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Shakespeare versus Ibsen

A Study in Contrasted Technique.

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It is impossible to intelligently criticise or appreciate a dramatist until we understand the circumstances of an actual performance in the theatre for which he wrote his plays. Changes in dramatic art have come with the changing of the theatre. Between the semi-medieval stage of Shakespeare and the improved modern stage of Ibsen there is a great gulf.

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The theatre with us is such an established institution that it is with some surprise we stop to realize that in Shakespeare's time it was in its infancy and that the whole system of the theatrical world came into existence after his birth. Indeed he was but twelve years old when the first theatre, the Theatre as it was called, was built just out of London. Up to this time they had used the English inn yard for their performances. Built as it is in the form of a hollow square with a central courtyard surrounded by galleries on four

sides, it was quite well adapted for their purpose. When no longer permitted to act in the inns, they went outside the city and built their first theatre. Knowing nothing of the theatres of Greece and Rome, and having none to copy, they took this inn courtyard as their model, so the first English theatres were really an inn yard without the inn. They built them in the form of a hollow square with a central courtyard open to the sky and a quadrangle of galleries. The mass of the spectators filled the pit or central open space, where there was standing room only. There were seats in the two galleries, the larger portion of which was separated into rooms or private boxes. The square stage extended out into this pit, so that the actors spoke in the very centre of the house, and the people stood close around them on three sides. The fashionable play goers might, if they paid enough, sit on stools on the wide stage, which was very embarrassing both to the actors and those in the pit, for standing as they did around the projecting sides they could only get glimpses between the stools. Where the gallery ran across the stage there hung a heavy tapestry curtain to cut off

the space behind, which might be used as a dressing room. Through this curtain at the back, or through the two doors, one on either side, the actors made their appearance. The draperies could be looped back to reveal a supposed cave, or another room. In the "Merchant of Venice" Portia says to Nerrissa: "Go draw aside the curtains and disclose the several caskets." The gallery at the rear served as balcony, pulpit, roof or upper chamber, any time in fact when the actors were not supposed to be on the same level. On it King Richard appeared "between two bishops" to the people of London below. From it Prince Arthur leaps as from the walls of Northampton Castle in "King John", and the citizens of Angiers hold colloquy with the English besiegers.

The audience of Shakespeare's day was pleased with very simple mechanical contrivances. For them the play was "the thing" and they were blessed with an imaginative faculty superior to ours. There was no scenery, though they had crude "properties" such as rocks, tombs, caves, tables, chairs and pasteboard dishes of food. The bare boards of the platform stage which no cur-

tain darkened, were the king's throne room, a chapel, a forest, a ship at sea, a market place, battle field or church yard at will. Title boards and scenic boards were used for the enlightenment of the audience. There were trap doors for the entrance of ghosts and other mysterious personages.

The costumes were often exceedingly rich and costly, but they were made in the latest fashion, regardless of the fitness. People of all times and all nations wore the doublet, ruff and hose. Boys took the part of women and to us this would seem worse than no scenery. Imagine if possible a boy playing Cleopatra, or a man of say twenty five playing Juliet. But the Elizabethans knew nothing better and were content.

Such was the theatre of Shakespeare which had such an influence on its construction and technique. His great tragedies and comedies are what they are to a great extent because of the peculiarities of his theatre. He shaped his stories to suit his stage and he cannot be acted on a modern stage without a thorough readjustment to suit changed conditions.

Compare with this our well equipped and up to date modern theatre. The stage which once jutted far out into the audience has been pushed back behind the curtain. The audience is now farther away and sees the drama as a picture in a frame. Where Shakespeare had to depend on the uncertain daylight, our theatres blaze with electricity and all parts of the stage may be easily seen. Now the dramatist may appeal to his audience through the eye as well as through the ear, letting gestures take the place of words. The art of the scenic painter has made wonderful effects possible. The scene is no longer described by a character, but put in the stage directions and painted by the scene painter. For this picture frame stage the modern dramatist like Ibsen composes his plays and his methods are those of the picture frame stage, as Shakespeare's were those of the platform stage.

Both Shakespeare and Ibsen had practical training for their work. Shakespeare when he came to London in 1586 became call-boy in a London theatre. He tried his hand on the revision of an old play and the manager recognized his gift for dramatic writing. So he rose to be the poet of his company, not only adapting and making

over plays, or writing them, but also taking some of the minor characters himself. It was as the ghost in Hamlet he achieved his greatest success. Ibsen was theatre poet to the National Theatre in Bergen from 1852 to 1857. There he mounted plays by Shakespeare, Holberg, Oehlenschläger and Herberg, about one hundred and forty five in all, besides producing and putting on some original works. In 1857 he became instructor at the Norwegian theatre in Christiania. This familiarity with the stage taught him the conditions of practical success. The clear and orderly exposition of the dramatic problem in his later plays is largely due to his experience.

Shakespeare was a practical playwright. He was writing for the playgoer of his own time not for future readers, so as he wrote his plays he kept one eye on the audience. It was an energetic crowd that filled the pit, soldiers back from the wars, sailors from the ships in the harbor, or apprentices. They demanded energetic plays, with plenty of excitement and full of horrors. They cared very little for carefully worked out conclusions. It mattered very little to them if the story were improbable or the characters inconsistent so long as there was plenty of

incident. Indeed they preferred the illogical and unnatural, and like two or three stories in one play. Within certain limits he gave them what they wanted. Ghosts came back to haunt their murderers, and deaths were frequent. Even in his greatest tragedies there are violent deaths on the stage, and a play like "Titus Andronicus" he has improved on the "Spanish Tragedy" itself. He had one purpose, to write a good dramatic story. His audience never demanded such a finished piece as "Othello". It was because he was a genius and an artist that some great theme would tempt him far beyond their demands, and he would give us marvelous structure and characterization. But too often he was content with what contented his audience. "If the best of Shakespeare was for eternity," says Brander Mathews, "the worst of him was frankly for the groundlings." Ibsen it is true has written in an age which does not care for horrors, but even for our day, his plays, for tragedies are singularly free from horrors. Ibsen, too, was writing for a special audience, the people of Norway. But his great object was not to please them, but to awaken them morally and mentally. He has never made concessions to his au-

dience. Boysen says of him: "the temptation to tell lies for money seems never to have come to Ibsen," and again, "there is something almost imposing in Ibsen's imperturbable serenity and his utter renunciation of the weak desire to please or flatter his audience." As a result he has gotten little for the sale of his plays and for many years he was very unpopular.

Shakespeare used the regular five act model which came down to him from his predecessors and contemporaries. He formed his drama on this regular model, the first act exposition with the exciting force, the second act containing the rising action, the third act the climax, the fourth act the falling action and the fifth act the final catastrophe. Ibsen early used this five act model, and he has also used four acts to quite an extent. But in "Ghosts", his greatest play from a technical standpoint, he has but three, and it is this three act model which he has left us.

In a play many things must necessarily happen before the curtain goes up. The dramatist must single out the most important and essential of these and present them to the audience. To this exposition Shakespeare

gives up the first of his five acts. He works it in very skillfully with action, so that it is not in the form of long monologues or dialogues obviously for our instruction. Take the first act of "Othello" for example. We find "Iago waking Desdemona's father to tell him that the daughter of a Venetian patrician has married a Moor. Then we hear Othello before the senators tell the story of his wooing. Thus before the act is over we have been skillfully informed of all that is necessary for us to know. But as far as the plot goes we have advanced very little.

Ibsen with his three act model could not give up the first of his three to exposition. By the end of his first act he must be nearly as far along as Shakespeare at the end of his second. He cleverly scatters his exposition through his play, starting his plot at once and working steadily up. So in "Ghosts" we find it scattered through most of the play, and in "Rosmersholm", he puts it off until the final act, almost too long, it would seem, for all this time we are kept in ignorance of the real motive that has been guiding Rebecca West. Ibsen is equally clever in informing us of past events without consciously seeming to do it.

In "Doll's House" we hear Nora relating to Mrs. Linde, as one of her achievements, to match one her friend has boasted of, that she once saved her husband's life by procuring money to take him to Italy when he was ill. So we learn of this important fact. Ibsen never began his plays anyway where an ordinary piece would begin. Each one presupposes a long history behind it, and starts from what would be the closing point of an ordinary play. All his later pieces are only so many grand final catastrophies. So in "Ghosts" the drama deals not so much with the action in the present before the eyes of the spectators as with the appalling and inexorable consequences in the past before the play began. We do not see the start of the tragedy, and then its careful working out, and in the end its consequences, as in Shakespeare, for when the play begins all the critical moments are past. Had Shakespeare written "Doll's House" we should probably have had Trovald's illness leading up to the forgery as a climax and in the fourth and fifth acts the consequences and catastrophe.

Ibsen in his best plays refused to have a climax involving a number of people. He took the quiet crucial moment in the lives of the one or two. Shakespeare,

on the other hand, often had the climax spectacular and involving a large number of people as in Caesar's death and the play in "Hamlet". His climax is carefully worked up to, each event pushing forward, sometimes in great bounds to the highest point. As a rule his falling action is not so cleverly constructed, being often split into small scenes. It is almost as though he lost interest afterwards and cared little for the end.

Just as the first act in Shakespeare differs from the first act in Ibsen, so do their last acts differ. As in the three act model the first act cannot be wholly devoted to exposition, so also the last act cannot be wholly devoted to the catastrophe. In Shakespeare's time there was no such thing as ringing down on the catastrophe and so ending things, for there was no curtain to ring down. It was not Shakespeare's way to end with a catastrophe. Professor Bradley says: "In tragedy, the Elizabethan practice like the Greek, was to lower the pitch of a motion from this point, by a few quiet words, and so to restore the audience to common life, 'in calm of mind all passion spent'." Shakespeare's fifth act contains the philosophy of the play. Our modern way is to leave this out and ring down

the curtain sensationally on the corpse. In Shakespeare it is this last which gives his plays their justification, which links them with the world and lifts them up. This method pleased Professor Bradley who again says: "But surely it is little short of barbarous to drop the curtain on the last dying words or it may be, the last convulsions of a tragic hero." But this is exactly the method employed by Ibsen and many good playwrights of our own time. In this three act model you have a perfect right to have the climax come at the end and close the play. As Ibsen constructed his tragedies, there is a steady rise, an increase in intensity and interest until the final catastrophe and the curtain. In "Ghosts" Ibsen does not relax the tension but prolongs it beyond the limits of the play, leaving us wondering what happened after the final falls.

Shakespeare made frequent use of the happy ending, and in such a play as "The Pillars of Society" we find Ibsen using it too, even though we feel he had to doctor up the ending some to achieve it. But after that play we feel in his plays that fate is pushing them relentlessly and they can end but one way. In the comedy of char-

acter or the comedy of manners it is all right to put on the happy ending, even though it may not be perfectly logical. But in the social dramas, such as Ibsen's later ones, the playwright is bound to be honest with himself and with the audience. He must work out his problem to its logical conclusion.

In our time each act in a well constructed play, has its own effective climax on which the curtain rings down. Shakespeare could not raise the curtain "discovering" several people on the stage or drop it at the end on several characters grouped picturesquely. It was not possible for him to begin in the middle of a situation or to leave it incomplete. All the players must enter and exit before the eyes of the audience.

In putting on a play of Shakespeare's today, one of the greatest difficulties lies in the large number of times the scene is changed in a single act. Take for example the second act of "Romeo and Juliet". It has six scenes, the first is a lane by Capulet's orchard, the second the orchard itself, the third, Friar Laurence's cell, the fourth a street, the fifth the orchard again, and in the sixth back to the cell. On our stage between

each, the curtain would have to be lowered and there would be a pause while the scenery was changed, making a decided change in the action. Six such breaks in one act are very distracting. But in Shakespeare's time they did not have this trouble, there was a pause only between the acts. With no scenery to shift, but only a little sign board to put up, the action went on uninterupted. He could put in little side scenes without breaking up the action.

With Ibsen each act contains but a single scene. Where Shakespeare bound together a number of scenes into one act, Ibsen forms a corresponding part of the action into a single scene. Even in his serious plays Shakespeare wove in partly extended scenes, partly whole scenes to intensify the character or add color and contrast. Such are the jests of the nurse, the interview with the players and courtiers and the grave digging scene. Ibsen never makes use of these episodes. Everything which does not actually carry forward the action is sternly excluded from his condensed dramas.

Shakespeare wrote his plays not for future readers, or even for future production but for immediate presentation in the Globe Theatre. Being there to

direct the plays, what need had he of stage directions? He could show them how he meant each scene to go, and what he meant by certain phrases. In Ibsen we see the increasing importance of business. It is but one example of his minute care, that he has supplied copious stage directions. Later playwrights have imitated him and we have grown used to it, but thirty years ago such minuteness seemed extravagant and needless. In Ibsen it is essential to his picture. There is an intimate relation between his business and dialogue. His stage directions cannot be skipped by any reader who desires to follow the dramatist's thought step by step without losing the least link. And they will be increasingly valuable the farther we get away from his time and the recollection of the way he himself wished his plays put on. There would be very much in "Ghosts" that would puzzle us if we had only the bare text as we have in Shakespeare. Think of what infinite value a copy of "Hamlet" would be to us with the author's careful stage directions.

Shakespeare was a practical playwright, up to every kind of trick of his trade & making his profit out of every convention acceptable to his audience. He found the aside and soliloquy so much used by his

contemporaries far too convenient to be given up and probably the thought of doing without them never occurred to him. It was convenient to have the villain lay aside his mask and talk to the audience of his villainy. A character could not only declare his actions but defend them. So in "Othello", technically one of his most perfect plays, we find the soliloquy used more than in almost any other work. He uses it again and again to let Iago reveal his villainy. At the end of the first act we find Iago frankly taking the audience into his confidence in a long speech, exposing to them all his dark designs. In the second act, in the middle and again at the end we find him explaining his schemes again to the spectators. Though the soliloquy was supposed to be the character thinking aloud as Juliet's soliloquy when Romeo overhears her, yet in many cases they were addressed rather to the audience to explain the business of the piece or the motives of the actors, than to the speaker's self. We do not feel this about the soliloquies in "Hamlet". The first one is profoundly dramatic, working up to his decision to have the play, it really advances the action. The second "To be or not to be", though there, is no advance in the action, is a profound revelation of

Hamlet's soul.

The prologue likewise came down to Shakespeare and he made use of it. But with him it is entirely severed from the action. It is merely an address of the poet to the audience, his plea to them for attention. A personage like Time in the "Winter's Tale" and Gower in "Pericles" comes forward to announce to the audience what they may expect to hear and see. Then he retires and is no more seen, until the play is over, when again he comes in at the end as the epilogue. Sometimes a character speaks the epilogue, as does Rosalind in "As You Like It" and Prospero in "The Tempest". Both the first and second acts of "Romeo and Juliet" are preceded by a chorus speaking a prologue.

The drama of the Elizabethans came down from the mysteries and moralities of the Middle Ages. In them one character was allowed to discourse at great length. We find the remains of this in Shakespeare. We can find scores of passages in his works which exist for their own sakes alone and are not an integral part of the play. There is no necessity for Jacques to set forth the seven ages of man, or for Touchstone to nominate the seven

degrees of the lie, especially in the third act where the action should be rapid. The Elizabethan audience was not so hurried as the modern audience. They had not read newspapers and might welcome instruction, while the impatient playgoer of today resents any digression from the plot. He is frankly annoyed if the author halts to deliver a sermon. The spectators now are more interested in what is done on the stage than in what is said. The fact that some of his actors had been choir boys probably induced him to put in some of his lyrics, little gems in themselves but having little connection with the play. Since there was no scenery Shakespeare was compelled to put into his dialogue the descriptions of any place which he wished to call up in the minds of his spectators. That he was not loth to take advantage of this opportunity for description may be easily guessed from his free use of it. Ibsen does not delay the action of his drama by any detailed description of the background which the spectators have before their eyes, but puts in his stage directions what scene he desires. The actor^{is} no longer partly surrounded he is back away from them. The result is the drama has cast out all that is undramatic and become less rhetorical, simpler in language

and more natural. Literature is disappearing and business and action taking its place. Long narrative as well as ~~de~~ description is out of place. The soliloquy which was appropriate on the platform stage of Shakespeare when the audience was so near, is out of place now, when the actor is in what looks like a real room. But this disappearance of the aside & soliloquy are of very recent date. Ibsen was the leader and has banished them entirely in his latest plays. But he used them in his earlier dramas, and even in the middle period they are not entirely gone. There are two asides in one act of "Ghosts". He has banished from his drama every trick that takes the mind away from the illusion of reality. Not only have the aside & soliloquy gone but there are no speeches of unnecessary length. He never puts in a word he does not have to, and even leaves out half a word. He is almost too condensed sometimes. In hearing a piece like "Ghosts" you do not the first time get all its meaning.

Shakespeare's audience accustomed to the spectacular, preferred such plays as presented numbers of men in violent commotion. They wanted processions, battles, coronations and mobs. The heroes must have train

of attendants. This spectacular method requires not only a large number of speaking characters, but an army of silent supernumeraries. In those days each actor had to take several parts. Shakespeare often has from twenty five to thirty speaking parts. So he is full of ensemble scenes, that is scenes with more than three persons. They are animated, but it distracts the attention to have many subordinate characters. These scenes give color and brilliance. A splendid example of such a scene is the banquet in Pompey's galley from "Antony and Cleopatra". In the number of characters there is a great difference between Shakespeare and Ibsen. In his earlier plays Ibsen had a larger number, but when we come down to his great social drama we find the characters wonderfully reduced. In "Ghosts" there are but five and ⁱⁿ "When We Did Awaken" there are really only four, the Sister of Mercy taking a very minor part.

All through the sixteenth century there was a determined effort on the part of scholars to make the drama conform to the unities. But the audience cared little, so long as there was plenty of excitement and incident. So we find Shakespeare steadily and consistently destroying them, more especially the unities of

time and place. In his histories he utterly disregarded them for we find the time extending over many years when the utmost time allowed by the unity of time was twenty four hours, while successive scenes occur in cities and countries many miles apart, despite the fact that unity of place decreed that the events be limited to one place, or at the very most to places so near that the character could reach them in the time allotted. The great tragedies "Othello", "Hamlet", "Lear", "Macbeth"; all disregard them. Even in his comedies, though he comes nearer to them, there is still a wide variation from any strict compliance. Two or more days elapse, sometimes weeks and months. In "The Winter's Tale" sixteen years elapse between the third and fourth acts. In "Antony and Cleopatra" the time is ten years while the scene is laid now in Alexandria, now in Rome, and wanders over portions of Europe and Asia. Of the thirty seven plays of Shakespeare there are two in which he observes the unities faithfully, "The Comedy of Errors", based on a play of Plautus, and "The Tempest", a play purely his own. The time covered in "The Tempest" is less than twenty four hours. He never lets us forget this for he brings the time before us again and

again. Miranda tells Ferdinand they will have three hours uninterrupted for her father is studying. Prospero at the end of this scene says he has much business which must be attended to before supper. In the fifth act Alonzo speaks of having been wrecked "three hours since" and the boatswain remarks it is "but three glasses" since the vessel was given up.

The unity of time was impossible in the kind of drama Shakespeare wrote. It takes time to work out slowly ^{the} disintegration of character in his great tragedies. Revenge, remorse, envy, hatred, pride, ambition are depicted from their beginnings as they slowly develop. In his comedies love is the great theme, and this again takes more than twenty four hours to develop and cannot very well be made to coincide with the unities. In "The Tempest" where he does observe them he takes Ferdinand and Miranda from the class of rulers, who are accustomed to have marriages arranged for them, and brings magic to his aid.

In his early works he destroyed even the unity of story and action. This demands that there shall be but one plot and in the orderly develop-

ment of this, everything that is not essential should be left out. In the early comedies Shakespeare weaves together two or three stories, but in his great tragedies, he consistently preserves the unity of action.

Ibsen in our day has returned to the unities. It is more than probable that he did this with no conscious design, it arose from his kind of drama. In his play where the characters are few and all the incidents of the plot are directed to the accomplishment of a single result, concentration ^{adds} to the strength. In his dramas the large part of the action has taken place before the opening of the play and we see only the catastrophe. We learn of preceeding events from the actors. The catastrophe itsself will not be apt to be spread over more than twenty four hours, or to take place in more than one place. Take "Ghosts" for example. The time is only twelve hours, from early evening until sunrise. It is only the catastrophe of the long and sad story of Mrs. Alving's marriage.

In the sixteenth century the mingling of tragedy and comedy was considered extremely bad taste, tragedy should be all tragedy, and comedy all com-

ic. But again Shakespeare asserted his independence. He put painful things in his comedies and humorous ones in his tragedies. The people liked it in spite of the critics. Life itself is not all fun nor all sorrow, and if they are mixed in life reasons Shakespeare why not on the stage? He inherited from an earlier time the play on words and the puns of which his audience were so fond. He sometimes, probably to please them, went too far. He has puns that are bad, puns in the wrong place and, sad to relate, he is sometimes even indecent in his jests. Some are good and the grave digging scene is one of the great scenes of literature. He created the fool as a type, a great contribution to English literature. In Ibsen we find none of this mingling of the comic with the tragic. His themes do not warrant it, he is too deadly in earnest. There is not an incident or a speech to lighten the gloom of "Ghosts".

Shakespeare took the blank verse and made it the plastic medium for drama. He wrote dramatic, philosophic and romantic verse all in this same form. In his dramatic verse he also broke it up you forget it is blank verse at all. In his tragedies it is the habitual

speech. Yet in some early plays he varies, dropping into rhyme, while in certain other plays, notably "Julius Caesar", the heroic characters used blank verse, the less distinguished a stately rhythmic prose, while the common people use everyday speech. In some plays the same character passes easily from one to the other. The law before Shakespeare and even in his time was that all comedies must be in prose, all tragedy in blank verse. But in all Shakespeare's pieces that go under the name of comedies, blank verse prevails to a greater or less extent, and it is almost certain to be employed whenever the expression assumes a serious character. It was the most effective form for he could use it for the simplest statement or the easy language of conversation and also for the sublimest heights of thought and the intensest passion. Into his tragedies also he introduced prose.

Prose has now come to be used for all plays not dealing with poetic subjects. So Ibsen in his later social dramas turned to prose, and has used it in even the more poetic and allegorical. But it is a prose with almost the beauty of poetry, rhythmic, modulated and flexible. His dialogue is wonderful in its compactness

and naturalness. Most authors make their characters all speak the author's own language. But with Ibsen each character speaks in his own language and so consistently that you get the peculiarities of their characters from their speech.

All things considered from a technical standpoint, Ibsen is the greater of the two. Where Shakespeare was often careless, Ibsen goes over and over his plays, correcting them with great care. Only too few of Shakespeare's plays are wrought with skill. Even "Hamlet" is not the organic whole it might have been. He did not have to care for technique, his audience did not demand it, and it was only because he was so great a genius and artist that his technique in a play like "Othello" is as great as it is. Brander Mathews says: "when we consider the actual circumstances of performance in the Globe Theatre our wonder is not that the structure of Shakespeare's plays is often straggling and slovenly, but rather that the great dramatist was ever able to attain to a more orderly conduct such as he did achieve in 'Othello' and 'Macbeth'". Ibsen's technique is the most perfect since the ancient Greek whom he resembles. He

wonderfully gathers together the issues of a long period of time in a single critical situation. He displaced the old sprawling analytic action with a compact, synthetic one, hardly surpassed by the Greeks. He has had a tremendous influence on all his contemporaries, and hereafter no will write for the stage after him as many wrote before him.

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