

José González Castillo's *Los invertidos* and the Vampire Theory of Homosexuality

David William Foster

One of the abiding arguments against homosexuality is that, in addition to representing a constellation of unnatural (perverse, sinful) forms of sexual behavior, it involves the seduction of the innocent by the already corrupt or perverted. Such a view is concomitant with ideologies of so-called healthy reproductive sexuality, which are usually also antierotic insofar as species perpetuation rather than corporal sensuality is their primary focus. Such ideologies are perennially on the alert against the occasions and agents of corruption (Acevedo *passim*).

In the history of Western sexuality, in addition to corruption from within the ground zero of a healthy, sane, or responsible bourgeoisie by its own disaffected or improperly socialized members, perversion has often been attributed to a corruption-ridden upper or leisure class, for whose members eroticism, including homoeroticism, is but one more form of unproductive self-indulgence (Foucault *passim*). This attribution is likely to be associated with a figure like Oscar Wilde and the eponymous, semiautobiographical hero of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). However, its most notorious embodiment may be found in the narreme of the an aristocratic Count Dracula ravishing village or peasant youth (whom Romantic legend happens to have heterosexualized). Reaching farther back in history, the cautionary stance toward the possibilities of corruption by the aristocracy may dwell on those princes of the Church for whom innocent altar and choirboys were just so many *boccati* to be consumed.

Yet, so-called Victorian morality has not been the exclusive province of a sexually stern bourgeoisie, and the notions of healthy anaerotic genitalism play an integral role in programs in defense of the working class. Traditional Marxist morality, in addition to being generally antierotic as a consequence of viewing unproductive sex as of a whole with bourgeois degeneracy, has had no problem in viewing homosexuality as an unspeakable perversion of

reproductive sexuality. Castro's persecution of the extensive homosexual subculture in Cuba is as much an application of this traditional Marxist wisdom as it is a confirmation of the exemplification in that subculture, and in the whole fabric of sexual mores in prerevolutionary Havana, of the degeneracy that the revolution was obliged to eradicate in order to ensure a healthy socialist body.

Within the orbit of ideologies in support of the cause of the working class against the exploitation from above, whether by a bourgeoisie or the holdover of a feudal aristocracy, turn-of-the-century anarchism must likewise concern itself with the threats to a norm of healthy individual life. One of the many threats to such a norm was homosexuality, inasmuch as it could only be viewed as an exploitation of the weak by the powerful and as the corruption of a natural condition of sexual health. Anarchism was not, however, opposed to "healthy" sexual responses, and it is important to note the defense of female sexual independence in Argentina (Bellucci). In the vast culture of anarchism in Argentina, one of the Latin American countries where anarchism flourished vigorously for approximately forty years between 1890 and 1930 (Viñas; Oved), the enormous inventory of concrete examples of the abuse of the individual by corrupt societies and their government has many other issues on which to focus its anger other than the threat of homosexuality. But *Los invertidos; obra realista en tres actos* by the anarchist dramatist José González Castillo (1885-1937) is a notable exception of a cultural text to deal explicitly with the subject (for information on González Castillo's dramas, see Foppa 347-349; Berenguer Carisomo 352, 388-389; Ordaz; Jones 157-158).

Los invertidos was first performed in 1914 and was published as an undated pamphlet in the series "La farsa; obras teatrales seleccionadas," probably in the same year. The "Carro de Tesis" collection of Argentores, Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (the Argentine equivalent of Equity of which González Castillo was an organizing member) brought out a reedition in 1957. However, to the best of my knowledge, the play has gone unnoted. Jones does mention it in his inventory of the dramatist's thesis plays, but it has otherwise been forgotten perhaps in part because it represents a sort of thesis drama that, except for Florencio Sánchez, whose last works were contemporaneous with *Los invertidos*, does not attract much critical interest; perhaps in part because of the continued preference of Latin American scholars to shy away from the theme of homosexuality.

It must be noted from the outset that *Los invertidos* is not alone in dealing with homosexuality in the period. Leland examines a few, not many but significant, examples in the narrative of the following generation in writers whose personal identities could be aligned intellectually with a still-prevalent climate of sympathy with anarchism in Argentina. Roberto Arlt is surely the most outstanding of these writers, and Leland discusses a homosexual incident included in his novel *El juguete rabioso* (1926). Should the inventory of these examples be increased by the sort of diligent archeological investigation

ordinarily necessary to correct a cultural balance, one is confident that they would reveal a single voice with respect to homosexuality: it represents the corruption of the innocent by the blackguards of perversion.

Moreover, should the sexual wretch be a member of the downtrodden masses, his desires can only confirm how he has been corrupted by the men who have abused him. While it is customary, in the defense of the inherent nobility of the natural man that both anarchism and socialism would defend, to argue that homosexuality is not to be found among the working class, that it is the result of a degenerate bourgeoisie or a rotten aristocracy, social realism proper and its pre-1930s populist and anarchist forerunners (including the sort of writing in the United States at the time called muckraking) might contain characters corrupted by their oppressors in addition to the usually sentimentalized image of the standard-bearers of revolt. Since bourgeois naturalism dwelt on the bad seed of the humble, the new revolutionary literature was at pains to nurture the spark of inherent nobility in the conflict between the classes. Yet, it could not avoid the simple sociological fact that, because of oppression and exploitation, the members of the working class were very broken and corrupted.

Los invertidos concerns the secret homosexual life led by Dr. Flórez, a prominent lawyer. As the play opens, his son is copying out the final draft of a report his father has been asked to prepare concerning a man accused of killing his male lover in a fit of jealousy. As Julián copies the report, he reads it aloud, thereby reminding the audience of some of the prevailing concepts of the day concerning homosexual activity. We may call these concepts the vampire theory of homosexuality, in honor of the aforementioned Dracula narreme. Individuals cursed with the love of other men come out at night to lure unsuspecting victims to their gaudy lairs, where they ravish them and initiate them into their perverse form of sexuality. This world is thoroughly corrupt, and raging jealousies and insane desires lead to the sort of violence evidenced in the case at hand. These vampires are the result of a combination of poor genetic stock, an improper moral formation, and a chosen way of life that presents them with the opportunities for corruption and perversion.

Needless to say, the glimpse of this world is disconcerting for Julián, who is, we are given to understand, a fine specimen of a privileged and careful upper middle-class upbringing. His home, including the public image his father projects, is a model of rectitude and moral fortitude, and his mother is a pillar of respectability as a mother and as a wife. Throughout the play, details of the Dr. Flórez's comfortable home reinforce the bastion of security that must be built and maintained to protect against the sort of degeneracy this servant of the established order is routinely called on by the police to interpret for them.

One man has free access to the Flórez haven of moral security. Pérez is a close associate of Dr. Flórez, and, during a time when men of the latter's class may have had their professional establishment on the premises of their home but enjoyed an expansive private life in the all-male company of exclusive

clubs, Pérez comes and goes in the Flórez home, stopping by to accompany Dr. Flórez to one of their clubs, returning with him from a night of gentlemanly occupation, or simply coming by during his own busy day to pay his respects. Indeed, it is on just such an occasion that Pérez makes amatory advances on Clara. More on this dramatic detail in a moment.

There is, however, one club to which Dr. Flórez and Pérez belong that Clara knows nothing about. This is a circle of sexual perverts of which the two men are the leaders. They meet in Pérez's townhouse, where the two scions of public respectability are accompanied by a band of stereotyped fairies. If Dr. Flórez and Pérez enjoy a male-male relationship based on homosexual desire, these young men enhance the separate reality of the forbidden social milieu Pérez has installed in his apartments. The bourgeois elegance and respectability of the Flórez home that is the main scenographic anchor of the play contrasts with the highlighted foppery of what is in essence Pérez's homosexual brothel. González Castillo's stage directions are designed to ensure that the decor is as exaggeratedly Wildean as possible:

Sala de una garçoniere elegante. Puerta al foro derecha. A la izquierda, especie de apartment, con un piano, divanes, confidentes, etc. En la lateral izquierda puerta que se supone conduce a un dormitorio. En la sala, lujoso juego de silla tapizadas, gran consola con espejo y útiles de belleza, rizadores, polveras, pinturas, etc. Todo el aspecto de la sala debe ser el de un camarín de artista de buen tono. El alumbrado, fuera del plafonier, debe ser compuesto por brazos eléctricos con lámparas de colores, azules, rojas, etc. Es de noche (14).

Into this stage setting within a stage comes Clara, who has allowed herself to be swayed by Pérez's flattering directness. Clara will return to the security of her bourgeois world and will both flee from the compromising situation in which Pérez has placed her and denounce the shocking flaw she uncovers in the character of the man to whom she owes fidelity. But her momentary lapse from fidelity to the patriarchal order Dr. Flórez purportedly personifies allows the play to bridge the two comfortable spaces Dr. Flórez inhabits, one the home his wife has made for him and the other the garçoniere where he entertains himself in Pérez's company.

Clara loses no time in sensing that something is not quite right about the apartment to which Pérez has led her, but he assures her that it is nothing more than his private world which he is offering to her:

Es mi casa, Clara . . . Mi garçoniere, como dicen los franceses . . . Aquí no entra nadie más que yo, y todo eso que te parece tan femenino no es más que el refinamiento con que me gusta vivir, haciéndome la ilusión de que, solo y triste, hay en esta

casa de soltero, un espíritu femenino, delicado y culto, como el tuyo, que todo lo ordena, lo dispone y lo rige (18).

While Pérez is doing his best to calm the uneasiness Clara feels but cannot define, he is suddenly interrupted by some of the young men who are accustomed to having access to his home. Although Pérez's has ordered his valet not to allow him to be disturbed, the boys barge in on Pérez and Clara. Clara's uneasiness suddenly clicks into sharp focus, and, as she realizes who these men are and what their relationship to Pérez is, flees in indignation, any sense of guilt she may have had for the transgression she was about to commit with Pérez replaced by repulsion for the nature of the man who sought to seduce her:

¡Basta! . . . No necesita explicaciones . . . ¡Es usted un canalla! [. . .] ¿Por quién me ha tomado usted? degenerado ... He oído todo . . . he visto todo . . . ¡Puerco! [. . .] ¡Déjeme paso le he dicho! . . . ¡Asqueroso! . . . (Le pega una bofetada y sale precipitadamente por foro, casi sollozando (21).

Clara's insults mark both the restoration of her moral respectability and the confirmation of Pérez's perverse nature: in addition to his homosexual activities, he would also pretend to corrupt a fine family woman like Clara. That he is initially successful does not serve so much as to underscore Clara's moral frailty as a human being or her bourgeois hypocrisy. Rather, within the rhetoric of a thesis play like *Los invertidos*, it functions to frame Pérez's character with unimpeachable clarity.

However, fate has another blow in store for Clara. Clara intercepts a letter sent by Pérez to her husband. The two have had a serious lover's quarrel, and the letter contains statements that leave no doubts in Clara's mind that her husband is a prominent habitué of Pérez's club. She begins to wonder about their life long friendship that antedates her marriage to Dr. Flórez, and she makes inquiries of both her maid, who is an old Flórez family retainer, and of Pérez's manservant. Both confirm her worst fears. When Flórez returns, he is in the company of Pérez:

Flórez: ¿Qué haces? . . .

Pérez: Volvete a la realidad de tu propia miseria, de nuestra propia miseria, que está en la sombra . . . Hacerte olvidar de ti mismo, de esa hombría que quieres aparentar y que no es más que el producto de la luz . . . Quiero impedir que te veas . . . que nos veamos . . .

Flórez: No . . . vete . . . vete . . .

Pérez: No, he dicho; no me voy . . . Quiero verte dócil, como lo has sido siempre, sumiso, femenino, que es tu verdadero estado . . . así . . . que te olvides de que eres hombre y de que sea tu propia infamia, tu dicha en la sombra como es tu verdugo a la luz (lo acaricia). Así . . . así . . . como le eras cuando niño . . . y como lo serás toda tu vida ya, irredenta, inconvertible. (Se inclina sobre él hasta rozar su cuello con los labios. Junto a la puerta, en la semi-obscuridad, ha [a]parecido la figura de Clara. Viste un peinador blanco. Ansiosamente parece inclinarse a oír. A medida que el diálogo parece ir culminando, ella con el brazo extendido, abre suavemente el cajón del escritorio y saca el revólver). No eres tú . . . Vuelve a ser el de siempre . . . (Se oye un beso, largo y lento. Clara, con ademán rápido ilumina la habitación. Los dos, con asombro quieren incorporarse.) (p. [31])

Clara, with the words "¡Miserables! . . . ¡Asquerosos! . . ." (31) fires the gun and wounds Pérez. She then offers the gun to her husband, indicating that he should do the honorable thing for the good of his children. Julián appears just in time to hear the gun go off a second time and to receive the sobbing body of his mother in his arms, as the curtain falls.

Certainly, the pivotal character in *Los invertidos* is Clara. She discovers a world of sexual behavior she never even knew existed. Ignorant of her husband's occasional research for the police--she is disturbed when Julián mentions to her the document he has been copying for his father--she is first stunned and then outraged to discover Pérez's world, and her horror is even compounded when she comprehends her husband's involvement in it. Moreover, Clara is called upon to be a witness to that world, first by what she sees and overhears in Pérez's garçoniére and then, in the dramatic high point of the play, when she plays voyeur to the final meeting between the two lovers and sees Pérez affirm his "masculine" dominance over the "feminine" Dr. Flórez with an emphatic kiss. By spying on this meeting, Clara discovers the complete truth of her husband's debasement within a perverse underworld that contradicts all his public figure stands for. The gesture of her turning on the light floods them with the light of discovery and becomes a metonymic assertion of her wrathful indignation, legitimate within the rhetoric of the play, in the face of the shadowy vampire world of their sexual habits. Pérez's kiss on Dr. Flórez's neck in the semidarkness of the latter's study is a sign of

Pérez's life-long, vampirish dominance of the passive Dr. Flórez. Clara's righteous anger prevails to cast out the shadows of their perversion:

Flórez: ¡Clara! ¡Qué has hecho! ¡Mujer!

Clara: (Con gesto grave y enérgico, como una orden).
¡Calla! . . . ¡Has sido tú! ¡Has sido tú! . . . Toma
. . . (Le da el arma). ¡Ahora . . . ahora te queda
lo que tú llamas la última evolución . . . tu buena
evolución! (31)

Clara's role as a witness and her experience of discovery functions, there can be little question, as a dramatic interior duplication of the audience, who is asked to accept the existence of people like Pérez and company in society, preying on the young and the weak. It is asked to contemplate in a forthright fashion the details of his nocturnal underworld and to scrutinize some significant details of its etiology. It is required to withstand the horror, along with Clara, of the kiss that Pérez implants on Dr. Flórez's neck. And it is asked to react with outrage along with Clara as an appropriate response to the reality it has discovered and witnessed along with her. In this way, the audience can accept the validity of her firing on Pérez, her demand that her husband take his own life, and the sense of emotional destruction that floods her as the curtain falls.

As a thesis play, *Los invertidos* charts its line of exposition very lucidly: the ordered daytime world of Dr. Flórez vs. the turbulent nighttime realm of Pérez; the young, healthy masculinity of Julián vs. the queerness of the fairies who are denizens of Pérez's garçoniére. Clara functions as a pivotal reference point between these two worlds because of the indiscretion of her incursion into Pérez's world, a lapse that she atones for first by fleeing from the corrupt Pérez and then by bringing moral justice to her own household as the implacable avenger of the threats to it. As a dramatist, González Castillo is equally implacable with Clara, as he exposes her to the danger of being the lover of the same man of whom her husband has been a lover since childhood (thereby confirming the absolute corruption of the vampire Pérez), obliges her to contemplate the brutal truth about her husband's secret life, and guides her as she does what must be done to defend the proper moral order. If the play in early twentieth-century Argentina may be assumed to have been directed at an essentially upper middle-class audience, Clara is a reasonable stand-in for the audience's introduction to a threat to any society's moral fiber.

Where *Los invertidos*, however, speaks to González Castillo's commitment to an anarchist point of view is in the handling of the two characters in the work, aside from the brief appearance of Pérez's "boys," who are marginal to the social class the play focuses on: the Flórez's maid and Pérez's valet. Both of these characters are rather bemused by the ignorance

about the ways of the world of the main characters, and both tell how they have had considerable contact with "men of that sort" outside in the unprotected milieu of their own social class. Petrona overhears Julián read aloud the text he is transcribing for his father:

Petrona: ¡Ah! . . . Una manflora . . . ¡Bah! . . . He conocido tantos . . . ¿Y cómo dice que le llaman a los manfloras?

Julián: Hermafroditas . . . Invertidos . . .

Petrona: Mafrodita . . . ¡Bah! . . . Los médicos y los procuradores siempre le han de inventar nombres raros a las cosas más sencillas . . . En mis tiempos se les llamaba mariquita, no más, o maricón, que es más claro . . . Pá qué tantos términos . . . ¡Yo he conocido más de cien . . . !

Julián: ¿Usted? . . . ¿En dónde? . . .

Petrona: ¿En dónde ha e'ser, pues? . . . ¡En el mundo! . . . ¿Usted qué se cree? Hay más de esos, mafrodita que lo que parece. ¿qué se figura? . . . (4-5)

Petrona then proceeds to toss out some information that casts the first light on the relationship between Pérez and Dr. Flórez, who have been friends since childhood and whose behavior has always seemed more than a little strange to this servant hardened to both the harsh realities of life and the curious ways of the people she works for. This information, which Julián dismisses by telling Petrona to mind her own business (5), foreshadows Clara's subsequent full discoveries.

As part of Clara's getting the facts straight for herself, she sends for Benito, Pérez's manservant, whom she bribes to tell her what really goes on in his employer's club. Previous to this interview, she has had Petrona repeat for her in greater detail what the latter had told Julián. But from Benito himself she learns all about Pérez's life and the shadowy world in which he moves. Benito makes it clear that his job is to obey orders and that a man must do what is necessary in order to live. He speaks of his distaste for what he sees and confirms the depravity of his employer and those who frequent the club, including Dr. Flórez:

Benito: Y . . . mujeres falsificadas, ¿no sabe? . . . Varones de ambos "sesos," como dicen . . .

- Clara:** Pero . . . de modo que . . . ¡No! eso no es posible . . . ¡Usted miente!
- Benito:** Señora . . . permítame. Yo no miento nada . . .
- Clara:** Pero . . . ¡dígame! Mi marido . . . ¿qué hace mi marido ahí? . . . ¿Qué hace? . . .
- Benito:** Y, señora . . . Son cosas de la vida . . . ¡Qué va a sorprenderse uno! Cada hombre tiene un vicio, tiene (28).

Like Benito, *Los invertidos* is not lying. And like Clara, the audience must accept the bitter truth about the existence and activities like the vampires that pervert the morally healthy. Petrona and Benito may accept with the resignation of the disenfranchised, who must survive in a world they cannot control, the presence of *manfloras* who, particularly in Benito's case, are part of the exploitation to which they are subject in a corrupt world. It is interesting to note that, as part of the confirmation of the extent to which the society they know is pervasively corrupt, both Petrona and Benito acknowledge the extensive existence of men like Pérez and Dr. Flórez, as against the bourgeois wishful thinking, prevalent even today, that homosexuality involves only a minuscule number beyond the pale of decent society.

González Castillo assigns the task of addressing this blight on the social fabric not to the working-class characters who admit to considerable familiarity with it, but to an agent of the very class to which the sexual vampires themselves belong. One might speculate as to the ideological advantage of affirming this correlation between Clara and the likely audience of the play, who themselves are responsible for the moral quality of Argentine society. Concomitantly, the dramatist may have shied away from putting social remedies in the hands of characters who are marginal to the social class that binds the world of the play and the sort of audience it would have had in 1914 almost two decades before social realist works sustainedly addressed themselves to working-class audiences (cf., however, Castagnino 133-134 on González Castillo's anarchistic themes). By whatever the explanation for this structural detail of the play may be, it remains clear that the homosexual ringleaders of the play belong to a privileged class from whose protected position they engage in their immoral behavior and corrupt others along with them, including men of Benito's station in life like the boys who interrupt Pérez's and Clara's tryst in his apartment.

As a work of drama, *Los invertidos* places the emphasis on homosexuality as action, as a behavior. Within the context of the debate over whether homosexuality is an inherent condition like other genetically determined traits or whether it is an assumed conduct that can be taken up and set aside

according to the varying circumstances of the individual's life (that is, the debate between whether or not "homosexual" can ever be an existential noun or whether it can only be an inanimate adjective to describe acts), Dr. Flórez's professional report refers both to bad genes and to the conditioning effect of environment and education, which is essentially a variety of the naturalist's deterministic hypothesis about the human condition. The task, then, becomes one of protecting society from the destructive influence of this lamentable condition. Where Julián, in a discussion with his mother of the subject, underscores the pathos of a condition that, nevertheless, provokes *asco* in him (25), *Los invertidos* looks toward the legitimate eradication of the vampires by the hand of the morally righteous like Clara.

From the point of view of drama as an arena of actions, it is not the pathetic *condition* of Pérez and company but their perverse *behavior* that holds sway in the development of the play. It is this behavior that Clara witness, both directly in her visit to the garçoniere, her reading of the letter from Pérez to her husband, and her spying on their conversation as lifelong lovers and indirectly through the information she extracts from Petrona and Benito, that legitimizes her set of actions that draw the play to a close.

Los invertidos is a grim piece of theatre for the version of a corrupt privileged class it depicts and the solution it proposes, as well as for the counterpoint between that version and subsequent versions of homosexuality (Foster), particularly the 1982 dramatic version of Manuel Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), to mention an Argentine reference (Muñoz). But while the only thing original about homosexuality that González Castillo's play has to offer is the legitimization of Clara's Medea-like corrective violence in the name of sociomoral integrity, its emphasis on the dramatic, action-based depiction of the behavior of homosexuality removes the subject from the realm of the cursory references in Argentine literature to the condition of some hapless individuals and provides it with its first forthrightly theatrical representation.

Arizona State University

Works Cited

- Acevedo, Zelmar. *Homosexualidad: hacia la destrucción de los mitos*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sur, 1985.
- Bellucci, Mabel. "El anarquismo y su lucha en favor del derecho al placer femenino." *Contribuciones* [Asociación Argentina de Protección Familiar] 10.35 (julio 1987): 41-45.

- Berenguer Carisomo, Arturo. *Las ideas estéticas en el teatro argentino*. Buenos Aires: Comisión Nacional de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Estudios de Teatro, 1947.
- Castagnino, Raúl H. *Sociología del teatro argentino*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1962.
- Foppa, Tito Livio. *Diccionario teatral del Río de la Plata*. Buenos Aires: Argentores, Ediciones del Carro de Tespis, 1961.
- Foster, David William. "The Search for Text: Some Examples of Latin American Gay Writing." Unpublished.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. from the French by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.
- González Castillo, José. *Los invertidos; obra realista en tres actos*. Buenos Aires: Editorial "Prensa Moderna", n.d. Reprinted, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Carro de Tespis, Argentores, 1957.
- Jones, Willis Knapp. *Behind Spanish American Footlights*. Austin: U Texas P, 1966.
- Leland, Christopher Towne. *The Last Happy Men; the Generation of 1922, Fiction, and the Argentine reality*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986.
- Muñoz, Elías Miguel. *El discurso utópico de la sexualidad en Manuel Puig*. Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1987.
- Ordaz, Luis. "José González Castillo: sainetero popular y dramaturgo." *Revista de Estudios de Teatro* 2.6 (1963): 32-35.
- Oved, Jaacov. *El anarquismo y el movimiento obrero en Argentina*. México, D.F.: Siglo XXI Editores, 1978.
- Viñas, David. *Anarquistas en América latina*. México, D.F.: Editorial Katún, 1983.