

Three Plays by Austin Clarke and the *Commedia* Tradition¹

Christopher Murray

University College Dublin (christopher.murray@ucd.ie)

Keywords: Clarke, *Commedia dell'arte*, Columbine, Pierrot, Harlequin

1. Like most European countries, Ireland felt the theatrical influence of *commedia dell'arte*. But since Ireland had no native or indigenous theatre, influence was a matter of imbibing through colonial history. The Irish theatre, mainly situated in Dublin, was since the late sixteenth century an imitation and transplantation of the London theatre. In that respect, the Dublin theatre before 1899 broadly accepted the taste and repertory of the English coloniser. Consequently, pantomime became established from the eighteenth century and followed the same path as in England, making use of Harlequin and Columbine as lovers and creating what was called the harlequinade as an extended transformation scene². Even though pantomime was a debased form, it kept alive some vestiges of popular tradition, albeit in a very British and a very spectacular style. As a child, Austin Clarke (1896-1974) would have seen the Christmas pantomime in Dublin and discovered theatre as a place of magical possibilities.

But soon, too, the young Clarke came to know the plays at the Abbey Theatre, founded as an alternative to the colonialist theatre. In particular, he came to admire the poetic plays of W.B. Yeats, the driving force behind the Abbey as a cultural institution committed to the nationalist cause. As a poet, Clarke fell under the influence of Yeats, but as a twentieth-century Irishman he was also attracted to new ideas of European origin. On the one hand, Clarke saw his mission as following Yeats in the dual attempt to restore poetry to the Irish stage and to train actors to speak verse properly. On the other hand, since the Abbey was becoming more and more the theatre of realism, as seen in the plays of J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey, Clarke found himself attracted to the great rival theatre in Dublin, the Gate³.

In the broadest sense, the Gate was dedicated to Harlequin. Founded in 1928 by two English actors as a modern theatre dedicated to an international repertory from Shakespeare to Goldoni to Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, and so on, the Gate emphasised theatrical values, lighting, staging methods, new ideas on design and production. The logo for this theatre was a drawing of Harlequin pushing open two gates symbolic of magical revelation. The book one of the founders wrote was entitled *The Mantle of Harlequin*. In it the author Hilton Edwards paid tribute to *commedia dell'arte* and said that its spirit could be

summarized in the figure of Harlequin. When Yeats rejected Clarke's first poetic play it was staged at the Gate (1930). A second was not staged until 1939, for in the intervening years Clarke was in London, like so many Irish writers of his generation, seeking a living as a man of letters. Only then, after the death of Yeats, who had rather spurned the younger poet, did Clarke turn to the Abbey. It was at this point his work was accepted for the first time, and he established his own company, the Lyric Theatre⁴, using the Abbey on Sunday and Monday nights, to put on modern poetic plays, international as well as Irish.

The better to situate Clarke within the parameters of this essay, I would claim that through the binary relationship between two Dublin theatres, both modern but one (the Gate) modifying the English tradition and the other (the Abbey) creating a new Irish tradition, Clarke entered on a brief career as a playwright at once sharing and going well beyond the project which energized Yeats as co-founder of the Abbey. Clarke now, it can be argued, in a sense brought with him something of the Gate's ethos, and, I would maintain, strove for a stylistic synthesis of Gate and Abbey. While this is a large claim, the element of hyperbole in it may serve to draw attention to the gap Clarke helped to fill in Irish theatre at a time when the Abbey was sinking more and more into conservative realism. Moreover, it is worth noting that Hilton Edwards regarded Clarke as briefly restoring to the modern Irish theatre the poet which *commedia dell'arte* had banished in its heyday⁵. Until the fire which destroyed the old Abbey Theatre in 1951, and with it all further chance of developing poetic drama in that quarter, for ten years Clarke challenged Dublin audiences with poetic, experimental work by modern authors, and in two of his own plays staged in the 1940s he paid tribute to *commedia dell'arte*.

I focus on this aspect of his work because it provides the means of emphasizing the international, self-reflexive nature of Clarke the playwright, who is otherwise too often regarded as a learned, Celticist-style poet, along the lines contemptuously (and unfairly) dismissed by the callow Beckett in 1934. In a review article at this time, Beckett, writing for the «Bookman» under the pseudonym Andrew Belis, divided contemporary Irish poets into «anti-quarians» and «others», Clarke being classed among the former, traditional, conventional, lacking a central theme: «The fully licensed stock-in-trade from Aisling to Red Branch Bundling, is his to command»⁶. Clarke published no volume of poetry between 1939 and 1955, during which he concentrated on the theatre, and it should be noted that his 1955 volume, *Ancient Lights*, ushered in a new, satirical Clarke, whose theme became Irish society in all its drawbacks, hypocrisies and moral failures. Accordingly, it is justifiable to regard Clarke's interest in modern poetic drama, and his commitment to the work of the Lyric Theatre, as hugely formative in his own development as well as marking a significant challenge to what Beckett called the antiquarian inheritance from the Irish Revival. In short, therefore, this essay situates Clarke

within two traditions, the Irish dramatic tradition and the wider European tradition represented here by *commedia dell'arte*. The purpose is to identify Clarke as a neglected playwright whose interest in experimentalism offers grounds for a revised view of mid-century Irish theatre.

2. Before describing Clarke's two *commedia* plays from the 1940s, followed by *The Third Kiss*, which was a later addition, it is necessary briefly to comment on Clarke's ideology and sensibility. In the first place, as an Irish writer he was actually closer in outlook to James Joyce than to W.B. Yeats. He was educated by the Jesuits and unfortunately, because of his temperament, developed an overwhelming sense of sin. Unlike Joyce, that guilt never left him. In general terms, his work, in prose as well as verse, while basically a critique of institutional rigour and orthodoxy, is infused by an acutely painful conscience. As artist, as poet, novelist and playwright, he was able to create a drama between puritanism and sexual desire, perhaps his enduring theme. But he ran foul of the new censorship laws which were introduced in postcolonial Ireland after 1930, so that all three of his novels were banned. He turned to the theatre because no overt censorship was in force there and found a small but appreciative audience among Dublin's artists and intellectuals of the day.

The Kiss, *The Second Kiss* and *The Third Kiss* were not written at the same time – indeed, there is a gap of twenty years between the first and last of these – but they obviously form a group, loosely based on Clarke's appreciation of *commedia dell'arte*, its theatricality and its celebration of love, mischief and the carnivalesque. With one exception, Clarke used only four characters in these three plays: Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot and Pierrette. The exception will be explained presently. The focus in the three plays is on Pierrot and Pierrette, less well known derivatives from the *commedia dell'arte*, especially the male figure. Pierrot, or Pierotto, based on Pedrolino, was developed in seventeenth-century France at the Comedie Italienne as «a servant or valet of dreamy and merry temperament», as Giacomo Oreglia describes him⁷. His costume was all white. First played by Giovanni Pellesini of the Gelosi company he was later played by Giuseppe Giaratone, who lent him a new refinement and delicacy, as Watteau's painting reveals. To quote Allardyce Nicoll (93), Pierrot «was invested almost with an atmosphere of mysticism» in France and became the central character in at least two French plays in the Romantic era. In the early nineteenth century Jean-Gaspard Deburau re-created Pierrot at the Theatre des Funambles as a silent character, «the white-clad, ever-hopeful, always disappointed lover»⁸. This was the tradition Clarke inherited, the rather sentimental, pathetic but moving figure brought to the screen by Jean-Louis Barrault in *Les Enfants du Paradis* in 1945, just three years after Clarke's *The Kiss* was first staged. But he would doubtless have been aware also of the debased versions of Pierrot and Pierrette common in English seaside entertainments from the 1890s on.

As to the style Clarke adopted, it was rhymed pentameter verse but considerably freer than Yeats's verse. Clarke's dramatic poetry, it has been said, «has a subtler and more varied music than Yeats's, while its flexibility suits the more human dimension of his plays»⁹. Literally, Clarke's plays were more down to earth. But the three plays under discussion were also much more self-consciously theatrical than Yeats's plays, with the possible exception of *The Player Queen* (1919), tended to be. As one critic has remarked, «[t]he characters are themselves actors in a play that they readily discuss with the audience, like their predecessors in *commedia dell'arte*. Sometimes they follow a script, sometimes improvise, playing variations on a theme, ingeniously making up situations and dialogue. It is as though they are in love with make-believe»¹⁰.

*The Kiss*¹¹ was first staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1942 but received a more important outing two years later when the great actor Cyril Cusack assumed the role of Pierrot. His wife Maureen Kiely played Pierrette. This 1944 production marked the beginning of a new theatre venture, the Lyric Theatre Company founded by Clarke, with the actress Ria Mooney directing the plays and Anne Yeats, the poet's daughter designing the settings¹². Mary Shine Thompson comments in her introduction *Selected Plays of Austin Clarke* (2005) that the Lyric played biannually at the Abbey for seven years with the declared aim 'to maintain the imaginative tradition of the Irish theatre which the poets of the literary revival made famous'(x), staging not only the plays of Clarke and Yeats but also plays by George Fitzmaurice, Donagh McDonagh, Padraic Colum and such contemporary writers as T.S. Eliot and Archibald McLeish. *The Kiss*, subtitled *A Light Comedy in One Act*, was based on a play by the French author Theodore de Banville, *Le Baiser*. In a brief programme note for the 1944 production Clarke called de Banville «one of the most graceful poets of the romantic movement and excelled in verbal dexterity» and said *Le Baiser*, first staged in Paris in the late 1870s, «was, in part, a light satire on politics and the monopoly system»¹³.

Clarke's play opens on a stage dark or in shadow except for one spot-lit area downstage, where a wood is suggested by «the mossy trunk of a fallen tree». It is a pastoral scene set near Dublin on an early morning in May. An old woman enters named Uirgeal, the one exception to Clarke's general use in all three plays of *commedia* characters. Uirgeal means «shining bright» or the like, and the old woman is meant to suggest a figure from folklore. «She is wrapped in a ragged cloak with a heavy hood and drags herself forward as if under the weight of centuries» (145). If an audience member had a theatre programme she would know that there are only two actors in this piece, and so must expect a surprise. Uirgeal lets the audience in on the plot in her opening soliloquy:

Why must I hobble, shudder with old age,
 Wrinkle the raindropped pools in tiny rage,
 Bedraggle the spine of the bramble rose,
 When by the very whiteness of the clothes
 He wears and their big buttons, I can tell
 Pierrot will surely break the wicked spell
 That keeps me old? (145)

Until Pierrot gives her the first kiss of his life, «so pure / He has not dared to dream of that first kiss» (145), she cannot escape from the evil spell placed upon her. She needs his ‘mortal innocence’ to save her.

She hides while Pierrot enters with a luncheon basket and proceeds to tell the audience its contents (probably miming the items he takes out of the basket one by one). He has two wineglasses and hopes to come across a pretty woman in the wood who will share in his repast. When Uirgeal slowly approaches him he comments to the audience on her ugliness and wishes he were alone with his cake and wine, «For who would call that one a Columbine?» (147). He shares with her nevertheless. She asks what he does for a living. «Nothing much, I fear», the actor replies, «delight in momentary fancies, dress in white» (148). But alarmed at her seeming frailty Pierrot asks if he can help her. «I only want a moment» (149), she declares. Always in Clarke the moment is sacred, and one of his last plays is entitled *The Moment Next to Nothing* (1958), referring to an irreversible decision in the choice between the physical, sexual life and the monastic, spiritual life. The sexual and magical meaning in *The Kiss* is conveyed when Uirgeal pleads for a kiss with the words, «What only takes a moment will not hurt you»; her seductive request neatly reverses the conventional plea by the male for the mystic prize of virginity. Of course, Clarke is referring to woman as seductress in the Christian tradition, especially in the lives of the saints, and he is using the simple kiss as synecdoche for complete sexual surrender or loss of soul as the puritan version of Christianity would have it. The moment is thus a moral moment, unlike Joyce’s epiphany. Pierrot moves down stage and confers with himself: «This strange old woman has alarmed my virtue, / My heart is jumping. I can feel it dash». Although parting with his first kiss may destroy his joy he decides that to do this good turn will help him to «endure what’s horrible», musing, «Did Theseus blench / When he went down to Hell for all the stench / Of sulphur?» (150). The mock-heroic tone indicates Clarke’s satire of contemporary Irish moral scruples. The comedy lies in the exaggeration of what is over-valued in a society made neurotic over the virtue of chastity.

When Pierrot heroically runs to Uirgeal and determinedly kisses her – however the actor was to act that – we get the following stage direction:

The moment he kisses her, the stage becomes fully lit and Uirgeal is transformed into a young girl. Still masked, she appears as the ideal Columbine of his thoughts. Pierrot is overcome with wonder and delight.

The wonder and delight can be mimed but Clarke also supplies Pierrot with a romantic speech analysing the magic in a series of questions, culminating in, «can I decline / Your loveliness, if you are Columbine?» (151). It is not entirely clear how Uirgeal *becomes* Columbine, but presumably her pretty white costume underlies the old woman's dark cloak and hood. The information that she is «still masked» lets the reader know for the first time that Uirgeal was masked from the start. The mask here is at first a mere disguise, then, but is it an ugly mask which Columbine then retains or does the actress somehow manage to turn it inside out or fold it in half? Clarke does not clarify the point.

Her mission accomplished, Columbine starts to leave the space. Pierrot then reveals what she has awoken in him and tries to persuade her literally to return his kiss. Here Clarke briefly turns the play towards comment on contemporary hypocrisy, as Pierrot compares the double standards in society for those in power as against those indictable for petty crime, and sees that he is opening a can of worms or, more precisely, «I touch a floating mine». This image is a reminder that when the play was first staged the Second World War was at its height. A trifle over a kiss would remind the audience that, after all, while the war raged in Europe and Ireland enjoyed neutrality, morality was a complex and dangerous topic, a floating mine, indeed. Pierrot wants Columbine to give all, in short her body, for his gratification. His initial idealism has easily shifted to self interest. Uirgeal, he considers, can start by unmasking, a metaphor for stripping. The metaphysics of the situation are teased out in Pierrot's hypocritical speech comparing the consequence to what faced the airmen engaged in bombing missions at this time. If he asks too much in asking her to unmask, what is the «reason of your own metempsychosis?». He goes on:

If one plain kiss return you to the sky,
 Dare we in one another arms be shy?
 Whisper to me of all that whiteness none
 Have been but airmen, flying past the sun
 Through icicles, before the lever drops
 The high explosive, whiteness that never stops [...]
 Although the clouded skies we know – are black
 With horror (153).

In a sense, Clarke is saying that moral questions, whether of love or war, are not black-and-white issues. Uirgeal/Columbine insists she cannot go against her character, her mask. Her nature, she says, represents light and innocence, whereas «mortal longings», or what we may call human passions, «are the deathward flight / Of midges towards the dusk» (154). Eros and Thanatos are intertwined. The question is as psychological as it is political, as Freudian as it is de Valerian. Uirgeal reduces it to a matter of legal contract or agreement: «We must be married first, / If I am to be yours» (155). Pierrot agrees but tries to cheat her over the

issue of a formal marriage licence. She sends him off to ensure there is nobody in the wood who might see her naked if she agrees to his request now. While he is offstage she unmask, and a tear has formed behind the mask in response to the birds and birdsong gathered all around her by Pierrot. «Must I weep ... weep ... come to earth?» (159), she asks herself, that is, does love imply human weakness? Having decided, on balance, to marry Pierrot when he returns she is instantly rebuked by the sound of «distant spirit voices» calling her name. These are her sisters, she tells Pierrot as she gives him back his kiss quickly and runs away. Left alone in despair Pierrot considers suicide but then reconsiders and decides instead to mourn his lost ideal in more romantic style by carving her name with his knife upon a tree, as the curtain slowly descends. The poet thus expresses his need for a Muse. The artist needs his lost love if he is to write.

Four years later, when the war was over, Clarke staged *The Second Kiss* at the Abbey. This time there were four characters, Pierrot and Pierrette (again played by Cyril Cusack and his wife), plus Harlequin and Columbine. This play takes the *commedia dell'arte* deeper into psychological territory while expanding the self-reflexive theatricality of the first piece. It opens in darkness to the sound of a long kiss, which, the stage direction says, «should exceed by three seconds the emotional duration allowed by the Film Censor» (249). In spite of this romantic opening, when the lights come up the subject is marital boredom, or, if you prefer, the day after the wedding. Pierrot and Pierrette look for ways to keep love interesting after marriage, including the promise of playing with their shadows at evening time and/or adopting roles such as Romeo and Juliet. They quarrel. When Pierrette runs off home to go to bed alone Pierrot is lost. He forgets his lines and goes stage right to ask for his cue. The prompter is Harlequin, who remains off-stage in the ensuing dialogue between them. He would appear to be Pierrot's alter ego, determined to seduce Pierrette. Pierrot stands up to him:

Back, silent masquerader,
My heart is free of you. I'm not afraid or
Dejected now. I know what devils feel (255).

Here Clarke accepts the demonic side of Harlequin's mask. Giacomo Oreglia tells us that Harlequin was originally devilish, and refers to his «typically demoniacal half-mask»¹⁴ which warns us of his amorality. In the play Harlequin is the «bright temptation» who re-appears all through Clarke's work, usually in the guise of a beautiful woman, as in the early poem spoken by the Young Woman of Beare:

I am the bright temptation
In talk, in wine, in sleep.
Although the clergy pray,
I triumph in a dream¹⁵.

Pierrot, attempting to control Harlequin, refers to the script to show «by every tap and page, / You cannot come tonight upon this stage» (256). In short, he's not in the story. Harlequin is silenced.

But Pierrot has no idea what his role is to be, and improvises while he consults the script. Not liking what he reads he addresses the audience: «This cannot be the play. / The lines are different. My head's astray». Coming down front he reads the title page: «"A Comedy" ... this light is much too dim ... / "By Austin Clarke" ... I never heard of him». And then, «*confidently to the audience*», «I'll read the stage directions, scan the plot» (256). He gets his bearings, finds lighting cues and stage setting obeying him, sits as requested while music plays preparatory to his falling asleep before Columbine is to come on, «daintily tip-toeing». All of this is in the script Pierrot reads aloud. It is not what he expected. Having read it, like a good Catholic he jumps up in panic and puts the script in his pocket, declaring, «I must be going. / I'm married now». And this is the situation the play will explore.

The play proper may be said to begin here, as Pierrot out of curiosity changes his mind and settles down to sleep on stage: «No harm to try ... just pretend to be asleep». The following action then takes place as if in his dream. Columbine enters hesitantly, fearfully. The stage direction tells us: «*She is dressed exactly in the same costume as Pierrette but wears a mask*». She moves around the stage «*gracefully and yet sadly*» until she discovers Pierrot asleep. The stage direction continues: «*The audience at this time has considerable advantage over the dreaming Pierrot and realises that Columbine is being played by the same actress who has already appeared as Pierrette*» (257). Further, she is the Columbine he met and lost in *The Kiss*. Awakened now into rapture Pierrot is surprised to find she is wearing a mask again and asks why. It is to hide the tears necessarily accompanying the pain of love, «The poison drops of joy» (258), and she will not remove it. What happened, Pierrot wants to know, when she ran away from him at the end of *The Kiss*? «Did some unexpected clap end the comedy?» (259). They struggle to reconstruct the scene and it is bound up in their memories with images of the war and of aerial bombardment and casualties on all sides. As the stage lights dim to black Columbine remembers why they both ran away: «As ghosts when all belief in them is dead. / A Glimmer of white clothes [...] / For comedy had seen the last of us». That is to say, the world was occupied with tragedy. But now, as they search for each other on the darkened stage, the light rises again, this time bright and coloured. «Look, Pierrot», shouts Columbine, «a skylight! Laugh and learn your part / Again». He searches for his script, but she knows the lines for both of them, she says. Were they improvising before? Are they improvising now? Clarke keeps the ambiguity going.

As they reminisce in romantic mood now it is as if they hover between their historical roles in the theatre, «the authors who invented / Excuses when

we tried to run away / Together—lest we spoil another play» and displease the «Dark gallery and pit, those hidden faces» (261), and the specifics of their always interrupted love affair. They find the roles of lovers again, just as it was before «the world went wrong» (263). If their fate was due to their being illicit lovers, Pierrot suddenly wonders, what if they now turned respectable, got married and settled down? She agrees and says she can now at last unmask. But she runs away again as soon as she unmasks and during Pierrot's search for her Harlequin leaps terrifyingly on to the stage, to appropriate sound and lighting effects. He wears a half mask under which he also wears a pair of goggles, perhaps to associate him with the airmen referred to in the earlier dialogue. He carries «a little rod or wand» (265). He is the author's *deus ex machina* in an ironic role, or as Pierrot puts it, «the devil striving to be orthodox» (266). His language is very rhetorical and boastful: «I am the spirit of all new inventions / Known for their speed and excellent intentions» and so forth (265).

Pierrot and Harlequin are opposites, one the eternal lover, the other the spirit that denies who yet is wonderfully mobile and mischievous. It was Harlequin who substituted *that* play, i.e. Clarke's play introducing Columbine, for Pierrot's own. Even if Pierrot is right to dismiss him as a fake, a «Jack-in-the-box, / Black in the face with rage that cannot hurt», Harlequin has the advantage in being well aware that all his attributes are but theatrical tricks, «I meant it all, believe me, as a joke» (266). Except, he insists, Pierrot's (real?) love endures, while Columbine is already his also. With that, with a playful wave of Harlequin's wand Pierrette reappears, dressed in white silk pyjamas and carrying a Chinese lantern. She rushes to Pierrot as Harlequin vanishes, and as the play draws to a close Pierrot and Pierrette resume the «long kiss» with which the play began and then they exit to bed. We are to imagine that Pierrot has for the time being successfully negotiated the two sides of his desire, for the real and the ideal, the persona and the anima.

3. *The Third Kiss*¹⁶, published unstaged in 1974, sums up much of what Clarke was trying to say in these little, poetic comedies. I shall just deal with three points and then comment on the epilogue in relation to Harlequin's interesting final speech. The first point is Clarke's interest in the theatre as the site of a Pirandellian debate on reality and illusion. *The Third Kiss* is something of an expressionist piece, where what happens may sometimes be a dream or nightmare.

The play is set in the old Abbey Theatre itself, in the year 1913, where Pierrot and Pierrette are actors in a realistic, sordid drama. In a prologue we see them getting into costume backstage. This is a self-conscious, improvised scene in which they look forward to abandoning their type characters, their «masks», and sampling what it may be like to be human and to share human emotions, when «we are real at last» (8). This is, then, a new kind

of transformation. Pierrot is quite prepared to depart from the text of the play they are to appear in, even if it shocks the author, in order to enjoy human love-making.

The play-within-the-play then begins, a slightly satirised slice of Dublin life in which Pierrot and Pierrette play Peter and Pauline, two would-be lovers divided by Pauline's religiosity. With her refrain, «What would Father Doyle say?» whenever Peter attempts to kiss her, we might be in one of O'Casey's later satirical comedies, such as *The Bishop's Bonfire* (1955). (Indeed, Pauline wants to leave the world and enter a convent)¹⁷. But from time to time Pierrot finds opportunities to drop out of character and improvise a love scene with Pierrette. These are brief contrasts to the mounting hysteria of Pierrette's role as Pauline.

This is the second point to be made. Clarke is dramatising the torments of conscience of a sexually repressed society. A few years earlier, after a trip to the United States, he had written a dramatisation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *Goodman Brown*, set in late-seventeenth-century Salem, under the title *The Impuritans*. There he showed how close his own imagination was to Hawthorne's and how he saw twentieth-century Irish society as unhealthily religious in the same way as Hawthorne saw his puritan ancestors of New England. In *The Third Kiss* voyeurs, voyeurism and the devil seem to occupy people's concerns to an abnormal degree. The saintly Father Doyle is not what he seems. When Pauline (i.e. Pierrette) sees a naked man rolling in nettles in a wood at dead of night to chastise himself for his sins her terror drives her to confess in church as if *she* were the guilty party because she «yielded to temptation» looked when the naked man stood up (28). The confession scene with Father Doyle is prurient in its question-and-answer format and climaxes, if the word is not too strong, when the priest asks if she knew the man she saw:

PAULINE (*suddenly aware of a change in his tone of voice, frightened*) How could I?

FR. DOYLE Look. Do you recognize / Him now?

(*He turns*)

PAULINE (*in horror*) You!

FR. DOYLE (*anguished*) 'Spirit that denies.'

(*black out*) (29)

Presumably, in referring to the «[s]pirit that denies», i.e. Mephistopheles, Father Doyle means Pauline and thus we have in this scene a compressed, imagistic expression of the neurotic misogyny (the demonization of women) underlying strict Roman Catholic ideas on chastity in the first half of the twentieth century. Conscience, in Clarke's astute account of it, is a kind of neurosis, to which the amoral attitude towards sex of *commedia dell'arte* stands in strong contrast.

The third point is the role of Harlequin in this play. It is directly related to the two preceding points, theatre and conscience. Once again Harlequin is

a behind-the-scenes figure, more the director than a participant in the action. He is now a more menacing «mask», however, intent on seducing Pierrette, and is deliberately related to the Gentleman in an Opera Cloak who accosts Pauline in a scene where she and Peter are racing three times around the Black Church. According to the superstition, for a Catholic to run three times around this Protestant church will result in meeting the devil. In saluting Pauline, «Good evening, Miss», the Gentleman turns, «*showing devil-mask*», as the stage direction says (20) and Pauline runs offstage screaming her discovery. The Gentleman makes a sign to the street lamp and it goes out as he vanishes. Running on in the blackout, Peter calls for Pauline and hears only the echo of his own voice «far off» (21). The Gentleman is listed among the cast of characters as well as Harlequin, who thus cannot be identified with him. He is intended to be real, a protected human species, another pillar of society who is secretly (i.e. masked) a corrupter of innocence. On the other hand, in claiming he is «an air-demon» and that his baton is «an heirloom / From Hell» (11) Harlequin is merely playacting. His presence in the play as mischief-maker contrasts with the ‘real’ devil feared by the respectable people in the play-within-the-play. Clarke plays once again on the ambivalence between theatre and life, showing in performance how real and unreal can be unsettlingly interchangeable concepts.

As already claimed above, *The Third Kiss* is in part an expressionist piece in which what happens may be dream or nightmare. In the fourth and final scene Pauline decides that her encounter with the Gentleman was just that, as she puts it, «a nightmare / Or trance [...] In rainy flickers» like a film, and yet terrifying. She comes to terms with it, abandons the idea of entering a convent, and commits herself to Peter, to a reality where the hegemony of conscience is discarded. Her decision reveals Clarke’s drama as one of dissent. Thus the lovers’ kiss literally brings down the curtain, as if to save the audience’s blushes. Clarke’s comic point is that Harlequin, a freer spirit than the members of the audience, continues to peep as Peter and Pauline undress backstage, knowingly conceding that voyeurism is his permitted vice. At least Harlequin can indulge without conscience intervening. At this point Harlequin un.masks, declaring «My wickedness, you see, is not really in earnest», then peeping through his mask adds, «Or is it?» (33).

Finally, to come to Harlequin’s big speech and its implications. He stands in front of the curtain, at first peeping through at the actors undressing (managing to create the illusion that backstage can be seen onstage). Then he launches into a dismissal of the playwright’s squeamishness before championing his own amorality and that of his colleagues in the world of *commedia dell’arte*, the Doctor, Brighetta, «the Clown and Scaramouche, / Old Pantaloon, the bragging Captain», because «Our lovers would be human, she – more, he – less». Harlequin asserts the primacy of bodily desires over longings for the ideal and the abstract. Where the priest in the play-within-

the-play identified with the «[s]pirit that denies» Harlequin declares «[p]leasure is in the affirmative». Pierrette is never safe from his intrigues, while Pierrot, doomed to chase in vain and «cold pursuit» after Columbine, finds only an image «made of cardboard» (34). And so the chase goes on all across Europe. «We are international types / Not local [...] *Commedia dell'arte* / Still carries on. The centuries have made us artful». With that, «*He turns, mimes the withdrawing of the curtain. It obeys him and he leaves, right*» (35). In his long speech, therefore, Harlequin speaks for the *commedia* («us»). Simultaneously he speaks for the spirit of theatre as embodied by the Gate, as his gesture of opening the curtain mimes the Gate's logo.

But there is one more scene to go in *The Third Kiss*. Harlequin wants us to see what the lovers are at backstage. Clarke makes good use in all three plays of the contrast between the liberal philosophy of the *commedia* and the puritanism of the Irish, but here in the epilogue to *The Third Kiss* the theme is ambiguously as well as dramatically rendered. We discover Pierrot and Pierrette onstage changing back into their own traditional costumes, now thoroughly disillusioned with the «lamentable condition» of humanity. They want nothing more to do with «Those tiresome human beings – [...] Unhappy, tormented / By conscience [and] Fear of sin» (36). Not realising that they are the playthings of Harlequin, the lovers rejoice in resuming their 'masks' and with them an imagined freedom.

Clarke can use the difference between the Abbey and the Gate in the same way as the difference between the real and the imagined. It is significant also that Harlequin made his big speech *in front of* the curtain, as if he were outside the frame of theatrical illusion. Then, with his final gesture magically opening up a space for himself inside the curtain again Harlequin shows that his world is absolutely and only of the theatre, and he makes his exit from the stage itself, presumably to loud applause re-affirming all he stands for. It is a clever way to entice the audience to endorse Clarke's critique of bourgeois society in the epilogue which follows Harlequin's exit. The use of *commedia dell'arte* in his three plays thus pays generous tribute to a specific and historically rooted style of comedy while also holding a mirror up to Irish society after Joyce.

Endnotes

¹This article is based on a lecture given to the International Forum on *kyogen* and *commedia dell'arte* at the Istituto Italiano, Tokyo, organizer Professor Masaru Sekine (Waseda University), in September 2007. I am grateful to the Forum, to Professor Sekine, and to the Italian Institute in Tokyo for support.

²For an excellent account, see D. Mayer III, *The English Pantomime, 1806-1836*, Harvard UP, Cambridge MA 1969.

³On Edwards-Macliammoir's Gate Theatre see *Enter Certain Players. Edwards-Macliammoir and the Gate, 1928-78*, ed. by P. Luke, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1978; C. Fitzsimons, *The Boys: A Double Biography*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin/Nick Hern Books, London 1994.

⁴ On the Lyric Theatre, Belfast see M. O'Malley, *Austin Clarke and the Lyric Theatre, Belfast*, «The Poetry Ireland Review», 22/23, 1988, pp. 105-109; C. O'Malley, *A Poets' Theatre*, Elo Press, Dublin 1988; R. Connolly, *The Evolution of the Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast: Fighting the Waves*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston 2000.

⁵ H. Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin*, Progress House, Dublin 1958, p. 22.

⁶ S. Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by R. Cohn, John Calder, London 1983, pp. 72-73.

⁷ G. Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, trans. by L.F. Edwards, Hill and Wang, New York 1968, p. 65.

⁸ P. Hartnoll (ed.), *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1985, p. 211.

⁹ R. McHugh, *The Plays of Austin Clarke*, «Irish University Review», 4, 1974, p. 63.

¹⁰ M. Harmon, *Austin Clarke (1896-1974). A Critical Introduction*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1989, p. 123.

¹¹ All quotations for *The Kiss* and *The Second Kiss* are from Clarke's *Collected Plays* (1963).

¹² The Lyric Theatre is not to be confused with the Belfast Lyric, founded in 1951 by Mary and Pearse O'Malley. However, Clarke's example was crucial to the development of the Belfast Lyric, where *The Kiss* was staged again as one of the opening productions. See Conor O'Malley, *A Poets' Theatre* (1988).

¹³ Lyric Theatre Company Programme for *The Kiss* and *The Countess Cathleen*, Abbey Theatre, 4-5 June 1944, courtesy Dardis Clarke.

¹⁴ G. Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte ...*, cit., p. 57.

¹⁵ C. Austin, *Poems 1917-1938*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1974, p. 164.

¹⁶ All quotations for *The Third Kiss* are from Clarke's *The Third Kiss*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1974.

¹⁷ Foorawn, in O'Casey's play, takes a solemn vow of perpetual chastity. See S. O'Casey, *The Bishop's Bonfire: A Sad Play Within the Tune of a Polka*, Macmillan, London 1955.

Works Cited

Beckett Samuel, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by R. Cohn, John Calder, London 1983.

Clarke Austin, *Collected Plays*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1963.

———, *The Bright Temptation: A Romance* (1932), Dolmen Press, Dublin 1965.

———, *The Impuritans: A Play in One Act Freely Adapted from the Short Story 'Goodman Brown' by Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1973.

———, *Poems 1917-1938*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1974.

———, *The Third Kiss*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1974.

Connolly Roy, *The Evolution of the Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast: Fighting the Waves*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston 2000.

Edwards Hilton, *The Mantle of Harlequin*, Progress House, Dublin 1958.

Fitzsimons Christopher, *The Boys: A Double Biography*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin/Nick Hern Books, London 1994.

Harmon Maurice, *Austin Clarke (1896-1974). A Critical Introduction*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1989.

Hartnoll Phyllis (ed.), *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1985.

- Luke Peter (ed.), *Enter Certain Players. Edwards-Macliammoir and the Gate, 1928-78*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1978.
- Mayer David III, *The English Pantomime, 1806-1836*, Harvard UP, Cambridge MA 1969.
- McHugh Roger, *The Plays of Austin Clarke*, «Irish University Review», 4, 1974, pp. 52-66.
- Nicoll Allardyce, *The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1963.
- O'Casey Seán, *The Bishop's Bonfire: A Sad Play Within the Tune of a Polka*, Macmillan, London 1955.
- O'Malley Conor, *A Poets' Theatre*, Elo Press, Dublin 1988.
- O'Malley Mary, *Austin Clarke and the Lyric Theatre, Belfast*, «The Poetry Ireland Review», 22-23, 1988, pp. 105-109.
- Oreglia Giacomo, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, trans. by L.F. Edwards, Hill and Wang, New York 1968.
- Thompson Mary Shine, *Introduction, Selected Plays of Austin Clarke*, chosen and ed. by Mary Shine Thompson, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 2005, pp. vii-xxii.