

Postcolonial Ibsen: Judith Thompson's *Hedda Gabler* (1991)

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers how, in her double-function as adaptor and director of a 1991 production of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* at the Shaw Festival, Canadian playwright Judith Thompson navigated her auteurship of a canonical "woman's play" by the "father" of modern drama that is itself at one level about the impossibility of female authorship and authority. In situating a postcolonial Canadian writer in a context where postcolonial critical perspectives on Canadian culture were not a primary concern, however, Thompson's production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Shaw was not simply a woman writer's struggle to author her vision of Ibsen's classic feminist-modernist play but a postcolonial writer's struggle to make her voice heard in a Canadian theatrical context still dominated by colonialist cultural standards.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet essai étudie comment, dans sa double fonction d'adaptateur et de metteur en scène lors de la réalisation de *Hedda Gabler* de Henrik Ibsen, présenté au Shaw Festival en 1991, la dramaturge canadienne Judith Thompson imprime sa marque d'auteur à une « pièce de femme » canonique, oeuvre du « père » du drame moderne et qui, dans une certaine mesure, traite de l'impossibilité de l'écriture et de l'autorité au féminin. Néanmoins, en situant une femme auteur canadienne postcoloniale dans un contexte où les perspectives critiques postcoloniales sur la culture canadienne ne représentent pas un intérêt primordial, la production de *Hedda Gabler* au Shaw par Thompson ne s'affirme pas seulement comme la lutte d'une écrivaine pour proposer une vision féministe moderne de la pièce classique d'Ibsen, mais comme le combat d'une femme écrivain pour faire entendre sa voix dans un contexte théâtral canadien encore dominé par des normes culturelles colonialistes.

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Centrally concerned with issues of creativity and sexuality, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) is one of the definitive texts of feminist modernism and has exerted a strong hold on women's imaginations from the time of its publication and earliest productions, such as that of Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea in London in 1891, through to more recent productions, such as the 1991 collaboration between Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw. As I have noted elsewhere, however, "authorship and authority are linked throughout Ibsen's 'women's plays,' so that acts of writing, reading, or—in Hedda's case—manuscript-burning serve to signify the female protagonists' respective degrees of critical engagement with hegemonic cultural texts that deny women status as authoritative subjects" (2002 1; 2004 1.) Given the linkage between writing and patriarchal authority in Western culture that Ibsen's "women's plays" dramatize, adaptations and stagings of *Hedda Gabler* by women playwrights are of particular interest. In this essay, I will consider how, in her double-function as adaptor and director of a 1991 production of *Hedda Gabler*, Canadian playwright Judith Thompson navigated her auteurship of a play by the "father" of modern drama that is itself at one level about the impossibility of female authorship and authority.

Thompson rose to prominence in Canadian theatre with her first play, *The Crackwalker*, which premiered in Toronto in 1980 and has since, along with a number of her subsequent plays, "achieved ... classic status" (Kareda 9) in the canon of Canadian drama. Her work is generally distinguished by its concern for what her long-time mentor Urjo Kareda, former artistic director and dramaturg of the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, described as "the animalistic side within each of us—the darker, unconscious, libidinous, sometimes destructive, chaotic dream-world inside" (10).

Thompson's importance in Canadian theatre history is related to her position as a woman writer in a cultural context that is, as she herself has recently pointed out, still dominated by men (2006a 132), but it is also—and as significantly—tied to her commitment to the postcolonial project of giving theatrical voice to Canadian experience. These two inter-related strands of Thompson's identity as a playwright conjoined to motivate her decision to direct the first productions of her own work. In her well-known 1992 essay "Why Should a Playwright Direct her Own Play?" Thompson recalls a formative incident of her early career as a playwright:

I experienced one writer-director relationship for which the word "colonized" is very gentle, indeed. I was the Incas and he was Spain. It all started at a preliminary meeting at my house. He seemed edgy, and he avoided my eyes. When I handed him a rewrite of a monologue, explaining that I was not a great typist, he tore it up and then threw the entire bound script at me full force, yelling at me. I screamed

the high-pitched squeal of a six-year-old, and repeated “Get out of my house” like a mantra. He put his hand on my head, said that I was “a very emotional girl, yes?” and then told me to sit on the couch and listen to what he had to say. Being a well-trained girl, I sat on the couch and stared out the window, tears streaming down my face. He paced up and down my tiny living-room, excoriating me and everyone else in Canadian theatre. “Would you like to know what I think of *Canadian theatre*?!” The word “mediocre” flew across the room many times. He told me that the only reason that he agreed to direct my play is that it is mildly interesting. Then, he pointed his finger at me and yelled, “If you ever dare to say one word to the actors, *I will kill you. I will kill you, do you understand? I will kill you!*”

(54)

During the course of rehearsals, it became clear to Thompson that this director “was bewildered by the play. He was totally dependent upon me, and soon resorted to sending the actors out of the room after every scene, and then turning to me. I would tell him how the scene should be done and then he would bring the actors back and repeat to them verbatim what I had said” (2006c 54). Following this early experience, Thompson, who is a graduate of the acting program at the National Theatre School of Canada and has extensive training in theatre practice, began to direct her own premieres as, in her words, a way to “discover what, in fact, my vision is” and “to have a direct line to the actors in order to constantly improve the text” (2006c 53).

Following her successful staging of her acclaimed play *Lion in the Streets* at the duMaurier World Stage Theatre Festival and the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in 1990, Thompson was invited by artistic director Christopher Newton to direct Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada the following year. Thompson jumped at this opportunity “to immerse [herself] in [the] play and know it from the inside out” (Thompson 2006b 101), but, finding the existing English-language translations inadequate, she only wanted to direct the play if she could adapt it as well.

Theatre critic Ray Conlogue of *The Globe and Mail* wrote of the Shaw Festival’s matching of Thompson with Ibsen’s classic text, “The affinities are clear. Ibsen, like Thompson, views life darkly as an amoral struggle between those who dominate and those who are victimized.” Conlogue suspected, in fact, that the Shaw Festival might have been “doing an end-run around its mandate, which is to produce only writers alive during Bernard Shaw’s lifetime,” in that having Thompson adapt as well as translate *Hedda Gabler* was a way to “smuggle this powerful writer into the festival” (C10).

Conlogue was not alone in seeing a certain logic in the Shaw Festival’s pairing of Thompson and *Hedda Gabler*. In recalling her acceptance of Newton’s invitation, Thompson herself has stated, “I just knew intuitively that it was right, it was right for me” (Farfan 2007). Indeed, she believes that *Hedda Gabler* “is the kind of thing I might have written if I had been around back then” (qtd. in Wagner D12), and

she has identified several points of connection between Ibsen's work and her own. At the level of content, for example, she has stated,

they're both, in their time, dangerous, and we want to show what we see to be true... In a sort of childlike way—a kid saying the emperor has no clothes—we don't know ... that we might get in some kind of trouble. When I wrote *The Crackwalker*, I was completely befuddled that people were shocked by it.
(Farfan 2007)

Because of the unsettling truths that both she and Ibsen dramatize, Thompson notes, their works were “both seminal in a sense, or a turning point of the way drama is going. His definitely was in a big global way, and mine was, I know, in a Canadian way” (Farfan 2007).¹

Thompson also sees a connection between the realism of Ibsen's prose plays and her own dramaturgical style, explaining,

I love realism that's then lifted into not quite Marquez territory, but just a bit. That's why my monologues—nobody speaks like that unless they're in a psychotic break or something, or at the peak of an emotion. Because to me, my monologues are where the unconscious meets the conscious life and where the subtext meets the text, because otherwise it is mostly subtext. And they *are* arias. And Ibsen has people say—Hedda says what she thinks. Her unconscious does come to the surface, like, “That's disgusting leaving that hat on the chair.”
(Farfan 2007)

But while Thompson sees similarities between Ibsen's work and her own, she also recognizes key differences, particularly in the use of language. As she has stated,

His language was generally, I understand, very simple, even in Norwegian, very spare, ordinary almost. That's the big difference, I think. I really choose lush and musical language, and I tried to sort of maybe impose that a bit on the adaptation. Because someone—a Norwegian friend of mine ...—did say it *is* more poetic in Norwegian, even though it is very spare and sort of Raymond Carver-esque.
(Farfan 2007)

Thompson's adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* for the Shaw Festival to some extent bridged these perceived differences between Ibsen's use of language and her own.

Generally speaking, Thompson “believe[s] that an adaptation of a classic or canonized work gives a writer the opportunity to guide the audience in their interaction with the play, to shake the piece until it is a living text again and to magnify areas of the play that have contemporary social relevance” (Thompson 2004). In the case of *Hedda Gabler*, she saw her primary challenge as being to find

a way for her 1991 production “to have an equal impact to the impact that it had” for its original audiences; and, to her mind, the existing translations, particularly the Michael Meyer version, were a major obstacle to achieving that impact. “With all due respect Michael Meyer,” she has stated, “he was very British—it was just so much of its time. It was just dusty and boring, *incredibly* boring.” “I think that to do the Meyer—you’re going to have a really bored—three quarters of the audience are falling asleep. But I thought, in my adaptation, I can actually bring Ibsen’s impact *then to now*.” Her adaptation was, from her perspective, “all out of love for Ibsen” (Farfan 2007). She wanted to clear away the “layer of mud” that she felt was obscuring the play in existing translations and restore to it the “rhythm and the poetry of natural speech” (Thompson, qtd. in Wagner D12). As Dorothy Hadfield has written, “By transforming the words authorized by learned translators into her own words, [Thompson] hoped to release the spirit of the challenge *Hedda Gabler* originally represented to traditional theatre practice before canonicity contained it; to re-energize the original resistant politics that a century of tradition had enervated and neutralized” (82).

One of the characteristic features of Thompson’s adaptation that is connected to her commitment to recapturing the impact of the early productions is her elimination of what Ray Conlogue called “Ibsen’s Victorian delicatessen” (C10). Thus, what Michael Meyer referred to as a “boudoir” (329) is, in Thompson’s adaptation, a “WHORE house” (57)². Meyer’s Tesman “happened to drop behind for a minute” (305) while seeing Løvborg home after Judge Brack’s party, but Thompson’s Tesman “fell behind at one point, in order to.. vomit” (54). Thompson’s Judge Brack does not simply tell Hedda that Løvborg shot himself “somewhat lower” than the heart, he also “TOUCHES HIS CROTCH” (73)³; and Thompson’s Hedda finds herself not simply in Brack’s power; but says, “I might as well be chained to the floor and naked before you, dear Judge. I am a slave” (76).⁴

Beyond eliminating Ibsen’s decorous euphemisms, Thompson darkened the palette of the play’s imagery and, in doing so, amplified the intensity of Hedda’s reaction to her surroundings. Thus, Tesman’s slippers look to her “like two old sewer rats run over by a carriage” (9); Aunt Juliana’s bonnet looks like a “running sore” (10) and a “scab” (12); and Berthe is an “old scrag” (23). Thea Elvsted’s move from her father’s home to her husband’s was like going from “dungeon to dungeon” (17); Hedda fears “jump[ing] off the train” (29), as Brack invites, because “there are vermin out there” that will “climb up [her] legs” and bite her (30). Thea is, for Thompson’s Hedda, not “a little idiot” or “a pretty little fool” (Meyer 299, 315), nor even simply a “mouse,” but a “rodent” (Thompson 1991b 61, 48).⁵

In addition to heightening the degree of explicitness and the intensity and tone of the imagery, Thompson trimmed Ibsen’s play, condensing it to the point that one of her collaborators referred to the Shaw Festival production as “*Hedda Gabler* on rollerblades” (Thompson 2006b 101). She also developed the character of Berthe into a somewhat comic figure, bluntly working class, less self-effacing

and more direct, and played with a Canadian accent in the Shaw Festival production. As well, she transformed Thea into a battered wife⁶ who is less naïve and more aware of Hedda's past with Eilert Løvborg⁷ and who is murderously angry at her for urging Løvborg to drink.⁸

But perhaps the most striking dimension of Thompson's approach to Ibsen's play is her vision of the underlying causes of Hedda's behaviour. More specifically, she believes that Ibsen was dramatizing the effects of sexual abuse without being fully conscious of what he was doing:

I think he was exploring something enormous and was so far ahead of his time, but, I think, like Freud, a bit of an innocent. The story is that Freud couldn't believe all these Viennese women saying that their fathers were having sex with them. So he said, well, it must be their fantasy, they must have an unconscious oedipal longing. It took Jeffrey Masson years later to say no, these fine Viennese doctors were raping their daughters, it wasn't longing.
(Holloway 136)

In Thompson's view, the stifling restrictions placed on Hedda as a late-nineteenth-century upper-middle-class woman and her father's contradictory double legacy of rebellion and conventionality (Farfan 2004 74) do not adequately account for the intensity of her response to Løvborg's advances:

for her to react that strongly to Løvborg's sexuality and her own sexuality clearly means that she had the conflicted reaction that a lot of abused women have ... That ambivalence between desire and repulsion is always present in someone who has been abused, and ... so she's terrified of her own tremendous animal attraction to Løvborg and so therefore wants to kill him for it.
(Farfan 2007)

Thompson published her theory about Hedda's sexual abuse by her father in her director's notes for the program of the Shaw Festival production (1991a), but she only made a few textual revisions to actually suggest it. In Act I, for example, Hedda says to Thea when pressing her for information about her marriage, "I have secrets ... that will go with me to my grave. I am very practised at keeping secrets" (18). As well, in Act III, when, prior to admitting to having lost the manuscript, Løvborg says that "to kill a child isn't the worst thing a father could do," Hedda replies, "I know that" (61). Near the end of the play, when Hedda concedes to Judge Brack, "I am a slave," she "(QUIETLY)" adds, "once more" (76). But beyond these occasional textual hints, Thompson added a prologue that underscored her view of the significance of Ibsen's exposition about Hedda's past rejection of Løvborg and its connection to her relationship with her father. In this prologue, Hedda entered the darkened stage in her nightgown, danced alone by candlelight, and was joined by Løvborg, who tried to make love to her until

she threatened him with her pistol. He left her alone on stage and she fired a blank shot at a bust of her father before exiting to her bedroom (2).⁹ Thompson originally planned a corresponding epilogue in which Hedda and Løvborg were united in death (78), but this epilogue was cut during the course of the Shaw Festival rehearsal process.

The reviews of the Shaw Festival production were mixed. Thompson's adaptation was admired by Jamie Portman for being "fresh and often provocative" and for its "spare, compelling, and idiomatic texture" (D4); Lois Chapman noted its "[wedding of] 19th century sensibilities with today's stringent language"; and Geoff Chapman described it as "modern and clear, the idioms of today capturing the austere poetry of the Norwegian writer's ideas, although Thompson has invented plenty of dramatic imagery to pursue her view of the mysterious Hedda's motivations" (D6). Portman, however, dismissed the prologue as a "pretentious and interminable ... mistake" (D4), while Herbert M. Simpson described it as "ludicrous" and Terry Doran complained that it "create[d] a long, befuddled pause before the play, Ibsen's play, truly begins, and ... foolishly telegraph[ed] a few of the main points that lie in waiting" (C5). Although the acting was generally praised, Ray Conlogue regarded the portrayal of Berthe as "an exact equivalent of a working-class Canadian woman" as "wrong-headed" (C10), while other critics found Berthe's lines "too vernacular" ("Riveting Production"), her "offhand slang and familiarity ... [ringing] falsely for the longstanding maid of two elderly sisters with a respect for convention" (Brown D4).

What is perhaps more interesting and significant than this mixed critical response to Thompson's adaptation and production was the degree of hostility of the Shaw Festival company toward her work, despite the fact that the artistic director of the Shaw had himself invited her participation as one of Canada's foremost playwrights who had already twice won the Governor General's Award, among numerous other prestigious awards and distinctions.¹⁰ It should be noted as well that her approach to Ibsen's text, including not only her heightened language and imagery but also her seemingly idiosyncratic concern for the issue of sexual abuse, was not inconsistent with what might have been expected of her, given her previous body of work. Yet Thompson recalled a general lack of support for her adaptation among company members, whose preference for the Michael Meyer translation she attributes to "that Canadian, colonialist, colonized attitude—we're just so culturally colonized—it's something I've been fighting against my whole artistic career, and I still see evidence of it everywhere" (Farfan 2007).

But beyond this general lack of support for her adaptation, Thompson has recalled an extraordinary incident that seems out of all proportion to the purported provocation of her textual revisions. In Act III of Meyer's translation, Løvborg says, "It isn't just last night. It'll go on happening. I know it. But the curse of it is, I don't want to live that kind of life. I don't want to start all that again.

She's broken my courage. I can't spit in the eyes of the world any longer" (315). The corresponding speech in Thompson's version reads: "Oh, last night was only the beginning, Hedda, I can feel it, rampaging through me. I have no....strength..against it..She..has loosed it with her..doubt, her loss of faith" (61). The following is an account by Thompson of how an ongoing battle with the actor playing Løvborg in the Shaw Festival production came to a head over this short speech:

These lines ... baffled the actor who was being paid to say them. From the first day of rehearsal this actor had enormous hostility towards the adaptation, viewing it as a monstrous distortion of Ibsen's play, which he seemed to think was perfectly rendered by the existing English translations. Along with one or two others in the cast, he regarded the clumsy, wooden and decidedly unpoetic extant English translations as gospel. However, up until this point he had, albeit reluctantly, walked through my adaptation in rehearsals and tried to "make it work," as I had been fairly obliging, reinstating many lines I had, perhaps over-zealously, cut, and patiently explaining how I had arrived at each word or phrase that differed from the other translations. But today was different. He would not enter into this pivotal moment of the play; instead, he glared at me and declared the speech unactable. He said that it made no sense at all, and that he was not interested in a "wash of emotion." He emitted fumes of hatred into the rehearsal room, and I began to find breathing difficult. I tried to help him with the moment, presenting him with several strong metaphors, all of which he refused to hear: "No, no, *no*, *no*! It doesn't make sense." Finally, at breaking point, I told him that I had the perfect analogy. I, like Lövborg, could feel a "beast rampaging through me" because of his (the actor's) lack of faith in me and my adaptation. In fact, what I felt like doing was putting my head and his through the glass doors. The actor had been in a squatting position, staring at the floor while I spoke. When I finished, he remained frozen in that position for a full ten minutes, refusing to answer the stage manager's queries about his well-being. Inside, I shattered. This rehearsal process was the most painful and sickening one I have ever been through, and although the production was wonderful, and very well received, I doubt I will ever recover from the emotional trauma of directing it.

(2006c 52)

The passage of the adaptation that precipitated this clash of wills was not a particularly radical departure from Ibsen's text, and so I asked Thompson in a recent interview how she accounted for this actor's behaviour. Linking to my own earlier discussion of Ibsen's use of reading and writing as a metaphor for female authority in his plays, she responded, "I think he didn't like my authorial authority. He did not like it. He didn't like it that I looked young and my ideas seemed a bit crazy" (Farfan 2007). In her published account of the incident, chauvinism and colonialism are integrally linked:

most actors seem to have been habituated to expect a traditionally male kind of authority figure, a bearded man who knows the play better than any of them, who has the answers to all their questions and who, preferably, speaks with a British accent. They want a conqueror, someone who will take their natural resources and build a splendid and fruitful machine. They do not want someone who is groping in the dark without a sword, searching for the play. No! They want a *man* who will show them the light, so that they can crawl out of their chaos and barbarism, their darkness. The director must have a grand design that the primitives cannot see. Surely this need of theirs is a perfect example of a hunchbacked colonial mentality, and I feel most uncomfortable wearing Columbus's clothing. I, as a writer, never see a grand design. I am a mole, burrowing underground, bumping into the play. I can understand why actors might be uncomfortable with that—who wants a blind taxi driver? But I cannot play “Dad.”

(2006c 53)

While Thompson's comments are, of course, over-generalizations, the internalized paternalistic colonialism that she encountered in staging *Hedda Gabler* might have been especially acute within the Shaw Festival context, particularly given that she had come to the Shaw from her position as writer-in-residence at the Tarragon Theatre, which had a distinguished track record of fostering new Canadian plays and was in that sense the Shaw Festival's polar opposite in terms of cultural politics.

Not simply a woman writer's struggle to author her vision of a canonical “woman's play” by the “father” of modern drama, Thompson's production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Shaw thus situated a postcolonial Canadian writer in a context where postcolonial critical perspectives on Canadian culture were not a primary concern. Unexpectedly, then, Ibsen's classic feminist-modernist “woman's play” became a site for a postcolonial writer's struggle to make her voice heard in a Canadian theatrical context still dominated by colonialist cultural standards.

NOTES

1. As Thompson further explains, “It's like Tremblay putting *joual* on the stage. Well, in *The Crackwalker*, I put the language of, you know, ‘*the underbelly of society*’—(I hate that)—but just, people want to go see their betters—their ‘betters’—people more beautiful and more well-spoken on the stage” (Farfan 2007).
2. Quotations from the unpublished rehearsal script are by permission of Judith Thompson and Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library. I have reproduced the original format in this and subsequent quotations from the unpublished rehearsal typescript. There are four versions of the script in the University of Guelph Library: a rehearsal script dated 23 June 1991, a rehearsal script dated 17 July 1991, a rehearsal script including pages dated 17 July 1991 and 1 August 1991, and the stage manager's prompt-book dated 8 August 1991. As my essay will make clear, the rehearsal process for the Shaw Festival production was, from Thompson's perspective, highly

compromised, and for this reason, I have chosen to work with the earliest version of the script so that, unless otherwise specified, all quotations are from the 23 June 1991 version. The stage manager's prompt-book dated 8 August 1991 reveals that the original script underwent considerable revision over the course of the rehearsal process (some changes are noted below). While I have chosen to work primarily with the earliest version of the rehearsal script, it should be noted that Thompson does not consider this first version to have been in any way definitive. Indeed, she has stated that the first draft for the Shaw Festival production needed further work (Farfan 2007), she reworked the adaptation in 2005 for a Toronto production directed by Ross Manson of Volcano Theatre, and, at the time of this writing, she was preparing a third version of the adaptation for a production by the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre in June 2007.

3. This stage direction does not appear in the stage manager's prompt-book.
4. The first line of this quotation does not appear in the stage manager's prompt-book. Instead, Brack "FONDLE[S] HEDDA'S LEFT BREAST" and Hedda says, "I am a slave" (1991c 76).
5. In the stage manager's prompt-book, the reference to Thea as a "mouse" has been eliminated and "rodent" has been changed to "little rodent" (1991c 48).
6. In Act I, as Thea tells Hedda about her unhappy marriage, Thompson's stage directions indicate that she reveals "A MASSIVE BRUISE FROM A BEATING" (18).
7. In Act I, when Hedda asks Thea the identity of the other woman who stands between her and Løvborg, Thompson's stage directions indicate that "THEA STARES AT HEDDA" and that "HEDDA MEETS HER STARE" (20). This stage direction does not appear in the stage manager's prompt-book.
8. Thompson's stage directions at the start of Act III read as follows:

THEA IS ON AN ARMCHAIR NEAR THE STOVE WRAPPED IN A SHAWL, AND HEDDA IS ASLEEP ON THE SOFA, FULLY DRESSED WITH A BLANKET OVER HER. SHE IS DREAMING. THE SOUND OF BIRDS AWAKENS THEA. SHE TIP-TOES TO HEDDA, PICKS UP A LARGE PILLOW ON THE COUCH, BEGINS TO PUT IT OVER HEDDA'S FACE BUT CANNOT. SHE IS DESPERATE.
(49)

9. The stage manager's prompt-book indicates that Hedda fires the gun but does not specify at what (1991c 2b).
10. By the time of the Shaw Festival production, Thompson had won the Governor General's Award for *White Biting Dog* in 1984 and for her play anthology *The Other Side of the Dark* in 1990. Her biographical note in the Shaw Festival program also listed a Chalmers Award for *I Am Yours* in 1988, a Nellie Award for Best Drama for *Tornado* in 1988, and the Toronto Arts Award for Writing and Editing in 1988.

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