69) in Escurial and Larose in Hop Signor who got his name from constantly chewing a rose by its stem. "He is a blond athlete superbly molded in scarlet, beardless, with a nonchalant feline gait." He "seems always lost in vagueness, and smiles ceaselessly and without motive."<sup>3</sup> He is "the most chaste of men" (SP, II, p.77), but "the women who step aside or flee from [his] path by day dream of [him] at night, when they are sick of men and no longer know what they want" (SP, II, p.76). His victims cry with pain, but Ghelderode's characters relate these cries to "sensual delight" because for them "sensual pleasure is only an abbreviated torture" (SP, II, p.75). The portrait is again contradictory to anything one could expect of an executioner and one would probably prefer to become one of his victims rather than a patient of one of Ghelderode's physicians.

The poets--colleagues of the Belgian playwright, his peers in fact--are epileptic and fanatic in Faust, wear high heels, belong to a School of Poetry in Colombus and are represented in Pantagleize by the

wavy-haired, most effeminate stripling named Blank who recites his poetry with a high-pitched voice. "Not content with living like a parasite and spreading the demoralizing example of sloth and immodesty, [he] dares to claim to be modern! Not content with overthrowing society, [he] must overthrow syntax and sow confusion in healthy brains" (SP, I, p.211).

Did Ghelderode feel empathy with theatre people and count himself among them? Not so if we judge by the artists who haunt his stage. All of them lead the skimpy and sinister existence of those who have not succeeded. The pitiful trio of Faust who appear at the Tavern of the Four Seasons serve as an archetype to the amorous trio of Trois acteurs, un drame and to the triangle of Le Ménage de Caroline among Pierrot, Arlequin and Colombine, the immortal ones, but seen by Ghelderode as aged and ridden with rheumatism (V, p.177).

Bars are frequently a place of congregation for Ghelderode's characters and in them one can find madames and prostitutes who constitute the greater part of our dramatist's feminine world. These women destroy the image of beauty and youth--although depraved--which the inhabitants of brothels usually evoke, as with Aurora, Diana and Venuska who welcome Don Juan into the Babylon; they are "fiftyish, stout, with huge fannies and spangled dresses" (IV, p.35). As also with the fat and ugly Chose, Boule and Crême who, under the aegis of Mamme, the "fiftyish, squat and massive" madame of La Farce des Ténébreux with "a forbidding bosom, a baritone's voice and a moustache" (II, p.252), leap threateningly around the poor panic-stricken Ferdinand d'Abcaude.

Prostitutes go in threes, as do worthy souls, scandal-mongers and zealots who come running to Piet Bouteille's death bed. As do also the three Mariekes, birds of ill omen, drunken weepers, lewd and hypocritical, who make of religion and its ceremonies a grotesque and useless institution in Miss Jairus.

Religion and the pious are also represented by

the meagre and obscene monk of Hop Signor who has Margaret Harstein condemned because he desires her-- or rather because she refuses herself. Odoriferous, depraved, such is the "globular" monk of Red Magic and in the Chronicles of Hell, churchmen incarnate all the capital sins and all the irremediable defects of humanity. These representatives of God are hideous and repulsive, more repulsive, no doubt, than the witches and she-devils who share sometimes Ghelderode's stage with them; more repulsive even than the Devil himself, be he Diamotoruscant in Faust or the knight Capricant in D'Un diable qui prêcha merveilles who ridicules the preacher Bashuiljus in the eyes of his congregation.

There are also Blacks and Jews in this theatre. For both, the dramatist adopts the accepted stereotypes. Beni-Bouftout in Don Juan is "a powerful negro in a red sweater and a grey bowler hat" (IV, p.36) who dances, roars and speaks pidgin, as does Bamboola in Pantagleize--a valet and a shoe-shiner, of whom is said: "You go and play poker with the taxi-drivers. After that? You dance and pick up tips--when you don't pick up Madame's jewelry" (SP, I, p.153). The Jews are fully as wicked as the members of the clergy from whom--interestingly enough--they cannot be differentiated in the Chronicles of Hell, since Simon Laquedeem, the auxiliary bishop, is a converted Jew. In that play, the curtain falls on the sight of this character, crouching, "gown tucked up--his rabbinical face expressing demonic bliss" (SP, I, p.273). Judas, prototype of the Jew, is called by his own wife "a shabby little Jew," a "piece of dung" and a "son of a pig" (SP, I, p.73) and by Barabbas the criminal, a "dung-fly" (SP, I, p.104).

Putrid-smelling, dirty, greasy, avaricious and predatory--such are Ghelderode's Jews. His anti-semitism has often been debated,<sup>4</sup> as well as his anticlericalism, his misogyny and last but not least, his misanthropy. But we have seen that there is

more than the hate for a particular class or institution of society. His is rather an upside-down, against-the-grain image of society as a whole, as if a cynical God had intentionally put everybody in the wrong place, except those who have traditionally served as scapegoats.

One wonders whether, in depicting this upside-down world, in depicting also the accepted stereotypes of traditional scapegoats, Ghelderode is not trying to bind himself with his spectators in a kind of negative kinship: all those who have a grudge against one or the other of the categories depicted will be one with Ghelderode when he mocks them and laughs at their expense. Freud himself writes that a comparatively small cultural group offers the advantage of "allowing [the] instinct [for aggression] an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders. [. . .] It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness" (Freud, p.61).

One wonders also whether it is not a way for the Belgian dramatist to justify himself for having kept his distance from society. Viewing his bias, one comes to the conclusion that every group of people, as soon as it becomes a self-defined unit, is ridiculous and ugly and that therefore the goal of an intelligent man should never be social integration.

But society as a whole is also represented on Ghelderode's stage by the crowd, which is often mentioned as one of the characters. In Faust, they are described as "the customers with painted faces, like dummies, in traditional attitudes. They wear caricatural costumes and act like English eccentrics" (SP, II, p.104). They overwhelm the stage with noise and interfere with the rest of the action. In the second episode of the same play, "a stream of ugly-faced people" (SP, II, p.129) is determined to lynch Faust for having violated Marguerite. In the

third episode, another crowd, looking like a surrealist ballet, occupies half of the stage in a paroxysm of agitation while on the other half of the stage Faust, confronted with his other self in the solitude of his study, hallucinates and kills himself.

Each time it will appear on stage, the crowd will have this surrealistic, marionette-like and dehumanized look. Masked or not, they are caricatures of humanity. By their appearance, they are evocative of the world of caricature and the grotesque violence in Breughel's, Ensor's or Jacques Callot's works.

These mobs, hideous, always frenzied, are often invisible to the spectators, but they are heard, sonorous and manipulated by their leaders, as in Barabbas, where they are driven to condemn Jesus to death. After his crucifixion, we hear that the crowd "is swarming like vermin on the wounded mountain. And its outcry seems to rise up from the depths of time . . ." (SP, I, p.96). It is as if "it was humanity itself . . . being executed . . . and giving the death rattle" (SP, I, p.96). They condemned Jesus but are now agonizing with him. There seems to be no logic and no aim to their decisions. Once a crowd is formed, even for rejoicing at a carnival, it turns into a shouting, threatening and dishevelled mob whose movements are unpredictable. They can set their city on fire, as in A Night of Pity or make a revolution as in Pantagleize where, at the end of the first act "The curtain comes down on the red and black picture of the revolutionaries waving their flags and embracing one another among the shouts and the din of the shooting" (SP, I, p.178). What seemed to start like a "nice day" turned into a catastrophe. In The Women at the Tomb, we are told that "crowds of drunkards and fanatics are trampling women underfoot" (SP, I, p.31). A mass of people is always, on our dramatist's stage, carried by its own noise and its own movement. There is no way to stop it, no way to gain time. One is pursued, engulfed, trampled, torn to pieces, tortured,

executed by the mob without being given as little as time to understand what is going on. Boos and jeers accompany Don Juan's retreat into the whorehouse named Babylon. He does not know why he is persecuted, but neither does the panic-stricken Hieronymus, who in Red Magic is accompanied to the scaffold by the same boos and jeers. In Hop Signor, it is the crowd who, in Ghelderode's own words, "apply themselves to the matter with their natural justice" (SP, II, p.48). and toss the miserable signor in a sheet and kill him. Later on, they righteously and unpredictably demand justice against his unfeeling wife Margaret for having paid them to torture him.

Indeed men are wolves to each other in all these plays, and a source of terror and anguish to each other too. One would expect an artist afflicted with such a vision of humanity as Ghelderode's to turn his back to the world. If such a man chose to give his fantasies body in a work of art, one would expect him to choose a lonelier medium than the theatre, a medium where one does not need to be with people at any stage of the creation or the production of the work. The performing arts imply a crowd of people to experience them; not so with a novel, a painting, a sculpture for example. But Ghelderode, although he wrote occasionally in other forms resolutely remained a playwright throughout his life. He was, in so doing, choosing to put himself at the mercy of these crowds which he so abhorred.

Paradoxically, as he tore himself away from society, he created an essentially civilized art: drama. On the one hand, by using the theatre, he was expressing his longing to be a part of society and on the other hand, the grotesquery of his characters came to express his fear and the rejection he experienced from his fellow men. It is as if he wanted to assert that art is a civilized means of transcending society and that the artist's share--however much he longs to be a part of it--is nothing more than solitude.

Like him, his characters are torn by this ambivalence. Whereas Faust, terrorized, shouts "too much solitude! You end up by coming across yourself! And it is frightening!" (SP, II, p.99), Colomb winds up by isolating himself voluntarily. "Knowing glory," he says, "it only remains for me to enjoy it in some quiet place where, unknown to anyone, I shall finish my days" (SP, II, p.170). As for Jean Jacques, in Sortie de l'Acteur, he has just finished making love to Armande at the dying Renatus' bedside. But he declares to her: "I am alone, and you are alone. One is never wicked when he is alone. Even intermingled as we just were, does one ever cease to be alone?" (III, p.270).

NADINE B. CASTRO  
QUEENS COLLEGE  
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Michel de Ghelderode, Théâtre (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), V, p. 201. Hereafter my own translations of the plays will be indicated by volume and page number reference to the five volume Gallimard edition.



<sup>3</sup>Michel de Ghelderode, Seven Plays, II, trans. George Hauger (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 73. Further references to this translation will be indicated by SP, plus volume and page number. Volume I was published in 1960.

<sup>4</sup>Roland Beyen, La Hantise du masque (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1971), pp. 414-427.

