

Drama and the Dramatist

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Dramatic performance, expressed through many genres, is an integral part of every culture. Live theater uniquely engages the audience by drawing sight, hearing, and cognition to bear on the staged conflict so that actors and audience co-create virtual reality for at least the duration of the performance. At its most powerful, this virtual reality resonates with social reality—it may even alter social paradigms if the play’s ideas, images, and language become embedded in mainstream culture.

Great drama is significant in direct proportion to the intensity of the conflict it portrays. Great dramatists present the raw material of the human condition in novel ways which change not only the audience’s perception of drama, but also the genre itself. The work of a great dramatist draws a bold line across the canon, distinctly separating Before from After. Before Shakespeare, drama was a continuation of Sophoclean tradition, where two disjunct realities—human and divine—exist, and “the dramatic problem of the plays centers in the character of the suffering hero and his destiny” with the hero’s fate arbitrarily determined by divine fiat (Greene 113). Shakespeare, says David Grene, questions reality, searching out whether “the deeper reality” is “the standard of “ordinary” nature” or the pattern identified in or imposed upon nature by man. Ibsen took the question even further, seeking to prove “the hero’s integrity” by matching “his private vision of himself” with an identical truth found in reality (Grene Introduction viii). Brian Johnston, introducing a collection of Ibsen’s plays, puts it this way: Sophoclean protagonists “agonized over the threat to their *integrity*” while Romantic and post-Romantic characters, like Shakespeare’s, faced a “tragic dilemma [. . .] that can be stated as loss of

authenticity,” and modern dramatists, starting with Ibsen, presented people facing “existential doubt as to whether they have an identity to be true to” (Introduction xvii).

Shakespeare changed literary drama for all time when, instead of transmuting a human hero into a demigod “hero-daemon” (Greene Introduction viii), he created characters who were credibly human and whose psychology generated the tension of the play as the protagonist’s nature was pitted against Nature. Harold Bloom describes this novel approach as “the invention of the human, the inauguration of the personality as we have come to know it” (Invention 4). Shakespeare’s deft interweaving of rhyme, blank verse, and prose created a genre described by Harold Bloom, in reference to *Hamlet* but with broad applicability, and drawn from the Bard’s own listing of dramatic genres in *Hamlet*, as “Poem Unlimited.”

This dramatic form became the ideal, establishing the “limits of theatricality” and the “frontier of consciousness” (Bloom Poem 7). It was superseded only when Ibsen, stung by negative criticism of his poetic skills in his verse drama *Peer Gynt*, retained credible humanity in his characters but used meticulously crafted prose and development of scene-setting in originating what Brian Johnston calls “a poetry of the theater” that effectively created the modern drama (9). Johnston says that “Visual imagery is an important to Ibsen’s art as verbal imagery is to Shakespeare’s” (Introduction, xii). In short, Shakespeare’s innovation lies in telling the story through the words of credibly human characters illustrated by actions, so that one listens to what they are saying while Ibsen’s lies in showing the story through their actions accompanied by words, so that one watches what they are doing.

Both Shakespeare’s humanist tragedy *Hamlet* and Ibsen’s modernist darkly comedic *Peer Gynt* address the dilemmas faced by men living in realities which they find unbearable; the response of each is true to the spirit of its time. Hamlet, sworn to the revenge killing of his

father's murderer, agonizes over questions of authenticity and reality, continually questioning his own nature through soliloquies while he strives to attain certainty of his uncle's guilt and the ghost's reality. Highly articulate and intelligent, he becomes mired in the paralysis of analysis, feigning insanity, unpacking his heart with words (II.ii.542), able to shift from imagination to action only when driven off his guard by strong emotion. Peer Gynt, mired in poverty and resentment of his family's loss of social status, sets vigorous action as his default, falling into daydreams when there is nothing he can actually do, and occasionally lapsing into insanity. He never considers possible consequences or questions the morality of his means in his drive to achieve his goal.

Both protagonists, Hamlet and Peer Gynt, are human in the modern sense, hindered by their own natures, while their realities – when stripped down to essentials – are “intensely realistic and dramatic,” showcasing problems that are “thoroughly modern and thoroughly eternal” (Roe 308). Both are products of their ages, yet both find analogs in today's conglomerate society. Hamlet, the prince who wants to remain a student in Wittenberg, is torn between his authentic self and the constraints of his royal status, while Peer wants to be king of Gyntiana without any idea of who he might really be as a person. Hamlet's struggle to honor his oath is the struggle of any person whose personal values collide with his world's expectations, while Peer's ultimately futile pursuit of wealth and status is familiar to people working the bootstrap technique, or whose success comes at high personal and spiritual cost.

Shakespeare has Hamlet tell the story while revealing the development of his character through soliloquies, word-duels with Claudius and the Clown, razor-edged punning swoops upon Polonius and Osric, and caustic analyses of other players' characters, flung into their faces as with Ophelia, spoken aside to Horatio as with Osric, or to himself as with Polonius. Elizabethan

playgoers comprised a slice through society, with nobles and groundlings alike regularly attending plays. The educated classes were highly literate and intensely curious, accustomed to seeking deeper meanings, enjoying puns and riddles, jests and conundrums, while the groundlings were provided with spectacle through sword fights, bawdy jokes, and rough play between the characters. Shakespeare accordingly barely sketched in the settings, using simple scenery and backdrops, so that the plot was embedded in the speeches and songs. The pragmatic petted playwright presented supersized portions, liberally seasoned and gaudily garnished, of his patrons' favorite dishes - explorations of human nature, death, the supernatural, and insanity, all richly present in *Hamlet*, allowing his genius free rein within the required menu.

Ibsen refused to pander to popular taste, treating his audience with hostility and scorn. Where Shakespeare infiltrated the minds of his audiences through their ears, Ibsen “grabbed straight for the intestines” (R. Johnston, pers. comm. Dec.2009). Consumed by “indignation at the paltriness of the world and at the contemptibility of man” (Arrestad 285), he “hated humanity for adopting shoddy consolations in place of the truth that kills” (Adams 419), an attitude curiously reminiscent of that of the character Hamlet, though not of Hamlet's creator. A man who had always “stood apart from his fellows, watching their movements with the curiosity (not always perfectly sane) of a psychologist and the instincts of a dramatist” (Roe 20), Ibsen preferred to dispense bitter tonics and purgatives rather than succulent morsels, attempting to purge society of its complacency and force it to acknowledge the very real rottenness of middle-class mores.

Nevertheless, his treatment of *Peer Gynt* illustrates Ibsen's firm grasp of his society's capabilities. Much more homogenous than Tudor audiences, mostly drawn from the middle classes, the general level of literacy of theater-goers was much lower. Johnston describes Ibsen's

period as rich in literature but depauperate in drama. The theater, he says, lured the public into its seats with morality plays based on stereotypes, like the old melodramas, “technically adroit [. . .] depictions of adultery and murder in the upper classes,” and thesis plays airing “thoroughly uncontroversial” moral topics. Audiences demanded that their fare contain “nothing unseemly or alarming,” expecting “maximum dramatic excitement [. . .] with the minimum of intellectual risk”, much like today’s movie and television aficionados (Johnston Introduction xiv).

Peer Gynt has the same basic structure as a modern TV soapie; it flashes along in short visual sequences, accompanied by sound bytes. Although written in verse, the words used in the narrative sections are strongly visually oriented, and depict vigorous action, as shown by Peer’s glorious description of his hunting foray culminating in a wild flight aboard a magic deer. Peer asks “Have you ever/Seen the Gjendin Ridge?” before launching into an eagle’s eye description of still pools and eagle backs far below him, before excitedly recounting the deer’s plunge toward a lake far below: “Mother, it was our own reflection/ Hurling up through the dark water/To the mirror-surface of the lake/As fast as we sped down to meet it!” and the eye-popping excitement of the buck’s frenzied swim through “bursting foam” (I.i.50-102).

Peer Gynt’s rapidly shifting juxtapositions of scene and situation, held together as in *Hamlet* by the almost universal presence of the protagonist, has an unrelenting staccato pace like that of a breakdancer. It demands sustained concentration, which leads to a sense of breathlessness and a rather flat effect. In contrast, *Hamlet* has scenes of light relief interposed between those that are almost unbearably intense; Shakespeare, like a skilled horseman, knows when to rattle up the pace and when to drop to an amble for the horses to catch their breath, bringing the team smartly in step to his destination.

After *Hamlet*’s post-ghost teeterings on the edge of madness, Polonius’ fussy instructions

to the spy he is sending to check up on Laertes, and the witty, bawdy interlude with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern relax the tension. The audience is then caught completely off-guard by Hamlet's vicious verbal attack on Ophelia. Later, the horror of Polonius' murder and Hamlet's black humor is counterpointed by the surprising dainty beauty of Ophelia's madness, where "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself/She turns to favor and to prettiness" (IV.v.181-182). Ophelia's disjointed ramblings and songs seem like the vagaries of a butterfly in a breeze. The violence of the quarrel between Laertes and Hamlet at her very grave over who had loved her more is all the more shocking after this interlude. Given the length of the play, about four hours, these shifts in pace and intensity serve to keep the audience fully engaged without exhaustion.

While the settings of the play, 14th Century Denmark and 19th Century Norway, appear to have no relevance to 21st Century U.S.A., these imitations of life are intended not to be "mistaken for realities" but "[to] bring realities to mind" (Samuel Johnson, qtd. Bloom 2). Their selection by their creators are artefacts of their writers' social contexts, relating both to their personalities and their degrees of freedom. Shakespeare and Ibsen had diametrically opposed personalities; Shakespeare vastly tolerant of and interested in his fellows, addressing their flaws with mellow irony, and Ibsen spiritually isolated, bitter, resentful of his personal situation, and confrontational with society. Their natures determined their writing styles, as well as the themes they chose to explore.

Although both were middle class, Shakespeare's family was sound yeoman stock, upwardly mobile and quietly prosperous, while Ibsen's family—which prided itself on its bloodlines—was losing caste. Ibsen's formal education was poor, ending when he was fourteen, at the time of his father's bankruptcy, while Shakespeare received an excellent education, described as both superior to that offered Elizabethan aristocrats attending Oxford and one "that would

daunt many college graduates today” (Braunmuller Theatrical xxii). Montrose Moses attributes attributing the absence of “dominant principle” in Ibsen’s plays to “a want in Ibsen himself, of any systematized, thorough-grounded education” (510).

Ironically, it was Shakespeare, accustomed to a plump purse, who wrote plays in order to make money, while Ibsen, the hardscrabble kid, made money in order to write plays.

Shakespeare profited so well from his theatrical investments that he was able to buy property in Stratford and London (Braunmuller Texts xxvii), handily achieving his goal of retiring as a wealthy, landed gentleman. Ibsen, “particular over his titles, and decorations” and soothed by the attentions of royalty (Moses 501), apparently found his writing to be its own goal and its own reward.

Shakespeare, confident of his abilities and comfortable in his skin, moved freely in his social milieu, participating in the rich creative ferment of the Elizabethan era, drawing from his thorough grounding in literature, and writing plays that could be enjoyed by Everyman. In sharp contrast, Ibsen, proud, touchy, and misanthropic, produced characters who are seldom likable in plays that are decidedly unsettling. Moses says of Ibsen that “to the popular mind he represents a shudder, even as to the popular eye he represents the fretful porpentine” (500). A “little, hardbitten Norwegian with watchful eyes” (Overskou, qtd. Tennant 448), Ibsen never overcame his rage and shame over his family’s disgrace. These themes, of monetary worries and inter-class—as well as inter-gender—injustices, suffuse much of his work in acidic hues.

Shakespeare, living under Tudor rule, had great need to camouflage themes that might be interpreted as social commentary unfavorable to the monarchy. State and Church alike were headed by the reigning monarch, who thus held absolute power, and whose word was definitely law. Neither rank nor wealth was any protection, and Elizabeth I’s favor was fickle. The Tudor

system of governance was based on “social networks and clienteles” of aristocrats (Mears 704) both at court - in the Privy Council, and in the countryside, where they held estates as large as the whole of Wales in fief. Shakespeare, a commoner, wisely set his plays long ago and far away, evading the taint of heresy or treason, and earning great popular success through not directly challenging the norms.

The dangerous aspect (to Shakespeare) of *Hamlet* is the problems faced by a kingdom whose monarch dies without naming a legitimate successor, and the degree to which its ills can be ascribed to the holding of a throne by a usurper. This was a white-hot topic for the Tudor monarchy, which had proven barren of male heirs after Henry VII snatched the crown from the Plantagenets. Re-working an archaic Danish tale to reflect England’s reality while maintaining the fiction that it was 14th Century Denmark that was rotten, and spiraling inward from the social issue to concentrate on Hamlet’s quandary, Shakespeare kept his head through keeping his head.

For Ibsen, the worst fate that might befall him as a social analyst and commentator was unpopularity leading to financial embarrassment. 19th Century Norway was governed by a constitutional monarchy with a single chamber of Parliament. The nobility was shorn of political power, and the dominant class was the middle class where status, like today’s U.S.A., was contingent upon flaunted wealth. Ibsen was free to satirize, challenge, and condemn social values and injustices of his own day without disguise, as well as to experiment with presentation, refining his stage presentation until the setting itself became “an actor, [. . .] reinforcing the action and extending the overall metaphor of the play” (Johnston Introduction xii).

Peer Gynt, reworked from tales of a semi-mythic folk hero named Peder Lauritzon Günth, is set in a real location in Norway and in a contemporary time frame, instantly recognizable to Ibsen’s audiences. The play, drawing strong parallels between Peer and trolls,

based upon an ethos described by the Mountain King as “Troll, to thyself be enough,” (II.vi.46-47) was met in Norway with great hostility and a preponderance of negative critical reviews. It was regarded as a nasty slur on the Norwegian national character, making it out to be narrow-minded, self-centered, and egotistical. Ibsen used drama like a scalpel, laying bare the uneasy soul of the middle class, “attacked from the right for its crass materialist values and tastes and from the left for its gross social injustices” but whose “tortuous complexities were good dramatic material” (Johnston xxi).

Reciprocal enmity and rejection between Ibsen and Norwegian society kept him poor and angry. Ibsen earned a bare livelihood in Norway from 1851-1863 through salaried positions ranging from dramatist through instructor to artistic director, while he wrote and produced plays. Bitterly resentful of his penury and social excommunication, Ibsen voluntarily exiled himself to continental Europe in 1864, finding both critical acclaim and financial stability there, while remaining spiritually centered in Norway. Moses describes Ibsen’s worldview as “distinctly marked by Norwegian paucity of colour” and “stamped with a caste that betrayed it as a very small community” (508); Ibsen’s narrow experience and education provided the sole substrate for all of his plays.

Unlike Ibsen, Shakespeare, eldest son of a well-to-do family, was free of worry about financial success in his *métier*. He stepped with assurance into the theatrical business, having been familiar with theater and acting troupes since childhood. Actors had to buy performance licenses, dispensed by the Bailiff of the town; in Stratford-upon-Avon, the official was Shakespeare’s father. It was easy for this young man on the verge of gentility to buy himself a sweet spot in a troupe. As part-owner of the company and, later, the theater building, Shakespeare had unusual freedom both as playwright and actor, which taught him his trade from

the inside out. He could choose his themes and write to will rather than to order, had directorial power over his scripts and the production, and selected his own acting roles, and he could ensure that his plays were presented. Embosomed in England, commuting at will between London and Stratford, his imagination ranged geographically and chronologically, giving him a large palette of rich oils where Ibsen worked from a box of watercolors.

Although they came to it in different ways, both profited from their full immersion theatrical experience, developing great skill in their use of the actual stage for production of their works according to their specific needs – Shakespeare for sound projection and Ibsen for superbly detailed visual focus. *Hamlet* requires much space, not for action – even the sword fight is a ritualized trial of skill rather than a messy physical brangle – but for the often large numbers of characters onstage at once, as in the court scenes, and for multi-directional sound projection as the audience surrounds the stage on three sides in the case of the Elizabethan thrust form. Shakespeare's plays were, of course, written with the actual performance in mind.

Plays were usually performed by natural daylight, starting around midday and running for several hours, with only one performance per day. Theaters were built in tube shapes, so that the stage was open to the sky in a giant lightwell, with only the back having a wall, which improved the acoustics of the otherwise open space. With this physical shape, curtains would be extremely difficult to install, and cumbersome to operate. Shakespeare wrote his plays as one comprehensive act, with change of scene cued to actors and audience by speeches ending in rhyming couplets. The location could be inferred from the presence of specific characters, as on the castle's battlement by presence of the soldiers, and by the speeches, as when the soldiers discuss their watches, and when Horatio comments on the cold and mist of the night. The audience's imagination is engaged to produce each scene's mental backdrop.

There were no intermissions. Tudor society, trained from early childhood through harsh educational regimes with equally harsh punishments for failures, to rigorous mental and physical self-discipline, had long attention spans and highly retentive memories; indeed, Hamlet is apparently able to quote a long section of a play he has seen only once. Hamlet also exemplifies the Elizabethan characteristics of deep reflection and introspection, which sometimes led to brooding and melancholy. Elizabethans were realistic pessimists, opposed to Moderns tendency to unrealistic optimism. Herbert Childs, describing his studies of the 1961 staging of *Hamlet*, produced in the Shakespearian manner, by Stanford University at The Oregon Shakespearean Festival Theater, concludes that while Tudor style stage devices add to the spectacle of the play, *Hamlet* “could be performed without undue distortion on any large open space” (474) owing to the “frictionless technique of the Elizabethan stage” (Granville-Barker, qtd. Childs 474). This reflects its design as primarily an aural vehicle for the playwright’s theme.

By the time Ibsen started writing his plays, stage, technology, and audience had undergone a sea change. Stages were enclosed in weather-tight buildings with artificial lighting and heating, permitting performances at any time of day and any time of year, regardless of weather. The stage had become the modern proscenium stage, which is recessed, so that the entire audience is seated across the fourth side, looking straight ahead as if looking into a room. Sight lines are not as complex in calculation as when multi-directional effects must be considered, but it becomes very important to restrict significant action to center-stage. It is possible to curtain off the stage while scenery is changed, providing short breaks for the audience, and the actors are now cued for successive scenes by the curtain rather than verbally. Much more elaborate settings can be prepared, with three walls and a ceiling to decorate.

Peer Gynt, though not as dependent on finely detailed settings and properties as Ibsen’s

later plays, still has more need of scenery and props than Elizabethan drama. Fewer characters are onstage at any one time, reflecting the much smaller floor space available to the playwright. Many scenes are set in small spaces – in the yard outside a home, in a clearing outside Peer’s outlaw hut, in Åse’s bedroom, aboard a ship, inside a tent, reflecting the strong visual focus of the time. These small areas are enclosed, by low stone walls or trees, or by ship cabin walls or tent curtains, in a tight zone from which the actors project, and on which the audience concentrates. By Ibsen’s time, as with our own, the majority of the population was schooled, but not with the thoroughness of the Tudors. Short school days containing short classes on several subjects, as well as the change in societal values from mental cultivation to conspicuous consumption, bred short attention spans with concomitant loss of memory span. While Tudors bred up their children to become adults as soon as possible, demanding adult standards of behavior even of toddlers, modern society wants children to be children for as long as possible. It is inevitable that visual aids and visual treatments should become dominant, as these are easier and require much less training and self-discipline to be effective.

The difference in the approaches of the playwrights, Shakespeare in bringing the audience into the play through identification with his characters, and Ibsen with forcing the audience to see things to which it would rather close its eyes, has much to do with the way in which they present their characters. Both dramatists parlayed their dramatic, poetic, and philosophic talents into creating “living human beings” and exhibiting “profound interest in what these creatures do and say” in their world (Roe 316), but Ibsen’s people are born full-grown, while Shakespeare’s mature and alter as the plot advances.

Hamlet, as Harold Bloom says of Shakespeare’s characters, “develop[s] rather than unfold[s]” (Invention xvii). He becomes more real to both himself and the audience as he listens

to himself soliloquizing, pouring himself like wine into a wineskin, plumping it out and giving it dimension and shape. As Hamlet's power increases, his interactions with the other characters force them into greater significance as they cannot avoid reacting and responding to his increasingly pointed comments and judgments

Hamlet, still a young man, is completely ripe for death, filling the Elizabethan need for death to be presented as a fitting end to life, and for people to "ma[k]e a good end" as Ophelia says of Polonius (IV.v.179). Other characters, like Claudius and Gertrude, diminish from their initial glossy, assured selves, shriveling and warping, before dying deaths appropriate to their personal characters. Claudius becomes ever more transparent under Hamlet's goading, culminating in his anguished realization that even prayer is denied him, as he shrinks from a well-intentioned, able king to a frightened man who will stoop to any means to get rid of his heir and keep his crown and his queen. Gertrude, tongue-lashed by her son into shame for her shallow, sensual nature, wastes rapidly. The confident trophy wife sinks into a timid, haggard matron whom Ophelia does not immediately recognize; the mad girl looks around in puzzlement and asks, "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" (IV.v.21). Horatio, the only non-Danish personage besides Fortinbras, never center-stage, quietly firms up as he moves out of Hamlet's shadow to attempt restraint of his loftier philosophical flights in the graveyard, warn his chosen prince that the fight with Laertes is rigged, and finally eschew the poisoned wine in order to ensure Hamlet's tale is truly told and justice will be seen to have been done.

Peer Gynt remains the same throughout the play; he describes himself as "nothing but layers," each stained by the rot of that period of his life, like a stripped-down onion lacking a core. (V.v.21-45). Expressing the modernist denial of mortality, as well as modernist tendency to want to buy everything – including respect and esteem - rather than earn it painfully by working

through failures and personal weaknesses, Peer, the “vigorous old man with ice-grey hair and beard” (V.i. Stage Directions p103), has never been ready for life. He fears that he was dead before dying (V.x.213). He has not thought his thoughts, heeded his warnings, sung his songs, wept his tears, nor done his deeds, because he has been tricked by the devil (V.vi.17-76). He has essentially repeatedly aborted himself and now exists only in Solveig’s stubborn love (V.x.266). She has carried him like a foetus, nourished with her prayers, songs, and work.

Solveig herself and Åse, the major supporting characters, also remain unchanged from their initial appearances. Their characters are important only as they illustrate the point of the story; in *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen stabs into bourgeois acquisitiveness and the hollowness of assessing personal worth through financial display. Åse never ceases to lament the glory days of her husband’s spendthrift behavior and the respect shown them by the neighbors before their bankruptcy, illustrating the modernist materialist value of money. She is contrasted with Solveig, whose ethical purity is symbolized by her white apron, and who, spending most of her life alone in a small forest hut, demonstrates that true happiness comes from full self-actualization. Living her own life true to herself, she is Peer’s salvation when the Button Molder is after him and he cannot find anybody to swear to his identity either as a human or a troll. While very real as people, *Peer Gynt*’s fixed characters are designed, as are their words, to channel the action to its inevitable end; there is never a point, unlike in *Hamlet*, where one can imagine the play taking a different course and ending otherwise.

In keeping with their innovatory approaches to drama, Ibsen and Shakespeare both demanded of their actors “nothing less than the representation of reality” through awakening them “into a new attitude toward script and character” and a new way of realizing that character on stage” (Cima 6) – depending on whether the need is for the audience to engage its ears or its

eyes with its brain. The actor has to study the play in its entirety, unravel the plot, and make connections with the character's past, in order to convincingly portray that character through words and action (Cima 8) and further the playwright's aims. While Cima is referencing Ibsen's plays in saying that prerequisites for casting the roles are "incisive, analytical intelligence" and "the skill and agility to transform the figure" (22), the same is true of Shakespeare.

Shakespearian actress Sybil Lines describes how the actor "can make giant leaps forward with a characterization" through studying "the author's life, his beliefs, aims, and the themes of his other writings" while warning against "producing a spokesperson for an idea instead of breathing a living identity into the script" (93). This need for intellectual and emotional investment into the character is echoed by Ibsenian actress Elizabeth Robbins. Describing Ibsen as "so intensely *un homme de théâtre* that [...] he saw where he could leave some of his greatest effects to be made by an actor, and so left them," she says that Ibsen considered his actors as joint-creators of his plays, entrusting them with his scripts and allowing them to impel the character "in a right direction. And I do not say *the* right direction" (Elizabeth Robbins, qtd. Cima¹⁰). However, for Ibsen, the "living identity" described by Lines should be "a spokesperson for the idea" – provided the idea is Ibsen's. The character is a visual aid, not a focus point.

From these actors' viewpoints, and from the absence or presence of stage directions, it becomes clear that Shakespeare strongly controls the speeches, leaving the actor to develop appropriate gestures, while Ibsen's visual effects depended strongly on gestures and movements, so that he leaves it up to the actor to decide upon the inflection and timing of the lines. Hamlet's directions to the Player King and company prior to their acting of *The Murder of Gonzago*, makes it plain that Shakespeare desired a realistic interpretation of his plays rather than the stylized roaring, strutting, and mincing of actors accustomed to typecasting. Ibsen embeds acting

instructions in the form of stage directions derived from his careful measurements and precise allocation of stage space. As long as the actor is in the right place and attitude, s/he is free to speak the lines in any way that enhances the visual effect.

Tony Church, a longtime member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, speaks of discovering that Shakespeare's lines are as meticulously designed to express character as Ibsen's minutely detailed drawings are to create scene and mood. Church recommends that the actor read the lines aloud, exactly as they are written, paying particular attention to breaks in rhythm, lines shared between two or more characters, and uncompleted lines. These devices, Church says, allow "[the actor] to gain a massive input of thought and passion combined. Far from restricting the emotional content of one's acting, it increases its emotional validity by leaps and bounds." Church states flatly that Shakespeare "was certainly concerned [. . .] to make his textactable, even actor-proof!" (78) as well as designer- and director- proof.

The script of *Peer Gynt* is heavily larded with stage directions, some of which replace speech in forwarding the depiction of Gynt's reality, as when Åse silently "sways and totters, gripping a tree-trunk" (I.i., between lines 80 and 81) during Peer's enthralling account of the deer's plunge toward the lake. Some stage directions are intended to show the character's true feelings, doubling the impact of the words, as when Peer "snap[s] his fingers, turns on his heels and continues" (I.i. accompanying line 104) with his tale. Continuing with heightening visual impact as a means of showing the play's theme, Brian Johnston suggests that

The pattern of repetition becomes more evident if the same actors play the wedding guests, the trolls, the monkeys, the asylum dwellers, and the funeral guests of 5; and if Ingrid, the Woman in Green, and Anitra are played by the same actress. Peer's "progress" through the world becomes a spiritual paralysis. (7)

Seeing the same actors repeatedly, in the same clothes, underlines Peer's lack of insight and inability to learn from his own experience, another persistent trait of modernity.

It becomes apparent, even in the necessary limited treatment of the genre by this essay, that Shakespeare and Ibsen achieved greatness as dramatists through understanding of their times and their societies, using the same eternally significant questions of the human condition – Who am I? Where do I belong? How should I behave? – and casting them into situations where real people, rather than stock characters, wrestle with them in intense conflict. Shakespeare, the humanist, played off his audience's needs and abilities to explore the questions in language of great beauty designed for the ear, while Ibsen, the modernist, played into his audience's vulnerabilities by showing them pictures of issues they would rather not address. Ibsen's language is usually terse, even in *Peer Gynt*, mostly lacking the haunting beauty that would encourage memorization; it is his scenes that are remembered, arousing the same stimulus-response reactions as propaganda and commercial advertising.

The greatness of a dramatist may be measured by the length of time his work survives in the canon, the number of times it is performed, and the degree to which its ideas and language enter mainstream usage. By these measures, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* are indeed great works. *Hamlet* and *Peer Gynt* have both become cult idols; George Bernard Shaw's caustic reference to Bardolization is rebutted by Harold Bloom as "merely an authentic response to Shakespeare" (Poem 7), while *Peer Gynt* improbably became a Nazi icon, with 1183 performances in Germany between 1933 and 1944 (Englert 91), second only to *Hamlet* (Englert 90). Both plays are still performed regularly, and they have become woven into mainstream consciousness through their adoption by other genres of performing art, and transplantation of their themes into *Everyman's Everyday*.

Peer Gynt has inspired music (Edvard Grieg's opera), ballet, and two movies, an early one starring Charlton Heston, and a German version released this year (2009), along with 1550 hits on www.YouTube.com. There is even an *In the Footsteps of Peer Gynt* hiking trail in Norway. Stratford-upon-Avon is a pilgrimage site; the Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust reports 788,899 visitors for 2005, its most recent record. *Hamlet* has generated numerous movies and truly entered popular culture; a search performed on www.YouTube.com returned 21,000 hits. While not limited to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's writings have inspired many painters. Harry Rusche's Emory College's English Department website, cites Richard Altick's calculations drawn from *Paintings from Books* that "pictures from Shakespeare accounted for about one fifth--some 2,300--of the total number of literary paintings recorded between 1760 and 1900" (255). And those are just the paintings by British artists." (Shakespeare Illustrated).

While little of *Peer Gynt's* language is in common usage, only the Bible has had more effect on the English language than Shakespeare; phrases from *Hamlet* have become clichés. "Cruel to be kind," (III.iv.182), "speak daggers," (III.ii.350), "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," (I.iv.90), and "The lady doth protest too much"(III.ii.212) are a few examples of how deeply Shakespearian thought and language have permeated our culture, understood even by those who have never read his work nor seen any of his plays.

Both dramatists, themselves products of their times, catalyzed salutatory evolution of their genre, in turn contributing to the formation of new societal contexts in succeeding generations.

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