

Templeton, Joan. 2008. *Munch's Ibsen: A Painter's Vision of a Playwright*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 185 pages. ISBN: 978-0295987767.

For someone who has a portrait of Henrik Ibsen drawn by Edvard Munch hanging above her desk, to be asked to write a review of Joan Templeton's new study *Munch's Ibsen*, was very exciting: a beautiful book of somewhat large format, printed on glossy paper, with a solid hard cover and richly illustrated. It is one of several already published under the "New Directions in Scandinavian Studies" series, established by the University of Washington Press to offer "interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the Nordic region of Scandinavia and the Baltic States and their cultural connections in North America" (ii). There are several opening parts in it such as "Dedication," "Table of Contents," "List of Illustrations," "Acknowledgements," "Preface," etc., in addition to seven chapters and a conclusion. The monograph demonstrates meticulous research, careful examination and painstaking attention to detail and fact. Joan Templeton is a renowned Ibsen scholar and I was curious to encounter her vision of the relationship between Munch and Ibsen. In the "Acknowledgements" she mentions all the previous studies of this relationship and thanks administrators and scholars whose guidance and research she has drawn upon, such as Gerd Woll, Pål Hougen, Arne Eggum, Lasse Jakobsen, and others. As stated in the title, the book's ambition is to uncover *that* Ibsen who is contained within Munch's psyche, the Ibsen that comes forward through Munch's drawings and paintings, through oil and water colours on the canvas, through ink, lead and paper, through etchings on wood and iron, through charcoal, tusche and crayons. Templeton's categorization and analysis of this vast and varied production is sharp, insightful and imaginative. It illuminates mainly Munch, but through addressing the relevant parts in Ibsen, she also offers interpretations of the drama texts—something which is both useful and compelling.

In the "Preface," the author points out various aspects of both Munch's writing *and* painting that demonstrate his sensibility and "explain" to an extent his interest in Ibsen—the main reason for that being that Munch "found in Ibsen essential affinities of his own way of seeing the world" (xxii). The aim of the book, states Templeton, is "to achieve a complete account of the relationship between the two great Norwegian modernists," and, more specifically, to study "Munch's illustrations of Ibsen's plays as integral parts of his personal and imaginative worlds" (xxii). Her ultimate ambition is to establish through the process "Ibsen's primordial importance for Munch as a pioneering modernist voice" (xxiii)—something in which she fully succeeds.

Chapter I focuses on Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Munch's engagement with it, and opens with an account of the historical, cultural and biographical context of the

play. Templeton establishes in this chapter the importance that *Ghosts* had for the young painter, the impression it made on him, and the overall deep influence that the revered older fellow countryman exercised on his compatriot—both through the example he set and through the courage he exuded. Several of Munch's works directly related to *Ghosts* are discussed, and Templeton comments on how these illuminate the artist. Ibsen's tragedy *Ghosts*, she concludes, and Munch's "landmark painting" *The Sick Child* can be compared not only thematically in that "both works depict the pathos of the death of an innocent child through hereditary disease," but also in their significance, in that both caused "the greatest scandal" (13) in the national development of their respective art. Templeton goes on to account for the creative process, which led the painter to such an avant-garde breakthrough piece of visual art, which is actually the first expressionist painting created in Norway (13–14). This chapter also recounts all the known meetings between the two artists, and ends with Ibsen's death.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the theatre programs commissioned from Munch for *Peer Gynt* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, as well as to all the portraits Munch made of Ibsen. We are now in Paris, at the beginning of Munch's development as a graphic artist. As throughout the whole book, Templeton situates particular works by Munch not only in their relation to Ibsen's oeuvre, but also in relation to other works by the painter. In the case of *Peer Gynt*, she concludes that "[the] power of the image comes not from its representation of Ibsen's characters, but from its evocative suggestiveness" (28). She offers stark, brave interpretations of both Munch's works and Ibsen's dramas, and makes clear, powerful decisions on where the artists are leading us—something which, one might say, characterizes her critical style. Even when I do not fully agree with her, the lucidity and force of her arguments engage me thoroughly and provoke my thought and emotions.

Another fascinating part of this second chapter is the detailed account of the theatre production of *Peer Gynt* to which Munch contributed. The account reads like a journey through fin de siècle avant-garde French art and theatre, and is highly enjoyable. Templeton moves on to discuss the second program—that for a production of *John Gabriel Borkman*. She focuses on Munch's decision to create for it a sketch of Ibsen's head, "with its all-seeing left eye," and to place it in the foreground of the main page. This visual interpretation of the great playwright depicts, she writes, "the visionary protagonist [Borkman] in an ambitious pictorial meditation on the making of art" (31). Her discussion of Munch's later portraits of Ibsen contains in-depth descriptions and penetrating, sophisticated analyses, which hail Munch's work as "an iconography that celebrates the artist as the probing dramatist of everyday life" (34).

Chapter 3, "Sketches for the Kammerspiele," deals with Munch's work on the sets of two German productions, both staged by Austrians: *Ghosts*, by Max Reinhardt, and *Hedda Gabler*, by Hermann Bahr. Drawing on their correspondence, and illuminating aspects of the collaborative process, Templeton elucidates the

way Munch was challenged by Reinhardt's creative spirit. The directions Munch received from the director impress with their daunting demands—he had to express the play's "symbolic core" (40)—and succeeded. Focusing in detail on this fruitful collaboration inspired by a remarkable text, Templeton illuminates an important moment in the history of theatre—a moment of tremendous growth for both the art of theatre and for Munch's personal artistic development. In addition, as all throughout the book, she corrects unfounded claims of previous criticism. The book includes reproductions of many of the sketches made for the sets of the two plays, accompanied by the author's insightful commentary, which, again, demonstrates her vast and comprehensive knowledge of Munch's entire production—carefully studied and contemplated. She associates freely between different elements of Munch's artistic vocabulary and draws conclusions on the way they appear and reappear throughout the oeuvre. Tying them to his personal biography becomes the key to unlocking the connection between Ibsen's characters and Munch's art. Templeton points out, for example, that Munch used earlier portraits of his grandparents for the set of Reinhardt's *Ghosts* and concludes: "The mature artist's transplantation of his adolescent drawing to the Alving home is an indication of Munch's conception of the Alvings as a reinscription of the Munchs" (45). She traces how Munch's sketches are, indeed, "mood" sketches, as Reinhardt requested from him: "expressionist renderings of powerlessness, hopelessness and dread" (51). Her account of his work on the set of *Hedda Gabler* includes glimpses from episodes in Munch's life and the way they relate to this work.

Chapter 4 examines, as the title suggests, "Portraits of the Artist as Peer Gynt." The author begins with less known details of Munch's biography and focuses on the circumstances around a play he wrote: the comedy *The City of Free Love*. She then ties this dramatic effort by Munch to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. While this may seem somewhat far-fetched in the beginning, Templeton develops gradually a convincing argument in support of her thesis that "*The City of Free Love* draws so heavily on Peer's sexual escapades in acts one and two of *Peer Gynt* that it is unimaginable without them" (69). "[Munch] was not consciously imitating Ibsen," she continues, but "*Peer Gynt* lived in the back of [his] mind, as part of his psyche" (71). She uncovers thus a kind of artistic transference between the two artists, before embarking on a reading of Munch's development as a Peer Gynt-ian figure, which is highly intriguing. It is a reading which Munch himself suggested and pre-authorized: "I am reading Ibsen again, and am reading him as me," he said of his latest engagement with the play (72), before embarking on producing "180 illustrations of *Peer Gynt*, far more than he made of any other Ibsen play" (73). Templeton's deep-reaching analysis of some of the most powerful and touching pieces ends with far-reaching conclusions about Munch's personality and artistic achievement.

The next chapter, five, has as its subject Munch's interpretation of Ibsen's saga drama *The Pretenders*—Norway's "unofficial national drama," as Templeton calls it (97). After a brief account of the action in the play, the author moves on to offer her interpretation of the significance this literary work had on the symbiosis of life and art that Munch was. She undertakes a valuable comparison between him and his contemporaries who illustrated Snorre Sturlason's *Heimskringla*—*The Sagas of the Norwegian Kings*, and concludes, not surprisingly, that "Munch's illustrations [are] light years away from the neat, historicist 'saga style'" art of the others (104). She discusses also his engagement and originality in working with woodcuts. Looking into the technical details, she explains the essence of his "revolutionizing" this art form (105). Chapter 6, "Artist and Model," deals with "Munch's response to Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken*" (117). It is a "unique" response, indeed, as Templeton shows. A part of this chapter is devoted to revising "a critical history of sorts" (120), which deals with the connection between some of Munch's works and this play. To the "lack of rigor" (120) of this critical history Templeton attributes a different, "established," yet incorrect opinion of this relationship.

"Starry Night at Ekely," the seventh and last chapter in the book, is devoted to Munch's comprehension of and response to Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. The chapter constitutes yet another deep insight into the complex relationship between playwright and painter. In the Conclusion—"In Ibsen's Company"—Templeton recapitulates some of the most important and original arguments she made throughout the book. Tracing again the deep connection between Norway's greatest artists, she points out prominent characteristics shared by the two.

Joan Templeton's research and the beautiful artifact which contains it—the hard-bound, richly illustrated book—constitute a highly engaging, thought-provoking and emotionally moving read. Her study makes a significant contribution to the fields of Munch studies and Ibsen studies and can be used productively in the teaching of both subjects.

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