Research Article *Correspondences* 11, no. 2 (2023): 173–208

The Fantasy of Peer Gynt: Ibsen and Theosophy in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland

Giuliano D'Amico

giuliano.damico@ibsen.uio.no

Abstract

The article studies *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, an abridged version of Henrik Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt* that was also its first British staging (Edinburgh, 14 February 1908). Focusing on the work of its stage manager, the Theosophist Isabelle M. Pagan, the article discusses how this adaptation was entangled with Theosophical discourse of the period and how Theosophy can illuminate an assessment of the production. In addition, the article touches on the place of *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt* in "occult" theatre history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its performative nature at the crossroad between performance and ritual. Finally, it also argues that Pagan's adaptation can shed new light on its hypotext, *Peer Gynt*, and offer a way out of an impasse that characterizes the scholarly tradition on the play. In doing so, the article studies Pagan's production, introduction, and translation of the play, as well as their contexts, as an example of reception, as a theatrical form at the crossroads between theatre and ritual, and as a "fluid" adaptation text.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen; Theosophy; Reception Studies; Performance; Ritual; Adaptation

Introduction

> Has *Peer Gynt* a Key? And how far is it legitimate to insist on the mystic interpretation of a work of art for which the author has emphatically disclaimed any hidden or esoteric meaning whatever? The question is most fitly answered by another: How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?[1]

With these words Isabelle M. Pagan opened a pamphlet that was distributed to the actors and the musicians that participated in the first British performance of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which took place in Edinburgh on 14 February 1908.[2] Pagan was a Theosophist, astrologer and stage manager who had provided the script for this performance and supervised its rehearsals. From a scholarly point of view, this disclaimer is fascinating for at least two reasons. First, there is the implication of Pagan's words—*Peer Gynt* can be read through Theosophy. In her production, as well as in the introduction to her script, published in book form a year later, she elaborates on how this is the case. Second, Pagan's project does not attempt to appropriate Ibsen and distort his oeuvre into an esoteric discourse—as often happens with "esoteric" readings of literary, artistic or dramatic works[3]—but rather tries to see how Theosophy can illuminate an interpretation of the literary, philosophical and spiritual value of the play.

In this sense, Pagan's *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt* (as her abridged version was titled, henceforth *The Fantasy*) not only represents a peculiar episode in Ibsen's reception in Great Britain, but also opens the door to more encompassing research questions. How can Theosophical thought help us read *The Fantasy*? What place does this production have in the "occult" theatre history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? And can *The Fantasy* shed new light on its hypotext, Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt*? This article approaches these questions by studying Pagan's production, introduction and translation. It places the dramatic text and

1. Pagan, "Has *Peer Gynt* A Key?"
2. J.H.E., "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh," 667.
3. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*; Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.

its realization on stage within the broader context of the early Ibsen reception in Great Britain, and more specifically within the Theosophical Society. In order to do so, this article draws upon a threefold methodological framework.

First, it studies *The Fantasy* from the perspective of theatre historiography and reception studies, focusing on what Thomas Postlewait has named "possible worlds" that gravitate around performance.[4] Also, it looks at this episode of the British reception in the context of what Ika Willis has called "active audiences," and of the interpretive "impertinence" they show towards established literary or dramatic texts. In the first part of this article, I will concentrate on the historical context of Pagan's endeavour and put the shifts found in her script in dialogue with the spiritual thought of the Theosophical Society.[5]

Second, the article will look at *The Fantasy* in the context of the flourishing of occult-inspired theatre at the turn of the century, which Edmund B. Lingan has termed a "theatre of the occult revival."[6] I will do so by drawing upon the tradition of theatre studies at the crossroads of performance and ritual. Erika Fischer-Lichte's idea of theatre as "sacrifice" that provokes "change" in the audience is strictly interrelated with developments in the academic study of the theatricality of ritual and ceremonial magic and of the epistemologies they offer.[7] In this section of the article, I will focus on the translation, and especially on its paratexts (introduction, stage directions, as well as reviews of the performance) as sources for reconstructing the dramatic and ritual components of Pagan's 1908 production.

Third, I will look at Pagan's script and performance as an example of adaptation and discuss whether the esoteric interpretive key that lies at its foundation yields some relevance for a reading of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. In doing so, I will review Umberto Eco's concept of "hermetic semiosis" and discuss whether it fits into Pagan's interpretation

4. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 15–18.
5. Willis, *Reception*, 92–93.
6. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival.*
7. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 4–5. See also Hammer, *Between Play and Prayer*; Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*.

of Ibsen's play.[8] I will also draw upon recent scholarship in adaptation studies that has insisted on the "fluidity" of the adapted text and on the "two-way communication" of meaning between the adaptation and its source.[9] Therefore, in this final section of the article, I will discuss how Pagan's interpretation of *Peer Gynt* can challenge some classical, philosophically oriented avenues of research into Ibsen's play.

The Fantasy of Peer Gynt Between Theatre Historiography and Reception Studies

Direct sources about this production and its context are few, but significant. When Pagan published her script in book form a year after the premiere, she added lengthy practical explanations and suggestions for cuts, clearly aimed at possible future stagings. Therefore, it can be claimed to represent, with reasonable approximation, the script that was at the base of the 1908 production in Edinburgh.[10] It also includes an introduction by Pagan that elaborates on the pamphlet mentioned earlier, and provides insight into her interpretation of the play. In addition, the archive of the Theosophical Society in Edinburgh keeps the records of the so-called Orpheus Lodge, which was the milieu in which Pagan's spiritual view of theatre developed. Last but not least, the reception of the premiere is documented by reviews in both Theosophical journals such as *The Theosophist* and *Theosophy in Scotland*, as well as in local newspapers.[11]

8. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*; Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.

9. Bryant, "Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision," 47–68; Bruhn, "Dialogizing Adaptation Studies," 69–88.

10. The Edinburgh archive of the Theosophical Society in Scotland keeps a copy of the book with extensive annotations and cuts in pencil, proving that this printed version was used as a script for further stagings.

11. Unfortunately, these sources provide scarce details about the relationship between the practical side of the performance (such as scenography, costumes and light effects) and Pagan's Theosophical interpretation. In the book version of the script, when commenting on the "astral" scenes concerning the trolls, Pagan mentions that "the lighting should vary effectively, and the movements throughout suggest the dream-world rather than the physical plane" (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 71). Similarly, she notes that "at performances where it is specially desired to emphasise the inner meaning of the play, the colours [of the costumes] should be symbolic; e.g. clear azure and tender rose colour for SOLVEIG [*sic*] instead of navy blue and scarlet" (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 50). Two black and white stage photographs were published in *Theosophy in Scotland* (no. 4, August 1911 and no. 9, January 1912), featuring the main characters in peasant clothes. This suggests a rather traditional staging, with no direct hints at Pagan's Theosophical interpretation.

When it comes to a historiographical study of this production, I find Postlewait's heuristic model to be a fruitful starting point. Trying to avoid a mimetic approach, in which the historical context either mirrors or dialogues with the performance event in a binary relationship, Postlewait proposes a multidirectional approach in which the event is embedded in a complex web of relationships between agents (in this specific case, the Theosophical Society), artistic heritage (both the theatre of the occult revival and the British stage at large), receptions (both emic and etic reactions to the production) and the world around it.[12]

The latter instance, however, can be a slippery and vague category. Postlewait claims that "this model implies that theatrical events provide a perspective *on* and *of* the world" and that "every human event articulates and mediates a series of relations with the world of which it is part,"[13] but this model does not in itself provide a clear idea of what this relationship consists of. Therefore, Postlewait suggests the notion of "possible worlds" that an event speaks and relates to, encompassing "biographical factors, linguistic codes, sociopolitical conditions, values, beliefs, and views, national experiences and identities, ideologies and possible understandings."[14] This clarifies that the performance event communicates a worldview, rather than a vague connection to the world. *The Fantasy* can be considered the product of one possible world, i.e., that of the Theosophist, and it is important to acknowledge that this specific worldview cannot be separated from the event itself.

The particularity of this worldview resonates with *The Fantasy*'s dimension as an episode in the reception of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* on the British stage. In the field of reception studies, two key concepts return often in order to account for collective audiences' reactions and interpretations of works of literature and art. These are Hans Robert Jauss' "horizon of expectations" and Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities." Although these concepts are still widely

12. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 15.
13. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 13. Italics in the original.
14. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 17.

relevant for studying general trends in reception, they fall short in accounting for the peculiarity, and also the marginalization, of non-mainstream acts of reception, such as *The Fantasy*. Jauss' term envisages "an objectifiable system of expectations that rises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a preunderstanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language."[15] Such a definition, in other words, focuses on an "objectifiable system" of response that is hegemonic, i.e., follows leading trends in societies, reading communities and interpretive conventions. Fish's notion of "interpretive communities," in spite of his insistence on their agency with "writing" texts as a result of the reception process, also fails to account for divergent readings, as such communities of readers, in his understanding, generate relatively consistent interpretations of texts. Readers belonging to the same interpretive community tend to conform to a common set of reading strategies or "interpretive conventions," typically governed by ruling institutions in the context in which reading takes place.[16] As I will show in the third section of this article, *The Fantasy* as a reception of *Peer Gynt* finds its starting point by problematizing usual interpretations of the play. Such hegemonic approaches to reception, therefore, appear unfit to study the implications of this case.

In contrast to Jauss and Fish, Ika Willis' reflections on divergent readings are much more illuminating. In a recent book, Willis insists that by studying real readers, i.e., actual interpretive communities rooted in time and space, scholars have discovered "active audiences" that use "a range of active interpretative strategies which frequently appear disobedient or, in the term used by [Michel] de Certeau, 'impertinent,' especially in contrast to professional interpretative strategies which tend to emphasize the coherence and unity of texts."[17] She especially focuses on "marginalized groups" that use "a range of actively interventionist and creative interpretative strategies to open texts onto readers'

15. Jauss, "The Identity of the Poetic Text," 22.
16. Machor and Goldstein, *Reception Study*, 171.
17. Willis, *Reception*, 92.

own lived experiences, concerns and desires."[18] It is debatable to what degree the Theosophical Society can be considered a marginalized group, but Willis' points about creative interpretation resonates with the worldview that is at the base of Pagan's project. Drawing upon, but at the same time surpassing, classical concepts of reception studies such as idiosyncratic reading, the deconstructionist and Marxist idea of a "resistant reader" that "reads against the grain," and the psychoanalytical "symptomatic reading" that identifies manifest and latent meanings in texts, Willis focuses on "the reader's power over the text" as a function of their freedom of interpretation, putting an emphasis on reading practices that develop themselves outside of theoretical, interpretive and genre-based constraints.[19] This inclusive understanding of creative reception will be the overarching approach in order to frame and understand the Theosophical reading that is at the base of *The Fantasy*. A few words on Theosophy and its worldview are necessary here in order to understand Pagan's take on Ibsen's text.

As it is known, although the word "Theosophy" had been used in an esoteric context earlier,[20] it came into common usage in connection with the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, opening a British branch in 1878. Drawing upon a growing fascination with science and Spiritualism, which suggested that the spiritual realm was scientifically verifiable, the society maintained that Truth or Divine Wisdom (*Theosophia*) is to be found in all religions, with an emphasis on the Eastern ones as particular repositories of such "ancient wisdom." The Theosophical Society therefore encouraged the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science. It also called for a "Brotherhood of Humanity," without discrimination based on race, creed, sex, caste or color.[21] Summing up the main features of the movement that the Theosophical Society

18. Willis, *Reception*, 92–93.

19. Willis, *Reception*, 74–117.

20. Such as the case, for example, of Jacob Böhme's "Christian Theosophy" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 87–106.

21. Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 3–4.

developed between the US, Europe and India at the turn of the 1880s would require far more space than what is allowed here. Three aspects, however, are particularly important for the present study: first, the popularization of Indian philosophy and spirituality in the West, for instance when it comes to concepts like karma and reincarnation; second, the ideal of a universal brotherhood and a belief in a collective, spiritual and human advancement by means of esoteric practice; and third, the diffusion of the Theosophical movement across the European middle class, which made the Theosophical Society one of the most important players in the revival of occultism at the end of the nineteenth century.[22] I will return to these three perspectives over the course of my analysis.

More generally, Theosophy is commonly understood to be a form of "esotericism" or "occultism," although these two terms have a complex history and have proven difficult to define. The scholar of religion Wouter J. Hanegraaff sought to refine the traditional characterization of esotericism as a "form of thought" focused on alchemy, astrology and magic—and occultism as a late nineteenth-century variant of it[23]—by proposing that, in the wake of the Enlightenment, these three esoteric disciplines merged in "a conceptual waste-basket for 'rejected knowledge'" that "has kept functioning as the academy's radical 'Other' to the present day."[24] To what degree Theosophy should qualify as "rejected knowledge" is open to debate, especially if one takes into account the diffusion it met at the turn of the twentieth century and especially the influence it had and continues to have on Western culture and art.[25] However, the doctrines and worldview of the Theosophical Society, at least in its original articulations, went against mainstream Christianity and spirituality, and this partly contributed, in spite of its popular

22. Among the vast bibliography on the Theosophical Society, see at least Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*; Chajes, *Recycled Lives*; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*; Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 211–28; Rudbøg and Sand, *Imagining the East*.

23. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 4–8.

24. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 221.

25. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Scheer, Turner and Mansell, *Enchanted Modernities*.

diffusion, to its relegation outside a religious mainstream, a status that has not changed. This can be one of the reasons why Pagan's Theosophical reading of *Peer Gynt* has remained relatively unknown among Ibsen scholars.[26]

By 1908, when *The Fantasy* was staged, Theosophy was not a totally new discourse in the British reception of Ibsen. The first translation of *A Doll's House*, which came out in 1882, was made by Henrietta Frances Lord, a women's rights activist and Theosophist who wrote a long introduction inspired by another Theosophist, Anna Kingsford. In 1890, her translation and introduction to *Ghosts* mixed a Theosophical view on karma and reincarnation with Christian science.[27] Shortly later, in 1893, the Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* featured an article in multiple instalments titled "Ibsen's Works in the Light of Theosophy," where Theosophical concepts such as will-power, the higher self and the stages of soul development were linked to Ibsen's works. Such efforts put Theosophy on the map in the early reception of Ibsen in Great Britain. Their strategy consisted of attempting to find legitimation for a doctrine or beliefs through the aid of a recognized author; in the end, these articles tell us very little about Ibsen and his dramaturgy, and more about Theosophy.[28] As we will soon see, Pagan's take on Ibsen and the work of her Orpheus Lodge was quite different.

Isabelle Mary Pagan (1867–1960) was an astrologer and Theosophist, mostly known for her treatise *From Pioneer to Poet* from 1911, which "became immensely popular and went through five editions."[29] According to the membership records of the Theosophical Society in England, Pagan enrolled in 1902, before moving

26. The relationship between Theosophy and Christianity is complex and multi-faceted. For instance, Anna Kingsford, one of the prominent figures of the early British Theosophical Society, was a Christian occultist (Kluveld, *Anna Kingsford*, 664). The Scottish Theosophical lodges were also, especially in their early phases, distinctively Christian (Shaw, "Theosophy in Scotland"). These Christian impulses, however, seem hardly to have had an impact on Pagan's reading of *Peer Gynt*.

27. D'Amico, "Henrietta Frances Lord," 96–122. An earlier English translation had appeared in Copenhagen in 1880, but it had scarce circulation and remained obscure.

28. Cuffe, "Ibsen's Works in the Light of Theosophy," 201–5, 295–302, 388–94.

29. Vandervoort, *Tell the Driver*, 8.

to Edinburgh in 1910 (thus shortly after her work on *The Fantasy*), where she founded the Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Scotland.[30] The records of the activities of the lodge document a continuing effort at collective readings of drama and literature (such as Shakespeare), musical recitals (especially Wagner) and lectures from its founding up till 1955, with regular attention to Ibsen's dramas.[31] The records also state that "the Lodge would make Art its chief field for study with Beauty as its Keynote."[32] The records as well as her articles in Theosophical magazines make Pagan's focus on studying the arts as means of spiritual achievement and development clearly evident. It is, therefore, in this context that we should read *The Fantasy*, arguably Pagan's first and most powerful attempt to approach Ibsen in the artistic and spiritual vein that two years later would culminate in the foundation of the Orpheus Lodge. Her commitment to Ibsen was not temporary, as she staged both *The Lady from the Sea* and *Emperor and Galilean* later in her life, and the mainstream newspaper *The Glasgow Herald* would write in her obituary that she "was first to introduce Ibsen's works to Edinburgh audiences, when, under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, she staged *Peer Gynt*."[33] *The Fantasy* seems thus to have been her life's work.

The book version of *The Fantasy* opens with an introduction, where Pagan points out that "The dialogue then used had been hastily transcribed for the occasion from the translations already existing in French and English," i.e., those

30. Theosophical Society in England, Membership Records, 181–82.

31. Orpheus Lodge, Records of activities.

32. Orpheus Lodge, Records of activities, 2. The Orpheus Lodge was not a unique group in British Theosophical milieux. In 1907, a so-called "Art Movement" was founded within the Theosophical Society in London, for discussing questions related to Theosophy and the arts (Anonymous, *The Art-Movement of the Theosophical Society*).

33. Anonymous, "Miss Isabelle Pagan." In 1924, again with the cooperation of the Theosophical Society, she translated and produced *Emperor and Galilean*, which was performed in Glasgow and Edinburgh (Anonymous, "Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*," 8. See also Ibsenstage.hf.uio.no). In 1936, she translated *The Lady from the Sea*, which was apparently also performed (see Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*). Pagan also published articles on *When We Dead Awaken* and *Emperor and Galilean* ("Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*," "Ibsen's Great Soul-Drama").

of Moritz Prozor and William and Charles Archer, but that she, afterwards, started "the study of Norwegian" and "set to work again, remodelling the lines and revising the cuts."[34] Therefore, if we are to trust Pagan, her text is partly a relay translation and partly a translation from the Norwegian, although the book version (and the 1908 performance as well) did not include the whole play. Apart from cutting selected scenes and almost the whole fourth act, as was customary in the early performance history of *Peer Gynt*, the most important shifts are to be found in the paratexts, and in particular in the stage directions, which in turn informed the way in which the play was staged.[35] Interestingly, a comparative reading of Pagan's translation with the original text, as well as Archer's and Prozor's translations, shows no major shifts in the speeches, that would develop a Theosophical narrative or interpretation. The only exception regards the following scene, and Pagan motivates it as follows:

> In this play one of the strongest and most dramatic situations is to be found in Peer's second dialogue with the "Green-Clad One," when she suddenly confronts him with the hideous misshapen elemental, which represents, on the astral plane, the result of his treachery to Ingrid. These lines as they stand are impossible from the stage manager's point of view, although they are far too important to be omitted. The transcriber, after much cogitation, decided, in rendering them and the corresponding passage in the Troll-scene, to emphasise as strongly as possible the fact—abundantly evident to any careful student of the poem—that the scene is astral or "psychic," and not physical, and so to lift the passage out of all danger of a merely gross and material interpretation into the region of the weird and uncanny.[36]

We gather from this quotation that Pagan had a double challenge here: on the one hand, a practical exigence to clarify the original text for the benefit of the

34. Pagan, "Introduction," 7. For a brief synopsis of the play, see Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen*, 235–36; The Norwegian Ibsen Company, "Peer Gynt."

35. I use the term "shift" here to refer to the so-called non-obligatory translation shifts theorized in Descriptive Translations Studies. They include, for example, changes in content or syntax, text additions or omissions that are not motivated by linguistic or structural differences between the source and target texts. See Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*.

36. Pagan, "Introduction," 10–11.

actors and the audience (a problem she repeatedly returns to in her notes and stage directions) and, on the other, a need to properly convey what she deemed to be the meaning of the speeches. This is the only occasion in which a translation shift is evident, and it consists in the addition of the following lines: "*Green*: There's a law that holds good. Ay! Believe it or not. / Still desires will take shape, thoughts are things, and exist."[37] Pagan's idea here is that the events that have taken place on the astral plane—in this case, sexual intercourse with the Green-Clad Woman, that resulted in the birth of a half-human, half-troll child—have consequences on the physical plane. As this trollish child repeatedly haunts Peer during the play, this event and character become a token of Peer's failed earthly and psychic possibilities that deeply affect his spiritual development.

Apart from this example, as mentioned earlier, Pagan does not operate with major shifts in her translation to support her Theosophical reading. The cuts found in the translation mostly serve a practical goal of shortening the length of the performance and avoid costly scenography solutions.[38] In Pagan's "impertinent" reading, Ibsen's play in itself was a carrier of Theosophical knowledge, and the text did not need to be tampered with in order to convey it. What needed to be done, on the contrary, was to orient both the actors and the readers of the book version of the script towards a Theosophical interpretation. That is why the paratexts of the book, and especially its stage directions and dramatis personae, are so important: they are meant to inform the reading and the performance of *The Fantasy*. The absence of shifts in the text may seem surprising in such a biased reading as Pagan's is, but it is actually not an uncommon strategy in "activist" translation, a practice that resonates with Willis' idea about "active audiences" that operate with "disobedient" or "impertinent" readings of

37. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 86. This shift is prepared by a tiny interpolation occurring a few pages earlier, in a dialogue between Peer and the troll king, who asks him, "Do you really believe . . . .That your thoughts bear no fruit?" (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 74).

38. The fourth act in particular has always been proved difficult to stage, because of Peer's many travels to exotic places. As mentioned, it was customary to cut it in the early stage history of the play. See Aarseth, "Oppførelse."

texts. As Mona Baker has pointed out, activist translators are often engaged in social or political issues, and use translation as means of their battle. Activist translation presupposes a narrative that backs up and guides the translation's interpretation, but textual manipulation in activist translations is actually quite rare. As the risk of being unmasked and accused of appropriation of the text is high, such a strategy may easily backfire.[39] Activist translators, therefore, choose carefully which borders to trespass and which to respect, and, in this case, it looks like Pagan chose to stay away from the text and concentrate on the paratexts to convey her interpretation. She is also careful to inform the reader, with the use of notes and stage directions, when cuts or paraphrases are made in the text.

More specifically, the quotation above gives the key to Pagan's interpretation of the play. Her main point is that *Peer Gynt* develops according to two "planes," namely the physical plane, which corresponds to our reality, and the astral plane, which, according to Theosophical thought, can be described as a sphere of consciousness/existence where the "astral body" of the individual (a sort of doppelgänger of the physical body, or projection of the self) would be able to wander and come into contact with the astral bodies of other individuals, as well as "nature spirits," sometimes also called "elementals." But since this plane is a "home of errant thoughts"[40] and of such "spirits," it is also intrinsically "deceptive, because it reflects indiscriminately the good and the bad, and is so chaotic."[41]

This dichotomy is the fundament of Pagan's "impertinent" reading of *Peer Gynt*. As she states it in her list of dramatis personae,[42] the characters that appear in the second act of the play (for instance, the Old Man of Dovre, the trolls, the Bøyg and the Green-Clad Woman) belong to the astral plane because they are either elementals or projections of other selves: this is the case for the Green-

39. Baker, "Translation and Activism."

40. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 67.

41. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 324. On the astral plane in a Theosophical context, see also Deveney, *Astral Projection*.

42. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 31.

Clad Woman, whom she considers "a shadowy, astral counterpart of Ingrid,"[43] the girl Peer has seduced and abandoned earlier in the play. In the same vein, she points out in a stage direction that "most of the actors in this scene [in the hall of the Old Man of Dovre], though fantastically disguised, should yet be recognisable as feverish nightmare reproductions of the wedding guests, and the whole action should be reminiscent, though not obtrusively so, of the wedding festivities."[44] The main idea, therefore, is that the agitated moments of the bride theft in Heggdal and Peer's subsequent escape have put him in a state of mind that has caused him, in one way or another, to reach the astral plane, where his recent experiences meet him again as in a distorted mirror.[45] As Pagan puts it in the same stage direction:

> Later in the drama, in a monologue uttered while looking at the sphinx in Egypt, PEER refers to the TROLL KING and the GREAT BOYG [*sic*] as people "from fairy-tales," whom he had "seen in a dream while he lay in a fever," so there is no doubt about the character of the scene as conceived by the poet; i.e. it certainly represents delirium.[46]

But the duality between the two planes in the play goes further. In Pagan's interpretation, Peer's escape from the Dovre palace marks his "awakening on the physical plane,"[47] which is followed by the meeting with Solvejg, Aase's death, Peer's travels abroad and homecoming. All these events happen, according to Pagan, on the plane of reality. But something else happens in the fifth act: Pagan interprets the so-called "onion scene" as Peer's death. In this scene in the original play, Peer is making a desperate attempt to find a witness who could attest that he has "been himself" as a fully developed human being. He peels an onion in search of a core that might give him a clue to the essence of things, and of

43. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 22.

44. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 66.

45. According to Theosophical sources, the astral plane can also be reached involuntarily. See Deveney, *Astral Projection*, 29.

46. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 67.

47. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 32.

himself, but as the onion has no core, he is left in even greater despair. According to Pagan, "Peer awakes on the astral once more—not in delirium this time, half on and half off; but wholly and completely free from the trammels of the physical."[48] This is in accordance with Theosophical thought, because after having died, the soul goes back to the astral plane to wait for a new reincarnation.[49] In the following stage direction, here is how this is supposed to be realized on stage:

> This is the close of PEER's life on the physical plane, and an ordinary exit hardly conveys the idea to the audience. It is only the soul of him that "hurries off" and continues to pass on from stage to stage in the passage from life to life through death. Therefore his body should be left lying in front of the hut.[50]

This scenic trick (in this passage, two Peers are supposed to be on stage) means that everything from this point on is taking place in Peer's afterlife, or, more precisely, in the quarantine period between his past and his next incarnation. The encounter with the enigmatic figure of the Button Moulder therefore also takes place on the astral plane; according to Pagan's interpretation, he is one of the angels concerned with the working out of karma as a law of reincarnation.[51]

In order to understand the ending of the play in the context of Pagan's "impertinent" reading, it is necessary to introduce briefly her understanding of other characters Peer meets. Peer, his mother Aase and his wife-to-be Solvejg are not only physical characters, but personifications: Peer represents "the human soul,

48. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 27.

49. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 67.

50. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 104.

51. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 27. Interestingly, Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer proposed a similar interpretation in the early 1970s, one that did not leave a mark on Ibsen studies. According to this interpretation, "whether one regards Peer as having died in the madhouse at the end of Act Four, or in the shipwreck at the beginning of Act Five, we must surely take that fifth act as representing either the unreeling of his past life in his mind at the moment of death or (which is perhaps the same thing) as the wandering of his soul in purgatory" (Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen*, 272). As the quotation shows, however, the similarity between Pagan's and Meyer's interpretation stops at Peer's death, as Meyer's mention of purgatory firmly maintains his reading within a Christian worldview that does not include reincarnation.

slowly evolving through variety of experience," Aase is "the conscience . . . i.e., the voice of past experience," and Solvejg is "the higher self, the divine element which Peer must ultimately wed."[52] Consequently, this stage direction shows how Pagan conceives Peer's scene at the hut in the fourth act, as he hears Solvejg's song:

> Mystically, this symbolises his entrance on the *Path of Wisdom*, as the building of the hut suggested his resolute entrance on the *Path of Action*. Both stages are followed immediately by the vision of SOLVEIG [*sic*], . . . the higher self; but the third path, the *Path of Devotion*, which is only reached through the gate of humility, must be trodden before permanent union is achieved.[53]

The three "paths" mentioned here are the classical forms of yogic spiritual development (Jñāna Yoga, Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga), as theorized in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which the Theosophical Society began to popularize in the Western world in the 1870s.[54] The duality of planes in the interpretation of the play, therefore, is not only a function of the extended understanding of reality typical of Theosophical thought, but mirrors the aim of the adaptation, namely the notion that *Peer Gynt* is an allegory of the spiritual development of the human subject. This is, once more, explained in the stage directions. The final part of the fifth act, or "Epilogue" as Pagan calls it, becomes a journey of:

> the restless spirit trying to free itself from the trammels of the flesh; the same spirit which, through its craving for physical incarnation, originally built the "pyramid" or temple of the body that clothed it during its earthly pilgrimage; and which now, wearied out by the stress and strain of physical action, longs for the rest and freedom of the realms above, turning from material things as transitory and illusive, and viewing the whole physical plane as a forest laid waste by fire.[55]

The allegorical interpretation and especially this last quotation should not lead one, however, to think that the play ends in a univocal, conciliatory note. In the

52. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 23.
53. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 95. Italics in the original.
54. Baier, "Yoga," 2.
55. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 107.

end, during the final encounter with Solvejg, Peer's soul gets back on the track of his path of self-realization, but this only means that he is allowed to reincarnate again and pursue his path of evolution towards the spiritual realm, until, as the Button Moulder puts it in his last line, "at the cross-roads we meet again, and then we shall see. Now I say no more,"[56] i.e., until his next death and reincarnation, when karma will again be waiting for him. The relevance of this cyclical, non-teleological reading of the ending and its consequences for the "impertinent" interpretation of the play will be analyzed in the third part of this article.

The Fantasy and the Occult Revival—Ritual and Performance

The theatre scholar Edmund Lingan, in a book titled *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, looks at the phenomenon of occult theatre in the decades around the turn of the century. "Occult revival" is used here as an umbrella term that encompasses the various occult groups and currents that arose in the wake of Darwin's evolutionary theory and the crisis of Christian faith that followed.[57] Central for many of these groups was a quest for self-realization, in which the adept, be it through the repeated use of rituals, invocations, meditation or other practice, aimed to reach a higher degree of consciousness and divine knowledge. In this process, according to Lingan, drama played a crucial role: "The art of theatre became an important tool for expressing and disseminating alternative spiritual ideas. . . . In fact, many occultists esteemed theatre as a sacred art with potential to spiritually transform human beings."[58] In particular, Lingan insists that "the theatre of the Occult Revival did . . . answer religious questions" and that "the occultists who wrote plays and created theatrical productions to promote a specific cosmology during the Occult Revival should not be confused with theatre artists who have incorporated occultism and religious content into

56. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 129.
57. McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi*.
58. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 2.

theatre and drama for the purpose of creating secular works of art."[59] The main aim of these "occult" theatre practitioners was thus less artistic than it was spiritual.

In his book, Lingan argues that movements of the occult revival elaborated a corpus of rituals that were theatrical and performative at heart, with Aleister Crowley's public series of *Rites of Eleusis* (1910) as a peak.[60] In addition, occultists of the turn of the twentieth century, for example the Californian Theosophist Katherine Tingley, looked at classical dramatists such as Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Goethe as initiates, whose plays could reveal esoteric truths to the spectators, and staged their plays accordingly.[61] As a whole, these theatre occultists esteemed theatre as a sacred art with the potential to spiritually transform human beings. Generally speaking, these forms of occult theatre had a threefold aim: 1) a ritual purpose in which the performance was supposed to have an effect on the performer or the audience; 2) self-development in which the initiated spectator or actor learned about specific spiritual concepts or realms through the staging; and 3) self-promotion, as these events were often open to a public consisting of the non-initiated. All these aspects are important to keep in mind when looking at *The Fantasy*.

In the first place, there is the ritualistic aspect, which encompassed the possibility of causing change or obtaining a spiritual effect through performative action. This is in keeping with studies that, at the borders between performance and ritual, have emphasized how the theatrical performance can have a spiritual effect on both the performer and the audience. In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, Fischer-Lichte famously claimed that particular forms of performance "transgressed the boundary between the semiotic and phenomenal body,"[62] thus also transgressing

59. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 9.

60. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 3.

61. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 47–52.

62. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 5. I use these terms in accordance with modern performance theory, which sees the "phenomenal body" as the actor's "bodily being-in-the-world" and the "semiotic body" as "the use of that body as a sign to portray a character." See Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre and Performance Studies*, 26.

the boundary between theatre and ritual.[63] Such theatrical ritual—or ritual theatre—resulted in the creation of "a temporary community of actors and spectators" that experienced the same transgression and transformation.[64] For Fischer-Lichte, the crucial point is the emergence of an ephemeral community between the performer and the spectator, even to the point of reaching "a hypnotic state" and "a dissolution of their selves."[65] Such experience focuses on integrating the individual into the community, with sacrifice as a focal point,[66] and presupposes a before and an after, two distinguished states and/or experiential stages that both the actor and the spectator transgress during a performance that becomes a rite of passage.[67]

Such perspectives on performances are corroborated by research into Western esotericism, and especially rituals of initiation. For instance, Henrik Bogdan has emphasized that in several secret societies, such as those of Freemasonry, rituals are conceived as essentially performative acts that include a transformative moment focused on experiential knowledge, as well as a fixed pattern (as in the case of a theatre performance that follows a script).[68] More specifically, these rituals have a transformative power inasmuch as they separate the candidates from their old state of being, bring them into a liminal phase in which the candidate is suspended between these two, and finally find them a new identity/state within the society.[69] Initiation is in these cases a form of experiential *gnosis*.[70] More recent studies at the crossroads between theatre and occultism have also shown how contemporary performance makes use of ritual, focusing on transgression of theatrical and physical boundaries (such as forms of ritual masochism), liminality,

63. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 9.
64. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 10, 7–13.
65. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 13.
66. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 31–32.
67. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 36–37.
68. Bogdan, "Esotericism Practiced," 249.
69. Bogdan, "Esotericism Practiced," 251.
70. Bogdan, "Esotericism Practiced," 255.

and healing; in these cases, the performance/ritual is supposed to provide spiritual development to both the performer and the audience.[71]

These aspects are important to understand the aim and nature of *The Fantasy* as a piece of drama of the occult revival, and the potentialities of its Epilogue or fifth act. In the moment in which Peer ends his life on the physical plane and his body is left lying in front of the hut while another actor continues to play his role in the rest of the scene, this doubling tends to blur the distinction between the phenomenal and the semiotic body.[72] With one "dead" body and another "living" one on stage, the Epilogue of *The Fantasy* invites the spectators into a liminal state, in which they both experience the bodily, physical presence of Peer and his own astral body looking for a new incarnation. This liminal moment binds the performers and the audience together in an ephemeral community that experiences a rite of passage, as Peer passes from the physical to the astral plane, but is also promised a return to the former when his higher self (Solvejg) puts him back on track and grants him a new incarnation. Apparently, this was also evident in the play's reception. According to the report of the performance published in *The Theosophist* in April 1908, theatregoers at the Edinburgh premiere reported that "we were so absorbed in the play we forgot to notice who were taking individual parts" and that "there was an atmosphere in the whole company that came right across the footlights to the audience—you *felt* it."[73]

Such circulation of spiritual energy is a function of the second aspect of *The Fantasy* as a play of the occult revival, namely its nature as a means to self-development for the actors. This ties in with Lance Gharavi's framing of spiritual performance as an act that generates faith, and not the opposite—performance thus becomes the fulcrum and origin of religious experience, and

71. Bogdan, "Esotericism Practiced," 260–63; Rockbrand, "Boundaries of Healing;" Alston, "'Burn the Witch'."

72. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 104.

73. J.H.E., "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh," 667. Italics in the original.

not an expression of it.[74] Also, although spiritual performance indeed can bear the mark of ritual, which Gharavi considers to be a bridge between performance and religion,[75] it includes elements that are not embodied (as in ritual) and are intrinsically ineffable: "a person's sense of something mysterious, just beyond the grasp of mental comprehension, something that defies representation except by metaphor."[76] Such movement in and out of the performer's body opens up productions such as *The Fantasy* to interpretations which not only focus on the body of the actor, but, more generally, on performance as a function of spirituality, "a sense of being in relation with ineffability [that] can be investigated as a domain of human experience from which people formulate knowledge."[77]

Such ineffability of the theatrical experience is at the core of *The Fantasy*, not only because of the exchange of energies between actors and audience, but because of the nature of the performance. Its value, as Pagan argues in her introduction, develops on several "planes" and "it is as if the larger man—the subliminal self of the psychologist—had somehow got a free hand for once, and using the outer self, or limited personality, as a channel, had poured through it something of the higher wisdom and wider knowledge that lay within his reach."[78] The aim and scope of staging *The Fantasy* is thus to perform, and therefore both reflect upon and disseminate, the "ineffable" spiritual wisdom that is allegedly at the root of the play; namely the spiritual advancement and progressive purification of the human soul through different incarnations, of which Peer's life is just a particular turbulent one. As *The Theosophist* put it in their review of the Edinburgh premiere:

> It is not often realised how much may be done for the evolution of the powers of combination in the individual by association for dramatic purposes. Here we had a body

74. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 18–19.
75. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 27.
76. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 44.
77. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 51.
78. Pagan, "Introduction," 18.

> more than usually coherent, harmonious, and singularly free from the element of personal ambition which so often mars a dramatic enterprise as a whole. . . . That this atmosphere was given by the Theosophical ideal of brotherhood and unity cannot be doubted.[79]

Therefore, the kind of drama represented by *The Fantasy* is supposed to foster Theosophical knowledge within the theatre group and a sense of community founded on the "ineffable" spirituality of the performance, but it is also deeply rooted in the establishment of a temporary fellowship as described by Fischer-Lichte. Theatre practice thus becomes a practice of spiritual self-development that goes beyond artistic performance per se and concentrates on the development of the actor as a human being. Actually, one could argue that the spiritual goal of having actors affiliated to the Theosophical Society work together was the most important goal for *The Fantasy*, regardless of the status of the author. As Pagan's sister, Mrs. Frank Baily, who played Solvejg, put it in a private letter, the performance "was partly amateur, and naturally felt below accepted standards. But it was a worth-while experiment. . . . The profound *ideas* mattered more than the scenery."[80] These "profound ideas" were both emic, aimed at the theatre group, but also etic, aimed at the audience.

It should not be forgotten that as a typical performance of the occult revival, *The Fantasy* also had an instrumental function in promulgating Theosophical thought. If this aspect is very prominent in the book version of the play, which is enhanced with Pagan's introduction and the large number of notes and added stage directions explaining her interpretation of the play, it is less clear if and how these aspects would have been evident for the spectators of the Edinburgh premiere. There is no clear indication of how Pagan communicated on stage that scenes from the hall of the Old Man of Dovre take place on the astral plane, and that the "dead" Peer left on stage was understood as a sign of Peer's journey to reincarnation. The only etic review of the Edinburgh performance, published in the newspaper *The Scotsman*, does not mention any Theosophical concept whatsoever, and even *The Theosophist*,

79. J.H.E., "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh," 667.

80. Quoted in Farmer, *Bernard Shaw's Sister and Her Friends*, 178. Italics in the original.

apart from mentioning "the atmosphere" that the audience felt, does not report much on whether the performance had succeeded in spreading a Theosophical message.[81] We know from the same source that Pagan wrote a pamphlet, on which her introduction to the book is based, and that it was given to actors, as well as musicians playing Edvard Grieg's music for the play, thus at least spreading the word in the Edinburgh artistic community, but it is unknown whether it also was distributed to the spectators.[82] A later note by Pagan on subsequent performances of Ibsen plays under the auspices of the Orpheus Lodge seems, however, to leave no doubt about the nature of the enterprise:

> The subjects chosen by the Lodges were rarely of the ordinary propaganda type. Ibsen plays were selected fifteen times, some of the *Peer Gynt* music being provided by local talent in at least four places—usually in centres where Theosophy was already strong. The Society has still to realise that it is where centres are weak, or propaganda just beginning, that these more ambitious efforts, along art lines that introduce Theosophical subjects, are most required. People will go to hear *Peer Gynt* who won't stir a foot to hear a lecture upon reincarnation: and having gone to *Peer Gynt*, and heard about reincarnation in dramatic dialogue of such power that they are unlikely to forget it, they generally want to hear more.[83]

Therefore, the instrumental nature of *The Fantasy* seems to be evident, in addition to its nature as theatre ritual and moment of spiritual development. It remains to be seen, however, if and how Pagan's interpretation makes sense as an "impertinent" reading of Ibsen' original play, *Peer Gynt*.

From *Peer Gynt* to *The Fantasy* and Back Again

I intend here to look at *The Fantasy* as an example of adaptation, and, starting from its Theosophical setting, see whether this can shed light on its source. The reason for such an operation is as simple as it is a slippery one in literary

81. Anonymous, "Amateur Performance of *Peer Gynt*," 8; J.H.E., "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh," 667.
82. According to the review in *The Theosophist*, a number of amateur actors and the orchestra were unconnected to the Lodge (J.H.E., "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh," 668).
83. Pagan, "A Lecture Tour," 151.

studies, and especially in those that deal with esoteric interpretations of literary, dramatic or artistic works. Pagan poses the question succinctly in the opening of her pamphlet, as noted above:

> How far is it legitimate to insist on the mystic interpretation of a work of art for which the author has emphatically disclaimed any hidden or esoteric meaning whatever? The question is most fitly answered by another: How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?[84]

This raises the question of which insights esoteric readings can offer into works of art that are not concerned with esoteric doctrines. As Pagan puts it very clearly in her pamphlet (and as Ibsen biographers seem to confirm), Ibsen had no interest in esotericism whatsoever, although his wife, especially after his death, developed an interest in Spiritualism.[85] Pagan suggests that *Peer Gynt*, independently of the beliefs of its author, disseminates a form of knowledge that the Theosophical Society happened to share.

A famous, fierce critic of esoteric interpretations of works of art has been the semiotician Umberto Eco, who uses the term "hermetic semiosis" to describe a mode of interpretation that originated among the Gnostics in the first centuries CE, was revived by Renaissance esotericism, and is still widely used in esoteric interpretations of works of art. Hermetic semiosis is based on "principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the world is linked to every other element (or to many) of this sublunar world and to every element (or to many) of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances."[86] Hermetic semiosis, Eco continues, "assumes that everything can recall everything else—provided we can isolate the right rhetorical connection."[87] Central to hermetic semiosis is an idea of analogy

84. Pagan, "Has *Peer Gynt* a Key?" 3.
85. Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, 423, 433–34.
86. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 24.
87. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 27.

between element A and element B, which causes the informed reader to make a connection between them. The main feature of Hermetic drift, concludes Eco, seems to be the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from one connection to another. In other words, any element can be a sign pointing at something else, if one has the eyes to see.[88] The relevant question for us is whether this mode of interpretation is at the basis of Pagan's "impertinent" reading and of *The Fantasy* as an adaptation of *Peer Gynt*.

One could start by stating the obvious, namely that, from a literal point of view, Pagan's interpretation is "wrong;" there is no reason to believe that Ibsen wanted to convey Theosophical knowledge, for the Theosophical Society was founded eight years after he wrote the play and there is no later evidence that he had read Theosophical literature. The interpretation of the trolls as astral figures is therefore totally to be ascribed to Pagan, as is the idea that Peer dies after the onion scene. From a dramaturgical point of view, there is nothing, not even an element of analogy (in Eco's terms), that would suggest such a connection and interpretation. If her reading of *Peer Gynt* is thus literally "wrong," we could ask next if this reading is equally "wrong" on an allegorical level.

First, one could stress that Pagan was presenting a *Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, and not *Peer Gynt* itself. In an explicit way, hers is more an adaptation of that play than a simple staging of it. Second, she does not appropriate *Peer Gynt* and try to stick Theosophy into it, which is quite a common trait in esoteric readings of the kind mentioned by Eco. On the contrary, Pagan puts it openly in her pamphlet: "How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?"[89] And precisely this last question is worth considering.

We can of course choose to consider Pagan's interpretation irrelevant because it is esoteric, but this solution strikes me as too simplistic. Her Theosophical

88. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 26–27.
89. Pagan, "Has *Peer Gynt* a Key?" 3.

parlance resembles that of early psychology and of its entanglement with esoteric discourse.[90] To put it another way: when Pagan speaks of Ibsen's "subliminal self" that finds expression in *Peer Gynt*, or of Solvejg as an allegory of Peer's "higher self," her argument is not necessarily weaker than that of the psychoanalytical readings that have made their way in Ibsen studies in the last decades.[91] And if it is true that Ibsen could not have had a knowledge of Theosophy at that point, is this not also true for most of the theories (for instance, psychoanalysis) that are often used to understand his work? Also, if it makes sense to read *Peer Gynt* through Hegel and Kierkegaard—two central philosophers with strong ties to Christian thought that we do not definitively know Ibsen read—this does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to read Ibsen with Theosophy, just because this system of thought has been marginal and arguably not a part of a shared cultural knowledge in Scandinavia and in the West at large. Ultimately, I have the impression that hermetic semiosis is not the right key to understand *The Fantasy*. Its nature as a fluid adaptation text needs other interpretive categories.

In the anthology *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*, Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen give an interesting perspective on the vast field of research into adaptation studies. Placing adaptation in the broader context of intermedial studies, their intention is to "readress the question of authority and originality,"[92] thus decentring adaptation's dependency on its source. One of their central questions is the following: "Should we not admit that the adaptive process is dialectical, and that the source text is changed in the process of adaptation as well?"[93] Echoing a central point of George Steiner's hermeneutics, the authors open up for a view of adaptation that overcomes the traditional

90. Hanegraaff, "Magic V," 738–44.

91. See for example Aarseth, *Dyret i mennesket*, 116–18; Rekdal, *Fribetens dilemma*; Kittang, "Ibsen, Heroism and the Uncanny"; Pollan, Peer Gynt *og Carl Gustav Jung*; Aalen and Zachrisson, "*Peer Gynt* and Freud's the Uncanny."

92. Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen, *Adaptation Studies*, 3.

93. Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen, *Adaptation Studies*, 9.

reception impasse that many esoteric readings of literature suffer from.[94] In other words, adaptations such as *The Fantasy* and their hermeneutic foundations are often looked upon as strange examples of reception, which can be studied historically in themselves, but have little to say about the original work. In contrast to this approach, John Bryant, one of the contributors to the anthology, argues that

> we need a broader conception of geneticism in which the notion of work embraces all versions of a text, including sources and adaptations, and the creative process is extended to include all forms of revision, both authorial and cultural. . . . In the fluid-text approach I propose here, a work is the sum of its versions; creativity extends beyond the solitary writer, and writing is a cultural event transcending media.[95]

This perspective opens up for an idea of a "total work" in which adaptations and their sources stand in a non-hierarchical relationship to each other and in which their authors contribute to making meaning, regardless of geographical, temporal, cultural and/or ideological distances between these versions. While such an approach breaks with any idea of stable meaning within the text—an assumption that reception studies abandoned decades ago, but that stands fast among more conservative literary critics—it also opens up for the possibility of a cross-pollination between source and adaptation in the process of making meaning, a process in which it is not only the former that informs the latter, but also the other way around. Bruhn argues that

> adaptation . . . ought to be regarded as a two-way process instead of a form of one-way transport. . . . We should study both the source and result of the adaptation as two texts, infinitely changing positions, taking turns being sources for each other in the ongoing work of the reception in the adaptational process.[96]

Bruhn's perspective is as simple as it is game-changing in its consequences; building upon the breakdown of temporal and hierarchical relationships between

94. Steiner, *The Hermeneutic Motion*, 196.
95. Bryant, "Textual Identity," 47–48.
96. Bruhn, "Dialogizing Adaptation Studies," 73.

the source and the adaptation proposed by Bryant, Bruhn suggest that an adaptation can help reading and making meaning of its source by opening up interpretations, showing unknown or underplayed aspects, and so on. In Bruhn's view of this dialogic relationship between source and adaptation, "the two texts enrich each other: the two versions point to interpretations of each other that would have been hard to reach with the knowledge of one and not the other."[97] It is in this vein that I will discuss how Pagan's "impertinent" thesis about Peer's death and reincarnation can in turn inform our reading of Ibsen's play.

One of the most important questions related to *Peer Gynt*, which continues to engage Ibsen scholars, is whether Peer's final encounter with Solvejg and his escape from the clutch of the Button Moulder represent a form of salvation, be it secular (Peer has finally "found himself" and can start a life as a "whole" subject) or religious (Peer has been absolved of his sins). The question about the ending mirrors another recurring issue related to the play, namely the search for an overall unity in the text, of narrative, thematic or aesthetic kind. Such searches for unity, Ellen Rees has pointed out, are linked to *Peer Gynt*'s status as a Norwegian "national epos," "the most canonical work by Norway's most indisputably canonical writer."[98] As *Peer Gynt* has become a play that "holds some key to understanding what it means to be Norwegian in a globalized world,"[99] it is natural that its interpretive history has been characterized by a unifying tendency; if *Peer Gynt* is a "national play," it needs to convey some sort of integral, if not edifying, meaning.

Such interpretive tradition has mainly been based on philosophical readings that, in slightly different ways, grant Peer as a subject the possibility of a development and, in the end, of reaching itself.[100] Solvejg's encounter is the

97. Bruhn, "Dialogizing Adaptation Studies," 81.

98. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 8.

99. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 9.

100. See for instance Aarseth, *Dyret i mennesket*; Shapiro, *Divine Madness and the Absurd Paradox*; Dvergsdal, "To Be Oneself"; Selnes, "Ibsens orientalisme."

ultimate reconciliation on the part of Peer with his own "being in the world." In recent years, such unifying readings of *Peer Gynt* have been criticized, most radically by Rees and Leonardo F. Lisi. Rees rejects them because, she claims, the play has a "profoundly parodic nature"[101] that resists a stable interpretation of its ending.[102] According to Rees, "*Peer Gynt* should be understood as expressing a fundamentally non-transcendent world-view."[103] Lisi, on his part, criticizes interpretations that "would place that text squarely in the tradition of idealist aesthetics"[104] and contends that "the ambiguous ending of Ibsen's dramatic poem arguably introduces a new structural principle of linear temporality that effectively rejects the primacy of aesthetic reconciliation."[105]

Key to all the traditional readings as well as their critiques, is the salvaging nature of the encounter with Solvejg, especially on a religious level. What strikes me about all these readings, is that they are built upon a Western, Christian worldview in which such salvation happens one single time and is valid from there to eternity—principally because in the Christian tradition, we have only one life, and can only be saved once. Such readings are at odds with the fact that, as Lisi points out, "it nevertheless remains unclear if Peer is ultimately saved from the Button-Moulder, who promises further encounters."[106] For Rees and Lisi, the conclusion cannot be anything other than a refusal of the definitive possibility of salvation, either in the name of a parodic nature or an aesthetics of dependency proper to a new narrative of modernity.

What strikes me about Pagan's reading, in contrast to the established scholarly reception, is that a Theosophical interpretation would disintegrate such oppositions and offer a way out of this impasse. Neither Lisi nor Rees

101. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 11.
102. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 17–18.
103. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 19.
104. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 87.
105. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 88.
106. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 95.

offer an alternative to the systems they deconstruct, other than advocating parody as a source of possible, diversified and ever-changing interpretations of the play or ascribing to *Peer Gynt* a sort of Marxist function as a mirror of existential fragmentation of the emergent capitalist system.[107] But if the Button Moulder is the agent of karma, his final warning, "at the cross-roads we meet again, and then we shall see. Now I say no more,"[108] loses its menace, the meeting with Solvejg its salvific power, and the ending loses its ambiguity and problematic interpretive nature. It becomes less important to understand whether the ending is conciliatory or represents Peer's salvation, as the only thing that has happened is that Peer has concluded one of his incarnations, possibly not one of his most spiritually successful ones, and will be given the possibility to do better in the next. In this way, *Peer Gynt* acquires more of a circular than a teleological structure, emphasizing the complexity of human experience, and offers an alternative solution to a scholarly quandary that seems to be stranded into either a saved/not saved dichotomy or a blunt statement about the fragmentation and aporias of modernity.

Conclusion

I am not writing this in order to conclude my article with the somewhat sensational claim that Ibsen wrote a drama on reincarnation, or that he must have known of it while writing *Peer Gynt*.[109] I am instead suggesting that Pagan's main interpretive point in *The Fantasy*, however heterodox, may function as an example of an adaptation that sheds light on its source and participates in the interpretation of *Peer Gynt* as a "total work." In so doing, I also intend to pinpoint and stress

107. Rees, *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt, 11; Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 94–112.

108. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 129.

109. In any case, this would not be totally impossible, as even in the Western world, the idea that souls reincarnate in different bodies before going on to a higher existence had long provided a recurrent alternative to the Christian belief in bodily resurrection and the afterlife. See Keller, "Reincarnation I"; Zander, "Reincarnation II."

the value of *The Fantasy* beyond its nature as an isolated episode in the British reception of Ibsen. *The Fantasy* is indeed a token of the Theosophical interest in the arts, which has been a recurring scholarly topic in the last few years—but it is also far more than that. Its nature as dramatic adaptation emphasizes the potential of the theatre of the Occult Revival as a practical means of spiritual development, and, more specifically, of the engagement of occult organizations such as the Orpheus Lodge in the staging of theatrical performances. Last but not least, as an interpretation of *Peer Gynt*, *The Fantasy* helps extrapolate such episodes of reception from their status as divergent, ancillary instances that have a historical value, but hardly participate in the critical tradition on a work of art. Cases like *The Fantasy* make a point for the validity of esoteric interpretations when they are conceived as hermeneutical possibilities rather than hidden truths. The latter is the case of hermetic semiosis or even of conspiratorial readings of works that aim to show us that "everything we know" about a specific work "is wrong."[110] Pagan's "impertinent" reading does not do so, but tries to show how Theosophy can illuminate art. As a system of belief, I see no *a priori* obstacle to using Theosophy in order to unpack the significance of *Peer Gynt,* and the advantages of Pagan's interpretation, given the critical impasse mentioned above, seem evident to me. If this still means reading *Peer Gynt* "wrongly," cases like *The Fantasy* seem to highlight Jacques Lacan's paradox while reading André Gide: "Nous avons mal lu . . . Mais c'est en lisant mal que nous avons bien lu pourtant."[111]

Bibliography

Alston, Adam. "'Burn the Witch': Decadence and the Occult in Contemporary Feminist Performance." *Theatre Research International* 46, no. 3 (2021): 285–302.

Anonymous. "Amateur Performance of *Peer Gynt*." *The Scotsman*, February 15, 1908.

Anonymous. "Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*." *The Evening Telegraph*, July 16, 1924.

110. See for example D'Amico, "Henrik Ibsen and Conspiracy Thinking."

111. Lacan, "Jeunesse de Gide," 14.

Anonymous. "Miss Isabelle Pagan." *The Glasgow Herald*, July 12, 1960.

Anonymous. *The Art-Movement of the Theosophical Society*. The Theosophical Society in England, London.

Baier, Karl. "Yoga." In *Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Preprint. Accessed August 15, 2022. https://contern.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/a-yoga-baier.pdf.

Baker, Mona. "Translation and Activism. Emerging Patterns of Narrative Community." In *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, edited by Maria Tymoczko, 23–41. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. *Collected Writings* Vol. 10. Accessed August 15, 2022. https://issuu.com/maxvietri/docs/collected-writings-volume-x–1888-1889-.

Bogdan, Henrik. "Esotericism Practiced: Ritual and Performance." In *Religion: Secret Religion*, edited by April D. DeConick, 249–62. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2016.

Bruhn, Jørgen. "Dialogizing Adaptation Studies: From One-Way Transport to a Dialogic Two-Way Process." In *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, 69–88. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Bruhn, Jørgen, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, eds. *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Bryant, John. "Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision: Editing Adaptation as a Fluid Text." In *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, 47–68. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Campbell, Bruce. *Ancient Wisdom Revived. A History of the Theosophical Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

Chajes, Julie. *Recycled Lives. A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Cuffe, Otway. "Ibsen's Works in the Light of Theosophy." *Lucifer* 13, no. 75–77 (November 15, 1893–January 15, 1894): 201–205, 295–302, 388–94.

D'Amico, Giuliano. "Henrietta Frances Lord: Translating Ibsen for the Theosophical Movement." *Scandinavica* 56, no. 1 (2017): 96–122.

——. "Henrik Ibsen and Conspiracy Thinking. The Case of *Peer Gynt*." *Scandinavian Studies* 94, no. 3 (2022): 281–315.

Deveney, John Patrick. *Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society*. Fullerton: Theosophical History, 1997.

Dixon, Joy. *Divine Feminine. Theosophy and Feminism in England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

Dvergsdal, Alvhild. "To Be Oneself: Satan's Ruse. Critical Reflections on Self-Realisation in Henrik Ibsen: *Peer Gynt*." *Ibsen Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 32–53.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Eco, Umberto, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, edited by Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Faivre, Antoine. *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

Farmer, Henry George. *Bernard Shaw's Sister and Her Friends. A New Angle on G.B.S*. Leiden: Brill, 1959.

Ferguson, Robert. *Henrik Ibsen. A New Biography*. London: Richard Cohen Books, 1996.

Figueiredo, Ivo de. *Henrik Ibsen. The Man & The Mask*. Translated by Robert Ferguson. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2005.

——. *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

Gharavi, Lance, ed. *Religion, Theatre, and Performance. Acts of Faith*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Godwin, Joscelyn. *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Western Esoteric Traditions. A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hammer, Anita. *Between Play and Prayer: The Variety of Theatricals in Spiritual Performance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. "Magic V: 18th–20th Century." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach, 738–44. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

——. *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Ibsen, Henrik. *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt*. Translated by Isabelle M. Pagan. London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909.

——. *The Lady from the Sea*. Translated by Isabelle M. Pagan. Lord Chamberlain's Office, British Library, London: 14836.

Jauss, Hans Robert. "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding." In *Reception Study*, edited by James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, 7–28. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2001.

J.H.E. "*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh." *The Theosophist* (April 1908): 666–68.

Keller, Carl A. "Reincarnation I: Antiquity." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach, 980–84. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Kittang, Atle. "Ibsen, Heroism, and the Uncanny." *Modern Drama* 49, no. 3 (2006): 304–26.

Kluveld, Amanda. "Kingsford, Anna Bonus." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach, 663–65. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Lacan, Jacques. "Jeunesse de Gide ou la lettre et le désir. Sur un livre de Jean Delay et un autre de Jean Schlumberger." *Critique* 131 (1958), 291–315. Accessed August 15, 2022. https://ecole-lacanienne.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/1958-04-00.pdf.

Lingan, Edmund B. *The Theatre of the Occult Revival. Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Lisi, Leonardo F. *Marginal Modernity. The Aesthetics of Dependency from Kierkegaard to Joyce*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Machor, James L., and Philip Goldstein, eds. *Reception Study*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Meyer, Michael. *Ibsen—A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1971.

McIntosh, Christopher. *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1972.

The Norwegian Ibsen Company. "*Peer Gynt*." Accessed August 16, 2022. https://www.norwegianibsencompany.com/peer-gynt/.

Orpheus Lodge, Records of Activities. The Theosophical Society in Scotland, Edinburgh.

Pagan, Isabelle M. "Has *Peer Gynt* A Key?" [Edinburgh, 1908]. Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo.

——. "Introduction." In Henrik Ibsen, *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, translated by Isabelle M. Pagan, 7–30. London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909.

——. "A Lecture Tour." *Theosophy in Scotland* 6, no. 10 (February 1916): 150–51.

——. "Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*." *The Theosophist* 42, no. 3 (December 1920): 233–50.

——. "Ibsen's Great Soul-Drama. *Emperor and Galilean*." *The Theosophist* 50, no. 1 (December 1929): 361–72.

Pollan, Brita. *Peer Gynt og Carl Gustav Jung. Med sjelen som følgesvenn*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998.

Postlewait, Thomas. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Rees, Ellen. *Ibsen's* Peer Gynt *and the Production of Meaning*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2014.

Rekdal, Anne Marie. *Frihetens dilemma. Ibsen lest med Lacan*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2000.

Rockbrand, Alison. "Boundaries of Healing. Insider Perspectives on Ritual and Transgression in Contemporary Esoteric Theatre." In *Spaces of Spirituality*, edited by Nadia Bartolini, Sara MacKian, and Steve Pile, 260–77. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Rudbøg, Tim and Erik Reenberg Sand, eds. *Imagining the East. The Early Theosophical Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Scheer, Christopher M., Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. *Enchanted Modernities. Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Lopen: Fulgur Press, 2019.

Selnes, Gisle. "Ibsens orientalisme: en hegeliansk historie." *Agora* 25, no. 4 (2007): 5–30.

Shapiro, Bruce. *Divine Madness and the Absurd Paradox: Ibsen's* Peer Gynt *and the Philosophy of Kierkegaard*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Shaw, Michael. "Theosophy in Scotland. Oriental Occultism and National Identity." In *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947*, edited by Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, 23–40. New York and London: Routledge, 2018.

Steiner, George. "The Hermeneutic Motion." In *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 193–98. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

Theosophical Society in England. Membership Records. The Theosophical Society in England, London.

Toury, Gideon. *Descriptive Translation Studies—and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012.

Vandervoort, Julie. *Tell the Driver. A Biography of Elinor F.E. Black, M.D.* Winnipeg: Manitoba University Press, 1992.

Willis, Ika. *Reception*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018. Kindle version.

Zander, Helmut. "Reincarnation II: Renaissance-Present." In *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach, 984–87. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Aalen, Marit and Anders Zachrisson. "*Peer Gynt* and Freud's the Uncanny." *Ibsen Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 169–93.

Aarseth, Asbjørn. *Dyret i mennesket: et bidrag til tolkning av Henrik Ibsens* Peer Gynt. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1975.

Aarseth, Asbjørn. "Oppførelse." Accessed 9 December 2022. https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRINNL_PG|intro_performance.xhtml.