

Thresher, Tanya. 2005. *Cecilie Løveid: Engendering a Dramatic Tradition*. Women Writers, Volume 2, Ed. Pål Bjørby. Laksevåg, Norway: Alvheim & Eide Akademisk forlag. 141 pages.

Tanya Thresher's book on Cecilie Løveid is a good example of excellent scholarship. It includes an informative introduction as well as detailed notes and bibliographical references. A useful index is also provided. Thresher concentrates on a few of Løveid's plays rather than her entire oeuvre, and she discusses these plays both in terms of previous scholarship and in terms of the literary and philosophical currents underpinning this playwright's work. What is most striking about Thresher's approach is her extraordinary ability to apply complex feminist poststructuralist theories of identity, especially in relation to gender performativity as developed by Judith Butler, to Løveid's work. Few critics are able to do this as eloquently and persuasively as Thresher. Given this ability, I predict that this young scholar will become a formidable force in literary criticism.

Thresher begins her introduction by declaring how "different" Løveid is: "Cecilie Løveid dares to be dramatically different. She is different in the way she works in the theater. She is different in the way she challenges her audiences. She is different in the way she uses language. And she is different in the way she represents woman" (9). Thresher proceeds to demonstrate these differences while at the same time critiquing other critics who have written about this extraordinary dramatist, and she also examines Løveid in relation to Ibsen: "like Ibsen, Løveid uses language to examine and recreate reality, and while the dramatist may be critical of the performance tradition of her famous forefather, she does develop his awareness of the significance of the dramatic image and his investigation of gender difference" (13). Thresher uses two of Løveid's most complex dramas, *Barock Friise* and *Østerrike*, to illustrate her point.

Chapter 1 focuses on Løveid's early work. It includes an intriguing discussion of the intertextual reference in her play *Sug*, published in 1979, to a poem by the turn-of-the-century poet Obstfelder "Rugen skjælver" (20). She argues here that Løveid "subverts Obstfelder's traditional code of patriarchy" (21) by taking Obstfelder's "realistic, traditional tale of shame and disgrace, and turning it into an erotic adventure celebrating woman's sexuality" (20). In this chapter, she also ably compares Løveid's use of language to Ibsen's, and she discusses articles by Merete Morken Andersen and Wenche Larsen both of whom have done considerable work on Løveid's plays.

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In the second chapter, Thresher shows how Løveid “makes a spectacle of gender” (37ff) in her *tableaux vivants* (42). Judith Butler’s gender theories are, not surprisingly, important for Thresher’s discussion of gender, but Cixous and Kristeva also figure prominently. Even though she is firmly established in the poststructuralist camp, Cixous has been seen by some to approach essentialism in her description of women, so Thresher is careful not to interpret Løveid as saying that women are “biologically determined” (57). She points out that Løveid specifically states that “women may decide to not make use of ... biological difference at all” (ibid.), and she draws the conclusion that Løveid’s theatre “highlights the individual as a locus of inherent and often contradictory relationships” (59). She goes on to compare Løveid’s critique of the conventional male/female binary framework to Julia Kristeva’s essay on “Women’s Time” in which Kristeva situates the opposition between man and woman in the realm of metaphysics (59).

In Chapter 3, the theoretical framework for the excellent analysis of Løveid’s play *Barock Friise* is the poststructuralist approach espoused by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. The protagonist Zille finds, says Thresher, a new space that “encourages a multiplicity of communications, and allows her to hear differently and perceive the sound a person first hears, the sound of the female body heard in the womb” (87). The sound of the mother thus “signals the beginning of a pilgrimage, a ritual journey to a space in which a revised female subject may challenge the binary oppositional framework of patriarchy and transgress its limits” (ibid.).

The discussion of Løveid’s complex play *Østerrike* in Chapter 4 is most interesting. This is a very difficult play loosely based on the life of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a play that the scholar Wenche Larsen has also written about in two essays, which probably did not appear in time for Thresher to incorporate them before her book went to press. (Larsen published “Austria: Location of a traumatic scene: Wittgenstein in Cecilie Løveid’s *Østerrike*” in *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 14 (2002-2003) 86-102 and “Larger than Life: Tableau and affect in Cecilie Løveid’s theatre of the body” in *Trans: Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 9 (2001) (<http://www.inst.at/trans/9Nr/larsen9.htm>). Both Larsen and Thresher cite the same sources (Knut Olav Åmås and Rolf Larsen, “Ludwig Wittgenstein in Norway 1913-50,” in *Wittgenstein and Norway*, ed. Kjell S. Johannessen, Rolf Larsen, and Knut Olav Åmås, Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1994, and Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The duty of genius*, New York: The Free Press, 1990) for the interesting information that Wittgenstein actually stayed in the western Norwegian fjord community of Skjolden in 1931, at which time the philosopher invited Marguerite Respinger (Agnes in the play) to stay with him for two weeks and abandoned her after only three days (Thresher 91 and note 5, and Larsen “Larger than Life,” note 14). Thresher also refers to the fact that Wittgenstein

“spent two extended periods living in Skjolden, in 1913-1914 and 1936-37” (91), and he was apparently so taken with the area that “he even had a cabin built on an almost inaccessible site overlooking Eidsvatnet, a site later known as ‘Østerrike’ by the locals” (ibid.).

Thresher’s interpretation of the shimmering northern lights in the play is suggestive. Agnes, who had arrived from Austria expecting Ludwig to propose to her, does actually “move the sky/heavens when she dances in the northern lights” (99). Thresher speculates that “if light in literature often symbolizes enlightenment, then the northern lights, which are multiple forms of light, suggest other kinds of knowledge—discourses that are not black and white, but all the colors of the rainbow, discourses that will push at the limits of our symbolic universe” (ibid.). This statement then sets the stage for Løveid’s real interest in this play: to illustrate Ludwig’s identity crisis and his struggles with his sexual orientation. Thresher interprets Ludwig’s interest in Agnes’s dress—an article of clothing that Thresher sees as Agnes’s “alter ego” (100)—as revealing his disinterest in the woman, Agnes, herself, because the Agnes Dress (a character in the play) is a “symbol of traditionally defined femininity, a definition that leaves no space for the actual female body” (100).

Also noteworthy is the thought that just as Austrian citizen Agnes cannot read Ibsen’s Dan-Norwegian *Brand* text, which she is nonetheless using as a tourist guide, so Thresher/Løveid shows that “there are endless possibilities for interpretation of any text, and that language is in fact an arbitrary signifying system” (102). Agnes literally “makes her own story up over Ibsen’s text, just as Løveid has done. She is an outsider to this literary tradition, just as she is an outsider to Ludwig’s philosophical thinking which she is similarly unable to decode” (ibid.).

Thresher sums up the play like this: “Ludwig speaks frequently in the strange code reminiscent of how he wrote his diaries, and the dialogue is often more lyrical than realistic, relying on assonance, alliteration, and word play for meaning. Just under the surface of Løveid’s piece the audience can hear a multitude of other texts, such as those by Wittgenstein and Ibsen to name but the most obvious; texts that ask the audience to challenge the veracity of the narrative” (112). Løveid thus “questions the very definition of her own art” (ibid.), and she concludes that “what Løveid offers us with *Østerrike* are pictures that allow the conception of certain metaphysical questions regarding identity to be thought of not in terms predicated by tradition” (113), i.e. not in terms of the conventional binaries of male and female.

Thresher’s analysis of the play is based on the published version (1998), but she does refer to Jon Tombre’s production that premiered on 29 August 1998 at the National Theatre in Oslo (125), in which the final scene was omitted and an epilogue inserted. This epilogue is reprinted as an appendix in Thresher’s book: “Epilog” (125f). Thresher feels that the Production Director’s changing of the

ending of the play resulted in “the negative connotations of the bifurcation for the homosexual [being] omitted, and Ludwig was left in a heteronormative position of self-loathing” (108). In a footnote, she adds that the production “had the same actor play David and the Gardener, thereby erasing the different functions each character has” (115). Wenche Larsen is even more critical of the omission in the theatre production. In her article in *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* (see above) she critiques Director Jon Tombre’s production by pointing out that the conflation of several characters into one role “does not work” (98, note 27). On the contrary, this kind of thing “shows how crucial it is to choose the right combination of characters, since their functions are deeply related to each other, and to the intrinsic, symbolic structure of the plot” (ibid.). To Larsen, the compound character “made the story confusing and had disastrous consequences with respect to the inner logic of the play” (94). Both critics prefer and rely on the published text for their interpretations, but Thresher presents the more compelling reading, in my opinion, as hers is informed by Judith Butler’s ground-breaking work on gender and identity. Thresher ends her chapter on *Østerrike* with the observation: “What Løveid offers us with *Østerrike* are pictures that allow the conception of certain metaphysical questions regarding identity to be thought of not in terms predicated by tradition” (113).

In her “Conclusion,” Thresher situates Løveid within Norway’s contemporary theatre, noting that postmodern Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse draws much larger audiences than does Løveid, and she speculates that “Løveid’s audiences find it difficult ... to subordinate an intellectual interpretation to a physical reaction” (122). This problem is compounded by the “heavy intellectual status of Løveid’s works” (ibid.); furthermore her texts are “highly inter-textual,” making references to “complex philosophical arguments and historical situations” (ibid.). In addition, Thresher provides statistics that show that “between 1992 and 2002 only 31% of all Norwegian drama produced was written by women in spite of the theatre-going public being predominantly female” (123). Moreover, income reports reveal, says Thresher, that “on average male dramatists earn twice as much as their female counterparts” (123). Thresher ends her book by pointing out that Løveid’s experience, in an “uncanny parallel” to Ibsen, has “resulted in her leaving her homeland and working from abroad” (123); in fact she currently resides in Copenhagen.

To turn to more minor matters, Thresher’s text has very few typographical errors. But I did note that the reference to Butler in the index is to pages 49-40, when it should have been to 49-50 (138). A more serious error is an omission in the bibliography to one of Butler’s works cited in the text. In the reference on page 49 to Butler’s essay on the “Performative” Thresher paraphrases passages from pages 521 and 524, but in the bibliography there is no reference to this essay. I assume that the missing piece is Butler’s essay on “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” in *Theatre Journal*

40.4 (1988), 519-31. Furthermore, on page 35 part of a quotation has not been translated with the rest of the quote: “og plukke roser selv.” And on page 41, line 2, there is a misprint: “things are not as themselves.” This should probably be “things are not themselves.” There are other misprints on page 35: “Ibsens’s,” on page 15: “analyse s,” on page 55 line 5 from the bottom: “consider-ation,” and on page 102 line 1: “return,)” (there should be no comma immediately preceding a closing parenthesis). As indicated, most of these are quite minor, however. The fact remains that Thresher’s book is an excellent piece of scholarship—well researched and well written. I hope that we will see a detailed book on Løveid’s entire oeuvre from this capable scholar in the not too distant future.

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