

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 19 (1991)

Artikel: The Romantic Heritage : Ibsen and the Uses of Folklore
Autor: Sehmsdorf, Henning K.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858296>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

HENNING K. SEHMSDORF, SEATTLE

The Romantic Heritage: Ibsen and the Uses of Folklore

When romanticism belatedly took hold in Norway a generation after the country gained independence from Denmark in 1814, the intellectual elite became, not surprisingly, pre-occupied with the search for Norway's national identity. Scholars and writers were inspired by a pervasive enthusiasm for the past based on the romantic idea – first launched by Herder and the Grimms under the label *Volksgeist* – that the illiterate rural folk had preserved traditions and lifestyles from an older, original stage; and origins were equated with the «national» in a country's cultural heritage. Nor did the folk disappoint them. When Andreas Faye published *Norske Sagn* in 1833, readers found themselves «overwhelmed and astounded» by «the wealth in subject matter, the creative imagination and incredible symbolism» preserved in rural traditions in hidden mountain valleys and along fjords and seashores – quite untouched by four hundred years of Danish cultural domination.¹ Faye's example was followed by Asbjørnsen and Moe's editions of folktales and legends during the 1840–50's, Landstad's monumental collections of folk ballads in 1853, and Lindeman's collection of folk melodies in 1853–9. Contemporary writers, among them notably Welhaven, followed by Bjørnson and Ibsen, mined this treasure for motifs and ideas, narrative styles and linguistic idioms for use in their own poetry, fiction and drama. Ibsen made his first, albeit abortive, attempt to write a folklore play in 1851 when he borrowed an historical legend («Rypen i Justedalen») about the bubonic plague that devastated Norway during the fourteenth century, from Faye. In October of the same year Ibsen was sent by the newly founded Norwegian Theater in Bergen to study dramatic craft at Copenhagen and Dresden. Between 1825–35, Heiberg, the artistic director of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, had written the highly acclaimed play *Elverhøj*, which was based on a Danish folk ballad, and *Alverne*, a fairytale play. Both pieces exemplified the effective balance between everyday reality and the fantastic world of the imagination described by Hermann Hettner in his important work, *Das Moderne Drama*, which Ibsen first studied in Copenhagen. From Hettner, Ibsen also learned the importance of motivating character development psychologically, while Heiberg taught him the visual techniques of Romantic stage production: for example, the use of fantasy and historical setting and stage design, upstage blocking and tableaux effects, movement, gesture and visual symbolism, all of which Ibsen put to good use in his work as stage director in Bergen and in his own early plays in the romantic style.

The three folklore plays Ibsen wrote while in Bergen combine, in varying degrees, elements of folk life, custom and belief, legend, and ballad. The first of

¹ ALVER (1989: 13).

the plays, *Sancthansnatten* (1852), depicts the ancient midsummer night celebrations when people dance around great bonfires in intoxicated abandon, and spirits of nature (the so-called *usynlige*) mingle with their human neighbors. The theme of the play is thoroughly romantic, pitting passionate love against reason and social convention. Affected by tender feeling and the ecstatic mood of the night, Johannes breaks off his betrothal to a young middle class woman from town in order to marry Anne, a simple village girl and thus one of the «folk.»

In spite of its undeniable poetic charm, *Sancthansnatten* was not a success in production, unlike *Gildet paa Solhaug* (1856), a tediously complex tale of mistaken identities and misunderstandings in the manner of Scribe. The play is based on motifs found in Landstad's collection, but Ibsen's melodramatic treatment of the material contrasts sharply with the terse style and atmosphere of the folk ballad. However, audiences loved the intrigue of suspected treason, poisoning, murder, high passion and tragic abandonment.

From a folkloristic perspective, the most interesting of Ibsen's early plays is *Olav Liljekrans* (1857). Olav's by-name recalls the circles of flowers or fungi found in forest clearings which in popular belief were associated with the dancing of fairies or elves. The play relates the enchantment of Olav by elves on his wedding day. In order to save his family from financial disaster, Olaf has to marry the daughter of a rich neighbor rather than the poor girl he truly loves. Olaf seeks escape from his dilemma by imagining that a fairy lover (who has the same name as his sweetheart) is abducting him into her own world. In terms of accepted folk belief, this was a real possibility. Sudden mental changes (as when a person seemed «out of his mind» or «beside himself») were explained by saying that he had been «taken into the hills» (*bergtatt*). Especially at critical transitional moments in life, such as childbirth, puberty and marriage, an individual was considered vulnerable to forces of the natural world represented by the *usynlige*.

All of these motifs are fully represented in the folk ballads on which Ibsen based also this play, again drawing on Landstad. The controlling theme of the play accurately reflects the economic realities of an agriculturally based society. Until quite recently, in rural Scandinavia, the purpose of marriage was primarily to guarantee the continuity of family and land ownership.² Generally speaking, the notion of love as a motivating and validating factor in marriage is a fairly recent innovation in Western culture.³ In medieval texts, including the folk ballad of northern Europe, passionate love is commonly depicted as irreconcilable with marriage. Romantic poets saw erotic love as central in human experience, of course, but they tended to project passion into the realm of fantasy and imagination rather than reconcile it with social reality. On the other hand, in *Olaf Liljekrans* the conflict between the personal dream and social responsibility is resolved in favor of the latter; Olaf resigns himself to loveless marriage. In contrast to

² APO (1987: 31ff.).

³ See DE ROUGEMONT (1956).

Sancthansnatten, where the same theme is treated romantically, Ibsen here demonstrates a much surer grasp of the social exigencies of rural life in pre-industrial Norway. Nor does Ibsen in this play permit the *usynlige* to become visible on stage; as in folk belief, however, they are present in the characters' perceptions and motivate their actions psychologically.

One of the reasons Ibsen made use of folklore in his early authorship, was that he hoped to develop a repertoire and theater style that would express the unique quality of Norway's cultural life and traditions, free of Danish influence. But Ibsen was never a *kraftpatriot*, that is one who waves the flag in the belief that anything Norwegian is innately superior. Already in *Sancthansnatten* Ibsen ridiculed the exaggerated national-romantic fashion of admiring everything rustic simply because it was so. These views are echoed in *Peer Gynt* (1867), which is the last of Ibsen's early folklore plays. Here he distances himself from folk customs in speech, clothing and foodways, or rather, he satirizes the fashionable admiration for these customs among the urban middle-class. Folklorists today refer to the sentimental revival of folk traditions, often motivated by commercial interests and tourism, as «fakelore» rather than «folklore,» and Ibsen evidently knew the difference. Ibsen's troll figure, for example, has little to do with the cute and harmless imps depicted on countless illustrations ever since Theodor Kittelsen created the largely humorous image of the Norwegian troll in the 1880's. Ibsen's troll is a representation of frightening, negative moral and spiritual power. In the legends about the famous hunter and storyteller Peer Gynt recorded by Asbjørnsen and Moe, trolls personify a physical and mental threat in the shape of dangerous fog banks and wild animals, and demon lovers. In Ibsen's play, the troll figures are transformed into allegorical images. Peer's encounters with the *Bøhg*, the Dovre king, the green woman and the three mountain girls, show that he typically opts for escape from social responsibility and personal commitment into a world of fantasy and fairytale. As in folk belief, the «other world» is dangerous but alluring, especially in sexual terms, and Peer experiences the presence of the *usynlige* when his consciousness is altered by alcohol, fatigue or stress, for example, in the scene at the Dovre king's hall. As an old man, when Peer finally comes to terms with life-long illusion about himself, he receives help from a figure based on a traditional social type, namely the button moulder. Homeless artisans like the button moulder would commonly move from farm to farm to ply their craft.⁴ Ibsen enlarges this social type into an allegorical figure cognizant of God's intended purpose for human life: «To be yourself is to slay yourself,» he says to Peer. What is probably the loftiest pronouncement in all of his authorship, Ibsen's version of the biblical theme that «whosoever will save his life, must lose it» (Matthew 16.25), is thus placed in the mouth of someone who, socially speaking, represents the lowliest of the folk.

⁴ For a brief introduction to the ethnography of pre-industrial Scandinavia, see KVIDE-LAND/SEHMSDORF (1988:3-12).

In the middle phase of his authorship during the 1870's to the early 1880's, Ibsen left the poetic world of romantic drama behind and shifted his focus to interpersonal and social problems. Folklore motifs occur as metaphors of the irrational, but they are taken out of the context of traditional belief and no longer rooted in the ethnography of a largely rural society; nor are they always Norwegian in origin. In *Et Dukkehjem* (1879), for example, Ibsen uses the Italian tarantella-dance (which is a folkloric reflection of the body's reaction to the bite of the tarantula) as a metaphor for Nora's desperate struggle to save her marriage, her husband's social position, and finally her own life. Or, in *Gengangere* (1881), the image of the dead captain living on in his physically and morally diseased son, eloquently expresses naturalistic theories of heredity, but it is only remotely connected with folk belief in the «walking dead.» In *Vildanden* (1884) the connection to folk tradition is even more tenuous. The supposed hunting lore according to which an injured wild duck will dive to the bottom of a swamp to die there rather than be captured, is a motif which Ibsen apparently took from a poem by Welhaven.⁵ It seems to be a poetic invention; at any rate, it has no parallels in Norwegian folk tradition.

When during the neo-romantic revival beginning in the late 1880's, Scandinavian writers once more turned to their native folklore as a major source of symbolism, Ibsen was no exception. However, in this third phase of Ibsen's dramatic production, we see a different and expanded concept of oral tradition and its functions. Much later, beginning in the 1920's, cultural anthropologists gradually abandoned the romantic view of folklore as the surviving tradition of unlettered, rural populations in the past; modern scholars regard folklore as «the unrecorded traditions of a people» at any level of culture, revealing «the common life of the human mind apart from what is contained in the formal records of culture.»⁶ Remarkably, Ibsen's use of motifs from Norwegian legend and belief during the 1880-90's anticipates this broader concept of oral tradition. In his later plays, folk belief delineates the mental life of the characters but now they belong to every cultural class in Norwegian society. His settings are no longer mostly historical or rural, but include the offices and drawing rooms of ministers, physicians, writers, architects, landowners, and their families and lovers. In other words, not description of the rural folk, but the exploration of instincts and the unconscious of people at all cultural levels provide the focus of Ibsen's employment of folklore in his symbolic plays.

For instance, in the emotionally charged atmosphere of *Rosmersholm* (1886), the water sprite (traditionally represented as a white horse and identified both with the inspiring, alluring quality of moving water, and the threat of drowning), becomes the symbol for the suicidal compulsion drawing Beate and eventually Rebecca and Rosmer to their death in the millrace. Similarly, in *Fruen fra Havet* (1888), Ibsen employs traditional beliefs to reflect the general experience that

⁵ MEYER (1971: 539).

⁶ BRUNVAND (1986: 1).

significant human relationships and emotional dependence do not necessarily end when one of the partners dies. In Molde on the north-western coast of Norway two years before writing the play, Ibsen had heard a tale about a drowned sailor who returned to claim his wife when she married someone else. This is the situation of Ellida who, when she conceived a child, felt that it had been fathered by a dead sailor whom she had loved but abandoned when her family pressured her into marrying Dr. Wangel. Psychologically, she is still bonded to the dead man.

An important theme in Norwegian folk tradition is the conflict between the powers of nature and those of the sacred, a conflict represented, for example, in the legend (of which a version was published by Faye in 1844) about a troll who falls to his death from the top of a church spire when St. Olav calls out his name. In Ibsen's *Bygmester Solness* (1892) this image expresses the moral and spiritual struggle of the masterbuilder. But here the two warring powers have been internalized in the human self; the troll is lodged in the unconscious, and the man can rid himself of the demon only at the price of his own life.⁷ Another compelling and mysterious figure is the rat wife in *Lille Eyolf* (1894), who (like the button moulder in *Peer Gynt*) moves from place to place offering her magic skills to rid house and home of various pests. Traditionally, services like hers were important to the rural community, but her supernormal powers were also feared and because of that, she would typically appear as repulsive. Her role in the drama of Rita and Allmers personifies their ambivalent attitude toward their own child. Like the play about the masterbuilder, *Lille Eyolf* is concerned with the demonic power of human thought and desire. As in folk tradition where magic is depicted primarily as a function of mental influences,⁸ the playwright leaves little doubt that the rat wife could not exercise her power to lure the crippled child to his death in the water, if Rita did not wish that the boy were no longer there to interfere with her own and Allmer's life.

To summarize our brief discussion of Ibsen's use of folklore: By the time he wrote his symbolic plays, more than thirtyfive years had passed since Ibsen first experimented with employing folklore in his work. He had long since left behind the bourgeois fascination with the «folk» as quaintly picturesque, or the romantic notion that «unspoiled» rural traditions were the repository of the nation's true cultural identity. Looking behind the surface of folk tradition Ibsen deciphered the underlying psychological meanings and the social contexts from which they arose. What he discovered there became the foundation of imagery and symbolism in some of his most compelling plays, and thus fulfilled his ambition to create a thetic language and style that expressed the unique quality of Norwegian cultural life. From a folkloristic perspective, it is particularly interesting to see how Ibsen expanded the concept of tradition by assimilating certain aspects of an originally rural world view and psychology into the mental

⁷ SEHMSDORF (1967: 270-71).

⁸ SEHMSDORF (1988: 34-5).

life of other levels of society. Inadvertently, the playwright thereby helped preserve the viability of ancient folk traditions even after Norway's rural culture was replaced by industrialization and the development of an urban lifestyle. If readers and theater-goers today have access to the mental norms and social values encoded in Norway's folklore, it is in no small measure due to Henrik Ibsen who integrated these traditions into the world of his drama.

ALAN SWANSON, CAMBRIDGE/MASS.

Geijer's *På nyårsdagen*
The Text in the Music: The Music in the Text.
Toward a theory of text/music relationships

There have been many attempts, especially in our day, to offer a means of adequately describing text and music as entities which simultaneously inform one another. Much of that which has appeared, both theoretical and practical, has been of little use when it has not been completely meaningless. I need only point to any newspaper review of any song recital to be able to demonstrate that fact. My own experience has shown me the weaknesses in the technical terminology which even the most experienced critic has at his disposal. It is chiefly my own confrontation with the problem of putting words and music together which has sharpened my understanding of what a song is and heightened my awareness of what happens in such a context. I begin, therefore, with a practical need for a meaningful and useable critical vocabulary.

The problem, as I understand it, is that it is difficult to speak of the simultaneous action of words and music beyond the obvious. We can, for example, easily understand if the words and music go together, that is, if the musical and verbal accents and phrases fit one another. There is no point in attempting to sing Geijer's «*På nyårsdagen*» to the tune of «*Tonerna*.» If we are prepared to use a more emotional language, we can eventually touch upon the question of whether or not the text and the music suit one another, but that «suit» is problematic.

There are both historical and rhetorical questions involved in an attempt to understand what happens in a song. The historical questions are clear and, if not especially popular nowadays, nonetheless relevant to our purpose. (Lars Lönnroth's *Den dubbla scenen* [1978] is a good example of such an enquiry.) Less clear, on the other hand, are the rhetorical questions in such an analysis.