

**PRETENDERS TO THE THRONE
SOVEREIGNTY AND MODERN DRAMA**

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines an apparent political and aesthetic anomaly that has so far not received scholarly attention: the persistence of sovereigns on the modern stage. Despite the political trend away from monarchical rule, and despite modern theater's deliberate and celebrated replacement of noble characters by ordinary individuals, kings and queens continue to figure importantly in modern drama. Focusing on sovereign figures in works by influential modernist playwrights as various in their political and artistic commitments as Ibsen, Jarry, Maeterlinck, Yeats, Pirandello, Genet, Beckett and Ionesco, I trace what emerges as a set of concerns about the concept of sovereignty that is both political and aesthetic in nature.

First, I consider the shift from literal to metaphorical sovereignty. I examine how Ibsen borrows the vocabulary and concerns of the sovereigns at the center of such early plays as *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean* to establish the dramatic characters and situations of later plays such as *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Second, I explore Jarry's *Ubu roi* and Ionesco's *Macbett*, plays I categorize as Modern Macbeths. I argue that both plays offer strong critiques of popular sovereignty, expressing anxieties about "the crowd" and its threat to the individual. Third, in plays I classify as Modern Lears - Pirandello's *Henry IV*, Beckett's *Endgame*, and Ionesco's *Exit the King* - I explore the implications of the ambivalence toward abdication these plays

reveal. Throughout my analyses, I argue that modern drama's interests in sovereignty have to do with modern theater as such and its contentious status as a modern art.

This study intervenes in the fields of theater history, modernism, intellectual history, and the intersection of theater and political and aesthetic philosophy more generally in at least three important ways: it provides an alternative account to the standard historical narrative of a modernist theatrical agenda motivated by a renunciation of the past; it reconsiders the efforts of modern dramatists to negotiate the limits of tragedy; and it brings together for the first time analyses of a group of modern plays under the thematic rubric of sovereignty. As the first study linking sovereignty to the modern theater, it expands our scholarly understanding of the long history of the relations between sovereignty and drama dating back to antiquity, and reveals the role of theater in contending with and contributing to the changing definitions of the politico-theological concept of sovereignty.

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Sovereignty and Modern Drama	1
PART I MODERN MOVES	
I. Ibsen's Bourgeois Sovereigns	22
II. <i>The Pretenders</i>	54
III. <i>Emperor and Galilean</i>	79
IV. <i>The Master Builder</i>	93
V. Ibsen and Modern Tragedy	108
PART II MODERN MACBETHS	
I. Revolution in the Theater	114
II. Jarry's <i>Ubu roi</i>	117
III. Ionesco's <i>Macbett</i>	122
IV: Counter-Revolution in the Theater	159
PART III MODERN LEARS	
I. Avant-Garde Theater: Forward or Backward?	163
II. Pirandello's <i>Henry IV</i>	175
III. Ionesco's <i>Exit the King</i>	184
IV. Beckett's <i>Endgame</i>	190
Conclusion: The King - Figure of Modern Theater	197
Bibliography	202
Curriculum Vitae	210

GENERAL INTRODUCTION SOVEREIGNTY AND MODERN DRAMA

Despite the political trend away from monarchical rule, and despite modern theater's deliberate and celebrated replacement of noble characters by ordinary individuals, kings not only survive in modern drama, they conspicuously thrive. This is not to say they rule peacefully over flourishing kingdoms without interruption – for then there would be no drama. On the contrary, their territories are troubled and potentially barren (Beckett's *Endgame*), they are beset with threats both external and internal (Yeats' *On Baile Strand*, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*), they are presumed mad (Pirandello's *Henry IV*) and fools for love (Strindberg's *Erik XIV*, Brecht's *Edward II*), they are shown to be masked figures of fantasy (Yeats' *The Player Queen*, Jean Genet's *The Balcony*) and of horror (Jarry's *Ubu the King*, Sartre's *The Flies*), they are unsentimental and calculating (Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*), they are at the mercy of those with religious authority (Anouilh's *Becket*, Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*), and they must confront and ultimately choose death (Ionesco's *Exit the King*). Yet in all these ways, and more, they thrive on stage, they exist: The king is dead; long live the king!

As the above list indicates, while hardly uniform in tone or image, sovereignty has nevertheless been staged and thematized within the many avant-garde movements of modern drama, and by some of its most significant playwrights. Astonishingly, the apparent political and aesthetic anomaly of the persistence of sovereign figures on the modern stage has so far gone unremarked by scholars. "Pretenders to the Throne:

"Sovereignty and Modern Drama" seeks to investigate the means and motivations of the continued interest in royal figures in an effort to open a discussion on this overlooked dimension of modern theater. Directing attention to sovereign figures in works by influential playwrights as various in their political and artistic commitments as Ibsen, Jarry, Yeats, Pirandello, Genet, Beckett, and Ionesco, my work traces what emerges as a set of concerns about the politico-theological concept of sovereignty that has political and aesthetic implications.

"Sovereignty and Drama" is not a new pairing to theater studies. Indeed, there has been an implicit association of sovereigns with tragedy since Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he specifies that a fine tragedy is about "one belonging to the class of those who enjoy great renown and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and eminent men from such lineages."¹ Baroque drama - by which I mean drama from the early modern period of the late sixteenth century through the eighteenth century, and includes the work of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Calderón, Corneille, and Racine - adopted themes and structures that unquestionably strengthened the relationship between sovereignty and drama as a result. Going beyond simply using royals as principal characters, baroque drama routinely investigates aspects of sovereignty that could be categorized in the following way: the ambition for power – the struggles and strategies for obtaining the throne (as in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*); the acknowledgment of sovereign position – the rights, entailments, comportment, and responsibilities of kingly governance (as in the *Henriad*); and the failure to meet such criteria leading to deposition or the abdication of power –

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), XIII.9-11.

often meditating upon the politico-theological concerns attendant to sovereignty, such as the "Divine Right" of kings, and the notion of the king's "two bodies" (as in *King Lear* and *Richard II*). Unsurprisingly, a great deal of scholarship focuses on sovereignty and baroque drama, showing how it not only systematically establishes and undoes sovereignty on stage, but furthermore, finds tragic form precisely in this movement.²

"Sovereignty and Modern Drama," however, would appear to be a contradictory pairing. The standard account of modern drama emphasizes the revolutionary move away from royal characters as it overwhelmingly relates the stories of the common individual. While this shift in perspective parallels philosophical, theological, and political movements of late modernity, drama - more so than any other literary or artistic genre - seems to have decided that the stage direction "Exit the King" is optional. As evidenced by the royal figures who show up in plays by some of modern theater's most significant playwrights, modern drama does not limit its relationship with sovereignty to representations in the overtly political sphere, but also explores sovereignty as it is reflected in the arenas of psychology, love, ambition, and existential crisis, thereby confronting issues of popular and personal sovereignty as well. That kings are retained at all is both a political and aesthetic matter and highlights the theater as a site where the two spheres collide.

Sovereignty itself has a long lineage of literature surrounding it, notably within the contexts of political thought, theology, psychology, and philosophy. The work of major twentieth-century thinkers who have theorized sovereignty – such as Sigmund

² The affiliations between sovereignty and baroque drama have given rise to such a profusion of scholarship any list would surely prove inadequate, but notable scholars currently contributing to this field include Alban K. Forcione, Stephen Greenblatt, Anselm Haverkamp, Victoria Kahn, Philip Lorenz, Julia Reinhard Lupton, Bernadette Meyler, and Franco Moretti.

Freud, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Kantorowicz, Georges Bataille, Louis Marin, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida – has been highly influential and figures importantly in the sorts of questions I seek to explore. But rather than echoing the trends favored in current discussions of sovereignty, what is staged in modern theater expresses a departure. Perhaps this accounts for why these illustrious thinkers of sovereignty, each of whom considers drama, rarely, if ever, look to *modern* plays to work out their ideas, but rely instead on ancient and baroque drama for their examples.

While dispensing with kings obviously finds support in terms of the political mood, the modern theater comes up against an aesthetic problem. For despite the increasingly widespread use of the labels "tragedy" and "tragic," modernity's ability to produce tragedy as an aesthetic form has been called into question, and these arguments often take as their starting point the removal of sovereign figures as protagonists. As my analyses of plays will bear out, modern theater is both searching for tragic form as well as engaging with the crisis of humanism by continuing to use royally construed individuals on the stage. As an art traditionally characterized by living human beings performing on stage, theater has a unique - and ambivalent - stake in the question of humankind's status as foundation and guarantor of knowledge, thought, and ethics. I do not argue for or against modern tragedy, nor do I seek to designate various plays as meeting or failing to meet tragic criteria. Instead, I understand the recourse to sovereign figures as a particularly useful lens through which to see how playwrights attempted to work through this inherited problem.

My claim in "Pretenders to the Throne: Sovereignty and Modern Drama" is that a certain strain of modern drama can be understood to have constructed its stage on the open ground provided by the two independently contested ideas of modern tragedy and modern sovereignty. To put it another way, the plays that form the basis of my study of sovereignty and modern drama are negotiating new boundaries and definitions of these concepts.

First, in "Modern Moves," I consider the shift from literal to metaphorical sovereignty. Taking Ibsen as a case study, I explore how even the so-called "father of modern drama," whose pioneering social realism led the way in giving ordinary individuals a legitimate place on the stage in serious drama, makes a return to sovereign figures. One can observe the modern revolution on stage in microcosm within the trajectory of Ibsen's work – the common individuals of his last twelve prose plays upstaging the royal characters who populate the dramas of the first half of his career. That it turns out that these subsequent, "ordinary" characters share many of the same concerns as their sovereign predecessors, blatantly appropriating the language and imagery of sovereignty, is where I focus my attention. Why does Ibsen return to themes and situations that evoke work he presumably had outgrown and given up? Does this mark a nostalgic regression on his part, a royalist conservatism? What is at stake in shifting from literal to metaphorical sovereignty? Charting the course of Ibsen's negotiations between sovereignty and drama ventures into the embattled - and overlapping - terrains of the politico-theological aspect of sovereignty and the aesthetic category of tragedy. I examine the way Ibsen borrows the vocabulary and worries of the kings and emperors who were at the center of early but pivotal plays such as *The*

Pretenders and *Emperor and Galilean* to establish the dramatic characters and situations of later plays such as *Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, suggesting links between the common person and the royal in terms of self-understanding and human subjectivity, links that Ibsen - and the other modern playwrights featured within this study - are reluctant to renounce.

Second, in plays I categorize as "Modern Macbeths," such as Jarry's *Ubu roi* (1895) and Ionesco's *Macbett* (1972), both farces, choices of genre reveal the theater's divergence not only from Shakespeare's tragic form, but also from political theory. Although modernity has moved from sovereign rulers to sovereign states, and, importantly, to sovereign selves, the topic of sovereignty has been discussed in modern (and contemporary) political discourse almost exclusively in terms of power, mastery, force and deciding the exception, as the writings of Schmitt, Bataille, Derrida, and Agamben – to name just a few major theorists – bear out. Modern drama's farcical interpretation of sovereign will and might reveals theater's ability to register as well as reject the discourse on sovereignty, especially in terms of the acquisition of power. More importantly, *Ubu roi* and *Macbett* reveal another departure: both follow the trajectory of revolution and usurpation outlined in the Renaissance drama, and although each play similarly presents a single king replacing another, both Ubu and Macbett epitomize characteristics of the crowd, fundamentally changing Shakespeare's story of revolution to a modern story of *the* revolution: the shift from absolute sovereignty to popular sovereignty. I claim that the two plays at the center of this study both offer strong critiques of popular sovereignty, expressing anxieties about "the crowd" and its threat to the individual.

Third, in plays I classify as "Modern Lears" - Pirandello's *Henry IV*, Beckett's *Endgame*, and Ionesco's *Exit the King* - I explore the implications of the ambivalence toward abdication these plays reveal, and suggest a further connection with modern theater itself. Although each of the sovereigns in this group of plays struggles and argues with those around him, the antagonism is ultimately internal and existential. Facing the loss of their respective kingdoms, Henry, Hamm, and Béranger negotiate the fine line between deposition and abdication. Above all, they echo King Lear's plaintive question, "Who is it who can tell me who I am?" In this way, these plays pursue questions surrounding the legitimacy of the sovereign and its dependence on theatricality. Proceeding from the imprisoned nature of the sovereigns in this group of plays, I also investigate sovereignty's links to madness, dreams, and self-narration. Sovereign concerns of creation and destruction, life and death, pardon and revenge come into play, and I argue that these plays point to a paradox of sovereignty: the desire to be sovereign contains within it the desire to relinquish that role. Furthermore, Pirandello, Beckett, and Ionesco irrefutably stand at the forefront of avant-garde theater, and yet the "avant-garde" is called into question in these highly meta-theatrical plays by staging an aesthetics of retreat rather than one of advance. The theatrical past finds expression in the sovereign figures at the center of these plays, recalling the long history of relations between sovereignty and drama. The retreat to previous aesthetic forms, however, does not necessarily reflect a defeat or surrender, but a strategic vision of modernist theater that is concerned with an acknowledgment, incorporation, and transformation of its aesthetic past as opposed to a wholesale rejection.

Each of the above chapters seeks to blend two reading strategies: a close literary and dramatic examination of specific plays and their aesthetic aims, and an intellectual history of texts, movements, figures, and debates that bear on the central aesthetic, political, and philosophical concerns at stake in the persistence of sovereign figures on the modern stage. Throughout my analyses, I argue that drama does not really reflect contemporary attitudes toward sovereignty, but that its interests in sovereignty have to do with modern theater as such and its contentious status as a modern art. I explore how and why drama, more than any other literary or artistic genre, has continued to rely on royal figures when the political, philosophical, and aesthetic concerns of late modernity are increasingly democratic, leading me to pay particular attention to the development and limits of the notion of personal sovereignty. By concomitantly pursuing its own aesthetic of tragedy and employing sovereign figures and themes, I claim that twentieth-century theater makes a significant contribution to the intellectual histories of these two separately contested ideas of modern tragedy and modern sovereignty, confronting issues not only of political sovereignty but public and individual sovereignty as well.

"Pretenders to the Throne: Sovereignty and Modern Drama" intervenes in the fields of theater and dramatic literary history, modernism, intellectual history, and the intersection of literature and political, aesthetic, and moral philosophy more generally, in at least three important ways: it provides an alternative account to the standard historical narrative of a modernist theatrical agenda motivated by a renunciation of past aesthetics; it reconsiders the efforts of modern dramatists to negotiate the limits of tragedy; and it brings together for the first time analyses of a group of modern plays under the thematic rubric of sovereignty. As the first study linking sovereignty to modern drama, my aim is

to open the conversation and begin to expand our scholarly understanding of the long history of the relationship between sovereignty and drama dating back to antiquity, revealing, along the way, the role of theater in contending with and contributing to the changing definitions and associations of the politico-theological concept of sovereignty.

STAGE CLEARING: SOVEREIGNTY AND FIN-DE-SIÈCLE THEATER

Alexis de Tocqueville, in "Some Observations on the Theater of Democratic Peoples" (1840), remarks that "when a revolution that has changed the social and political state of an aristocratic people begins to affect literature, it generally manifests itself first in drama and remains conspicuous there long afterward."³ Oddly enough, as my dissertation means to bear out, the social and political revolution that did away with sovereigns, maintained them on the stage. Did the revolution fail? Or did theater fail to live up to Tocqueville's lofty expectations that it would lead the charge?

The chapters to follow will concentrate on key plays in which royal figures - literal and metaphorical - emerge on the modern stage, contributing to larger discussions about sovereignty and about theater, and about the relations between the two. Within this introduction, I would like to focus on how sovereignty was inflected into theatrical discourse at the tail end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the impassioned and highly influential writings of Émile Zola, advocating for Naturalism in literature and in the theater, demonstrate why it is so staggering that sovereign figures should dare show up on modern stages; on the other, the theories of Belgian Symbolist Maurice

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, "Some Observations on the Theater of Democratic Peoples," in *Democracy in America* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 563.

Maeterlinck (on whose work I will dwell at greater length) establish a more nuanced space within modern drama for sovereigns.

No one could have wanted the revolution to make itself felt in literature and on stage as Tocqueville anticipated more so than Zola. In *Naturalism in the Theatre* (1881), the previous form of theater, namely tragedy, is directly equated with a sovereign who must be deposed. "To understand the need for a revolution in the theatre," he writes, "we must establish clearly where we stand today. During our entire classical period *tragedy ruled as an absolute monarch*. It was rigid and intolerant, never granting its subjects a touch of freedom, bending the greatest minds to its inexorable laws."⁴ In the name of aesthetic freedom, Zola sought to stir up unrest and describes a seemingly implacable enemy: "never has the word insurrection seemed more apt, for romantic drama bodily seized the monarch tragedy and, out of hatred for its impotence, sought to destroy every memory of its reign. Tragedy did not react; it sat still on its throne, guarding its cold majesty, persisting with its speeches and descriptions."⁵

The tyranny of tragedy for Zola is on account of its perception of the human being as a metaphysical being rather than someone made of flesh and blood. "The future is with naturalism," he declares. "The formula will be found; it will be proved that there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history."⁶ The realist and naturalist plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, to name two of the most significant dramatists of the period, upheld his prediction.

⁴ Émile Zola, "Naturalism in the Theatre" in *The Theory of the Modern Stage: An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*, ed. Eric Bentley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 352; emphasis mine.

⁵ Ibid., 353.

⁶ Ibid., 365.

But these playwrights, among many others, also confounded Zola's conviction that a theatrical revolution - insisting on common, physical human beings in a tangible world, rather than conjuring a metaphysical, kingly man whose drama took place in the soul - would be final. Evidently, there were tensions with the concept of sovereignty as it pertains to theater that Zola had papered over, or had simply not considered.

The realist and naturalist theater of the late 1870s and 80s, as well as the melodramas and "well-made plays" that otherwise dominated the nineteenth-century stage, did the pioneering work of focusing on common individuals rather than royal or aristocratic characters. It is in this way that the choices made by Jarry, Ibsen, and other important playwrights in the 1890s (to say nothing of beyond) to *return* to sovereign figures represent a puzzling but intriguing feature of aesthetic thought of that time, and one that is particular to the theater (one does not, for example, find a similar rehabilitation of protagonists taken from the nobility in the novel, nor sovereign subjects in painting). The three most prominent playwrights working in the 1890s - Ibsen, Strindberg, and Maeterlinck - exemplify this curious trend in their own distinct ways, as characters marked either overtly or subtly by sovereignty emerge in their dramas at the end of the century despite associations that would seem to indicate the contrary in terms of their artistic commitments - to Realism in the case of Ibsen, Naturalism in the case of Strindberg, and the static theater of daily life in the case of Maeterlinck. For all three, their output during this time is informed - to various degrees - by Symbolist aesthetics. It is precisely during the 1890s that theorists and practitioners grappled with whether and how a Symbolist *theater* might exist. It will turn out that the interests and concerns of

Symbolist art, and especially the question of a Symbolist theater, play a leading role in the renewed interest in portraying sovereigns on the stage. Maeterlinck, considered the playwright responsible for realizing a Symbolist theater, was a central voice in the articulation and working out of its theory. I will be pursuing some of the other elements that characterize Symbolist theater in the discussion to follow, but it will suffice for now to highlight one feature of his aesthetic thought that initially appears to foreclose the use of royal figures in his plays.

Maeterlinck's well-known essay "The Tragical in Everyday Life," is noteworthy for pointedly declaring tragedy not only available to everyday life, but asserting furthermore that daily life is precisely where, according to him, the tragic is "much more real, much more profound."⁷ Published in 1896 (the same year as *Ubu roi*) as a part of his collection *The Treasure of the Humble*, one might expect - on the basis of these titles, at any rate - that Maeterlinck is intent to counter the traditional association of tragedy with the ruling class, and instead to mark it out for ordinary individuals. But, unlike Zola's, Maeterlinck's emphasis on the quotidian and lowly is not a class-based criticism of previous drama, nor is it a recommendation of realist or naturalistic efforts to pay attention to mundane details. Instead, for Maeterlinck the ordinary has to do with what is common to all, the state of being, and the silent mystery of the meaning of existence.

As his essay makes clear, what Maeterlinck objects to in the tragedies of the past is their insistence on action, adventure, violence, and calamity. He compares tragic authors to "those mediocre painters who waste their time painting historical scenes" and instead advocates a "static" theater that gives vision and voice to moments of repose,

⁷ Maurice Maeterlinck, "Le tragique quotidien," *Le trésor des humbles* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1911), 161, translation mine.

contemplation, still, and quiet.⁸ This grievance, as well as the proposed alternative, will receive further attention shortly; what is important to note here is that the static theater Maeterlinck proposes is clearly an anti-Aristotelian theater, but only on the level of action and plot, not in terms of who might make an appropriate protagonist.

In other words, Maeterlinck takes no issue with kings as dramatic characters; he has no aesthetic need to depose the nobility in order to advance the common person. On the contrary, in an implicit logic that, I am arguing, permeates and drives the persistence of royal figures in the modern theater despite (and within) the widespread shift of attention to the ordinary person, the majesty of the latter depends on the majesty of the former. So, far from posing an irony or contradiction between his aesthetic promotion of the quotidian, on the one hand, and his ongoing use of sovereigns, on the other, Maeterlinck's plays corroborate the tacit universality of the tragic, with casts consisting alternately either of common people, like the family members in *L'Intruse* (1890) and *Intérieur* (1894), or of named and titled royal characters in works such as *La Princesse Maleine* (1889) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892).

While this brief sketch provides a sense of the openness of theater during the 1890s to royal figures on the stage, it only partly answers the questions surrounding how sovereignty figures into a discussion of Symbolist aesthetics, and theater more generally. The ideals Maeterlinck advocated for the Symbolist theater provide important clues. Maeterlinck's assessment of the theater, along with the alignment he makes between what he disparages on stage to history painting - "But like those mediocre painters who waste their time in painting historical scenes, our tragic authors devote their works to the violence of their stories" - echoes Denis Diderot's criticism of dramatic aesthetics a

⁸ Ibid., 165-6.

century earlier. Diderot disdained tortuous *coups de théâtre* favored by playwrights, and instead endorsed hushed and restrained *tableaux* as a pictorial source and aim of drama.⁹ The parallel with Diderot helps to show how Maeterlinck's static theater falls squarely within the absorptive tradition that Michael Fried identifies as crucially operative in French pictorial arts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Fried demonstrates throughout his critical and art historical work, absorption, as an aesthetic value, is engaged in a continual and productive dialectic with its antipode, theatricality.¹⁰ Indeed, as Martin Puchner stresses in *Stage Fright*, as far as modern drama is concerned, a gesture or mood of antitheatricity often provides the impetus for new forms of theater, despite a potential irony.¹¹

As I see it, this dialectic between absorptive antitheatricity, on the one hand, and theatricality, on the other, not only takes part in shaping fin-de-siècle dramatic aesthetics, but also bears upon the figure of sovereignty as it once again becomes a viable, indeed a key image within the repertoire of the theater. As already noted, modern drama does not limit its relationship with sovereignty to representations of power and force nor even to the political sphere. My contention is that the seeking out of sovereignty on the stage reflects a modern struggle that is uniquely addressed within the domain of drama, by virtue of both the theatricality of sovereignty (that is, the theatrical construction intrinsic to sovereignty), as well as the link that sovereignty has maintained with tragedy as a genre. Furthermore, many of the oppositional tensions that motivate the dialectic

⁹ See Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres esthétiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1966), especially *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* and *Discours de la poésie dramatique*.

¹⁰ See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹¹ See Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

between antitheatricality and theatricality - such as nature versus artifice, original versus imitation, genuine versus fake, true versus counterfeit, and face versus mask - similarly plague the sovereign figure.

An explicit uneasiness with theater and performance is an absolute hallmark of Symbolist thought. Theater, for reasons I will be exploring, threatened to defile the written word, which was considered sacrosanct. The tension, then, of paradoxically seeking out a Symbolist theater while simultaneously maintaining a distance from what were considered the impurities of performance, generates, among other features of the movement, a fascination with the aesthetics of puppetry. In simplistic terms, the principles that characterized the linguistic and visual code of Symbolist poetry and painting, and above all its private mode of engagement with a reader or beholder - principles such as suggesting rather than explaining, cultivating mystery rather than clarification, creating art manifestly geared toward a meditative experience for the initiated rather than action-filled entertainment for the masses - seemed on the face of it anathema to theater and its presumed interests in plot, character, and a live, publicly gathered, clapping audience. Beyond even the drawback of such an audience, however, *a live person* acting on stage posed a particular problem for the values adopted by Symbolist aesthetics.

From Plato's fear of the theater's power to please with an imitation, to perennial suspicions surrounding an actor's ability to convincingly change roles, and disdain for actors catering to the audience, antitheatricality has been motivated by a variety of

prejudices.¹² But it is in what I will call an *antihumanist* aesthetic vein that the Symbolist theater turned to puppetry to bridge the impasse between its desire to stage a drama and the inherent neediness and unreliability of a human actor. I am importing the concepts of humanism and antihumanism here as a way to illuminate not only the particular forms of theatricality and antitheatricality at work on the Symbolist stage, but more importantly, the forms of sovereignty that are in play within that overarching dialectic. While there are multiple "humanisms" that can be traced - including Christian, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and social humanisms - for my purposes right now, I will be relying on a broadly defined humanism that is concerned with asserting and defining sovereign subjecthood. I suggest understanding Symbolist antitheatricality as antihumanist, precisely because the principal goal is to impose limits upon the acting human subject. The attempt to restrain the human actor results from the admission, and fear, of the power he holds by virtue of his human subjectivity. The irony, of course, is that this is ostensibly done for the benefit of a human audience.

Maeterlinck could not be more explicit - and he is emblematic of other Symbolist theorists such as Téodor de Wyzewa and Stéphane Mallarmé - when he writes, "[The] performance of any masterpiece by means of *accidental* and *human* elements is an antinomy. Every masterpiece is a symbol, and the symbol can never endure the active presence of the human being."¹³

Privileging 'le Verbe' (the Word) above all else, and especially above 'la Scène' (the Stage), it turns out that for Symbolist aesthetics, staging a drama is on the order of

¹² See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

¹³ Maurice Maeterlinck, *Introduction à une psychologie des songes, 1886 -1896* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1985), 86, translation mine; emphasis in original.

committing a crime of lèse majesté. One solution posited by a variety of thinkers, including Maeterlinck and Mallarmé, was to do away with the physical theater altogether, promoting instead an inner stage that could be accessed by reading in private. Still, despite the obstacles, Symbolists were in search of a theater that would accommodate their aesthetic priorities. Maeterlinck tentatively proposes the elimination of “the living being from the stage,” noting with the following series of questions how precarious such a maneuver would be: "Will the human being be replaced by a shadow? a reflection? a projection of symbolic forms, or a being who would appear to live without being alive? I do not know; but the absence of man seems essential to me."¹⁴

Maeterlinck's desire to banish human beings from the Symbolist stage gave way to two dramaturgical strategies. He relied alternately on marionettes, favored for their ability to replace human beings altogether, and on highly stylized productions with traditional human actors, whose presence was mediated by a gauze veil, thereby visibly distancing the actors from the audience. As he works through the appeal of doing without human actors or at least minimizing their presence, Maeterlinck provides clues for his antihumanist position. In describing the advantages of marionettes, he writes, "we would then have onstage beings without a destiny, whose identity would no longer erase that of the hero."¹⁵ In this way, human actors pose a threat to the *dramatis personae* they seek to embody, not simply because they are capable of failing in their task to accurately represent a character by under- or overacting, but precisely because as living human beings, they have personal destinies and identities that cannot be ignored. Unlike puppets,

¹⁴ As quoted in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 145. For an excellent account of this aspect (and others) of Maeterlinck's aesthetics, see especially Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ As quoted in *Symbolist Art Theories*, 146

whose "gestures and words reverberate nowhere and reveal nothing of eternity," human beings, even when pretending to be someone else, create a crisis of acknowledgement.¹⁶ In other words, it is not physical presence and materiality that is so distracting, but the metaphysical fate that an individual presence registers. An audience, confronted with a living human being, cannot avoid the claim being made upon its attention, a claim of human mystery. Through no fault of either the actor's skill nor the audience's ability to suspend disbelief, the destiny of the actor - what Walter Benjamin will refer to as the "aura" of the living actor in the theater[□] - competes with the character he plays, forcing an effacement of the figure created by the poet.¹⁷

The perceived danger of the human actor - erasure of the hero - is a case in point of the privileging of word over stage. What is more, Maeterlinck resorts to explicit terms of sovereignty to characterize what ensues between actor and hero, and when he does so, the crime of *lèse majesté* I suggested earlier comes fully into focus: "Something of Hamlet died for us the day we saw him die on stage. *The specter of an actor has dethroned him, and we cannot rid our imagination of the usurper.* Open the doors, open the book, the former prince will come back no more."¹⁸ The "something of Hamlet" that dies, is the poetic idea of Hamlet that lives in the imagination, the idea that only Shakespeare's poetry can generate. The problem is not one of confusion on the part of the audience, but of outright substitution. Instead of the poetic character taking over the actor's identity, the presence of the human actor eclipses that of the hero. This creates an issue, for the Symbolist goal is to evoke or suggest, not provide a concrete example, and

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, eds. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Maeterlinck, *Introduction à une psychologie des songes*, 83-4; translation and emphasis mine.

certainly not to provide a distraction to the imagination. There is no possibility, as far as Maeterlinck is concerned, of peaceful co-existence between human actor and hero; either one or the other will dominate and take possession of the throne, and in a traditionally staged theater performance, the human actor will unseat the poetic idea. Far from being a benign substitution, Maeterlinck's terms are clear: the human actor usurps the throne of a legitimate royal, the poetic character. Usurpers can be overthrown, however, and as we have seen, the Symbolist theater, in turning to puppetry, seeks to depose the living human actor, exiling him from the space of the stage.

In so far as the Symbolist deposition of the living human being from the theater is also in the service of making manifest the "tragic in everyday life," a certain irony can be noted. The metaphysical underpinnings of Maeterlinck's understanding of the human actor reveal a paradox in what I have been calling his antihumanism, for it is, after all, a deeply humanistic conviction to find in every human being "the mysterious chant of the infinite, the menacing silence of souls or gods, the eternity that rumbles on the horizon, the destiny or fatality we perceive inwardly without being able to say by what signs we recognize it" - which is the argument he uses to show what is common to ordinary life as well as to tragic heroes on the order of King Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet.¹⁹ The fallibility of man is not the source of concern, so much as the reverence and dread inspired by man as a being marked by a metaphysical fate. In this way, the tension at work in Symbolist theatrical aesthetics is at odds with itself, not only on the level of antitheatrical theater, but also of antihumanist humanism.

The plays under consideration in this project - from Ibsen's *Master Builder* to Jarry's *Ubu roi* to Pirandello's *Henry IV* to Beckett's *Endgame* to Ionesco's *Macbett* - take

¹⁹ Maeterlinck, "Le tragique quotidien," 162, translation mine.

these strained relations in new directions, setting up the question of sovereignty in terms that will underwrite certain existentialist tensions of the modernist avant-garde theater.

One last thought before turning to the plays. In his book, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*, Jean Starobinski traces the artistic attention to figures of the circus during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Clowns and acrobats, as Starobinski elegantly outlines, serve as more than pictorial content, but rather as self-portraits of the artists negotiating their place in the modern world. Jarry is named in this context for his explicit self-identification with Ubu. But if Ubu is a clown, he is also a king, and he is one of many kings in modern drama. If the clown is the figure of modern painting, I am suggesting the king as a figure of the modern theater linked to, or sharing in, the various oppositions that worry the theater: nature versus artifice; original versus imitation; genuine versus fake; true versus counterfeit; face versus mask.

²⁰ Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Genève: Albert Skira, 1970), translation mine.

PART I

MODERN MOVES

IBSEN'S BOURGEOIS SOVEREIGNS

I. IBSEN'S BOURGEOIS SOVEREIGNS: AN INTRODUCTION

Oddly enough, Ibsen looms large in the story of sovereignty and modern drama, and his significance in this regard contains a fascinating and unexpected paradox: Ibsen is admired for successfully evacuating the modern theater of kings, but in a move that has gone largely unrecognized, he also found a means to retain them. To be sure, sovereigns are not generally what come to mind when one thinks of Ibsen. The so-called “father of modern drama” secured his title precisely by drafting plays featuring bourgeois characters. His pioneering social realism ensured a legitimate place on the stage in serious drama for ordinary individuals. Yet alongside this adjustment in focus, Ibsen did not lose sight of the value of sovereign figures in drama.

In the wake of the French Revolution, the shift from absolute sovereignty to popular sovereignty had profound consequences in theatrical aesthetics, where sovereign figures have played a crucial role since antiquity. One can observe the modern revolution on stage in microcosm within the trajectory of Ibsen’s work – the common individuals of his last twelve prose plays upstaging the royal characters who populate the dramas of the first half of his career. It turns out, though, that not only are these subsequent, “ordinary” characters preoccupied with many of the same concerns as their sovereign predecessors, two dramas blatantly appropriate the language and imagery of

sovereignty. Exactly what this means will be the ultimate focus of my inquiry in this chapter. The revolution, I am arguing, contains a counter-revolutionary tension.

Why does Ibsen return to themes and situations that recall work he presumably had outgrown and given up? Why, having championed the bourgeois individual, does he have Solness building castles for a kingdom, and Borkman strategizing for an empire? Why does he make verbal and figurative connections to sovereignty? Does this mark a nostalgic regression on his part, a royalist conservatism? What is at stake in his shift from literal to metaphorical sovereignty? Charting the course of Ibsen's negotiations between sovereignty and drama, this chapter ventures into the embattled - and overlapping - terrains of the politico-theological aspect of sovereignty and the aesthetic category of tragedy. Examining how Ibsen borrows the vocabulary and concerns of the kings and emperors who were at the center of pivotal early plays such as *The Pretenders* (1863) and *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) in order to establish the dramatic characters and situations of later plays such as *The Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), reveals Ibsen's insights into the crucial links between the common person and the royal in terms of self-understanding and human subjectivity -- links he is reluctant to renounce.

Moreover, this recalibration of the relations between sovereignty and drama is not restricted to Ibsen's oeuvre. As the present study will seek to demonstrate, the counter-revolutionary tension persists on the twentieth-century stage, disclosing another feature of what Ibsen "fathered." Modern drama does not limit its relationship with sovereignty to representations in the political sphere, but also explores sovereignty as it is manifested in the arenas of psychology, love, ambition, and existential crisis. That kings and queens

are retained at all, I am suggesting, is both a political and aesthetic matter, and highlights the theater as a site where the two spheres collide. Because Ibsen marks the chronological beginning of my study and introduces many of the themes and problems to be taken up by the other dramatists I feature, I will be laying the groundwork in this chapter for the philosophical underpinnings guiding my inquiry. My contention is that the mythical, historical, fictional and metaphorical rulers who show up on the modern stage are interesting precisely because they provide a means to understand other moods and concerns of modern drama. Characters who lack the official royal nomination but strive after it (often in a non-political mode), seeking a personal sovereignty, discover - in modern ways - the terms, rights, joys, and dangers of sovereignty. Perhaps, above all, its dangers. For to be a royal figure in a drama has traditionally been the first step toward being a tragic one.

MODERN RETREAT OR ADVANCE? COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST

In the Norwegian edition of Ibsen's collected works, the playwright requests that the plays be read in the order in which they were written, testifying to his sense that understanding any given work within his oeuvre must take into consideration what came before.²¹ On Ibsen's terms, choosing to examine *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, two of the four plays that make up the distinctive "epilogue" in a career spanning fully half a century, creates an obligation to the entirety of his work. My analyses are indeed motivated by a conviction that sequence bears on their meaning, and as my aim is to trace his engagement with sovereignty, *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and*

²¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen*, 8 vols., ed. and trans. by James Walter McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1960-77), 8: 359; hereafter citations will be listed as *The Oxford Ibsen*, with volume and page number.

Galilean provide a highly suitable (dual) starting point. Each of these two plays from the end of the first half of Ibsen's writing career carry markers of Ibsen's initial struggles both to establish himself in the nineteenth-century theater world and to find the artistic voice and vision that will change the course of that world.

Though different in scope - *The Pretenders* is the culmination of Ibsen's nationalistic efforts, whereas *Emperor and Galilean* carries the denomination of "world-historical drama" - these works display Ibsen's most unambiguous and comprehensive engagement with the concept of sovereignty. Furthermore, both signal crucial turning points. Never again will he return to history accounts of previous centuries for source material, but instead will train his eye on contemporary life for the next quarter century. The standard interpretation of this moment in the arc of Ibsen's career sees in it his irreparable break with traditional Romanticism and his trailblazing turn toward the modern: he dispenses not only with historical source material, but, more importantly, with the - until then - customary use of royal and aristocratic figures as protagonists in serious drama in favor of the common individual. Astonishingly, though, if overlooked, Ibsen's literally sovereign characters in this pair of early plays lay the foundations for metaphorically sovereign characters in a pair of late plays, *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. What is it about sovereignty that it persists as a theme? What is the force of using such a metaphor? Just what is being carried over? Ibsen's return to the language and landscape of sovereignty signals his navigation into the new, still undefined territory of modern tragedy and his endeavor to discover its shape, size, and boundaries. Such, at any rate, will be my argument.

The vast critical literature on Ibsen focuses almost exclusively on the twelve prose plays of the second half of his career, from *Pillars of Society* through *When We Dead Awaken*. The occasional nods to the first half of Ibsen's career more often than not go to *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, both written between *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean*. The celebrated prose cycle of groundbreaking plays, however, had crucial predecessors in *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean*, if only because these were Ibsen's earliest attempts at prose. And while it is becoming increasingly rare for critics to engage with the two "sovereignty" plays that stand at the midpoint of his output, this has produced a crippling blind spot with regard to understanding Ibsen's far-reaching artistic project, for it overlooks a certain dimension of his bequest to modern drama.²² This blind spot is a result, at least in part, of the narrow interpretation of Ibsen's social realism as his political activism - an interpretation Ibsen himself repeatedly rejected.

Beyond the prose idiom, another aesthetic feature of the contemporary plays provides a key to understanding why Ibsen encouraged knowledge of the early plays for a better grasp of the late plays. Critics have long noted the structural pattern Ibsen perfected in these plays in which the crisis takes the form of a confrontation with and a reenactment of an event or action from the past.²³ As in the two late "sovereignty" plays: Hilde knocking on Solness's door after ten years to claim her kingdom, and Borkman returning with Ella to the overlook where he once again describes to her his future empire. The basic format of a confrontation with the past does not, however, have

²² The most notable recent exception is Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Moi devotes a central chapter to *Emperor and Galilean*; even so, she does not engage with the themes of sovereignty as such.

²³ See, for example, the discussion of critical approaches focusing on Ibsen's dramatic strategy of reenactment of the past in Oliver Gerland, "Enactment in Ibsen" in *Critical Essays on Henrik Ibsen*, ed. Charles R. Lyons (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), 226-38.

a single possible approach or outcome. As one critic has put it, “The past may erupt unexpectedly into the present after a long absence and redirect the course of a life...Alternatively, attention to it may overtake a life.”²⁴

In finding modern dramatic - and potentially tragic - form in an encounter with the past, Ibsen’s work is in keeping with philosopher Stanley Cavell’s description of modernism itself. “The essential fact of...the modern,” he writes, “lies in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic.”²⁵ Inflecting his account - parenthetically, but keenly - with a nod to state sovereignty, Cavell further explains the beginning of the modern as a “moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted; the time in which music and painting and poetry (like nations) have to define themselves against their pasts; the beginning of the moment in which each of the arts becomes its own subject, as if its immediate artistic task is to establish its own existence.”²⁶ I will set aside, for now, the intriguing affiliation between sovereignty and theater defining itself as an art (although this is among the larger concerns of my study). The point I wish to emphasize here is that if within modernism the project of the arts is to define themselves *against* rather than *by* their pasts, the result will entail one or another mode of confrontation. But as in Ibsen's dramas this need not mean absolute opposition to the past such that the project is "overtaken" by this stance, but rather, could mean facing what has come before with greater openness and curiosity such that conversation develops and "redirects" the project.

²⁴ Theoharis Constantine Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 74-75.

²⁵ Stanley Cavell, “Foreword,” *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxxiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

Toril Moi has turned to these passages of Cavell's to present *Emperor and Galilean* as marking the moment in Ibsen's work when he challenges his previous commitment to Idealism and Romantic tragedy. And yet a further parallel to the situation of running up against a problematic past emerges in the larger trajectory of Ibsen's writing. I am suggesting that the thematic concerns centered around sovereignty and so evident in *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean* can be understood as a decisive element of Ibsen's previous work that haunts his future playwrighting, most prominently in *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Put plainly, the "sovereignty" plays of his early career are not only history plays in so far as they recount the rise and fall of bygone rulers, but represent an "artistic past" that Ibsen confronts as a playwright, just as the protagonists of his contemporary plays must grapple with their personal histories.

I want to be precise about the kind of confrontation with the past that manifestly interests Ibsen both in the dramatic narratives of his plays and, more importantly, in his own artistic undertaking. Ibsen is rightly esteemed for his breakthroughs in drama, and although a popular version of the modernist theatrical agenda focuses on newness above all else, innovation need not be at the expense of a wholesale renunciation of the past. Thomas Postlewait, in a recent discussion of the beginnings of modern drama, chastens theater historians for being overly eager to accept and promote the narrative of modernism as a story of revolt and controversy. The enthusiasm for recording scandal and rebellion betrays, ironically, complacent assumptions that fail to register the complex and sometimes subtler ways in which the theatrical avant-garde blazed its path. According to Postlewait, "We are not much interested in the various accommodations that modern artists made to the heritage. We tend to ignore the ways

the traditions were modified yet continued. Our focus on innovation and confrontation usually rules out a history of continuity."²⁷ Similarly, in an essay arguing for the consideration of modernist theater against the backdrop of the *longue durée* of modern theater, Stefan Hulfeld has commented on the problematic tendency of historians to "demonstrate their affinity with the way theatre professionals view themselves...their historical narratives turn upon the dynamic element of change, whereas continuity and stability are described pejoratively or else suppressed."²⁸

I take the failure to adequately acknowledge the attempts modern theater made to negotiate a continuity with sovereignty to be one of the losses incurred by a preferred narrative of rogue artists abandoning all things traditional. Unfortunately, such an account is not only blinkered in terms of the history of modern drama, but misses an important sense in which the integration of the past is precisely the mark of its modernity. Cavell identifies, in general terms that are consistent with the work of Ibsen and the other playwrights featured in this study, a modernist project for which "the repudiation of the past has a transformed significance, as though containing the consciousness that history will not go away, except through our perfect acknowledgment of it (in particular, our acknowledgment that it is not past)."²⁹ In the story of sovereignty and modern drama I am relating, if there is not outright rejection and overthrow of the old forms, the question becomes, what remains? What about sovereignty must be acknowledged and transformed by modern drama? What of sovereignty persists?

²⁷ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 279.

²⁸ Stefan Hulfeld, "Modernist Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, eds. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.

²⁹ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxxiii.

PERSISTENCE

I will be turning to the plays themselves in the following sections to discuss the facets and principles of sovereignty that persist, but a further fine-tuning of my project is in order. As noted, I find it necessary to situate my survey of Ibsen's work in terms of a confrontation with the past that is resolved in acknowledgment and incorporation rather than categorical rejection. I am taking pains to present this as a modernist effort especially because Ibsen, and the characters he chooses to spotlight, are sometimes held accountable by critics for failing to renounce a past more thoroughly.

My inquiry bears a significant resemblance to what Arno Mayer has dubbed the 'persistence of the old regime' (in his book by that title), not only in so far as it heeds the resilience of sovereign figures in an increasingly democratic aesthetic form - kings cunningly finding ways to remain on the bourgeois stage - but also as it discerns a bourgeois "rage for co-optation and ennoblement" in the desire for sovereignty and its forms, as exemplified by Ibsen's master builder and entrepreneur each defining himself and his accomplishments with the language of kingdom and empire.³⁰ This double rapprochement, as described by Mayer, is not flattering to the bourgeoisie but betrays a self-abnegating impulse on the part of the new class. What Mayer considers the craven susceptibility of the bourgeois to seek to emulate the old elite, undermines more than their socio-economic potential; the loss extends to their potential *aesthetic* power. "Instead of encouraging modernist impulses," Mayer asserts, "the bourgeois allowed themselves to be ensnared in a cultural and educational system that bolstered and reproduced the *ancien régime*. In the process they sapped their own potential to inspire

³⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 13.

the conception of a new aesthetic and intellection.”³¹ On Mayer’s terms, the derogation of kings must be absolute, or the middle-class has failed in its revolution. Any capitulation to the values, appearance, or structure of former institutions cancels whatever promise is bound up with the idea of the bourgeois.

Franco Moretti, who explicitly places Ibsen within Mayer’s framework, reaches a similarly pessimistic conclusion. In his essay “The Grey Area: Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism,” Moretti astutely perceives that those in Ibsen’s bourgeois world represent “not a class in the middle, threatened from above and below, and innocent of the course of the world,” but rather, “this is the *ruling* class, and the world is what it is, because they have *made* it that way.”³² Trying to pinpoint just what the bourgeoisie wrought, Moretti further distinguishes between the “realistic bourgeois” with pedestrian concerns, inhabiting Ibsen’s early prose plays such as *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll House*, and the “creative destroyers” armed with “world-transforming metaphors,” peopling his final plays such as *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. For Moretti, the ‘persistence of the old regime’ - including the aesthetic curse - is played out to grave consequence in Ibsen’s plays, where the realistic bourgeois content with the status quo gives way to the likes of Solness and Borkman who dream of domination. As he vividly expresses it, Ibsen’s characters are awash in grey - murky ethical and moral considerations, dulled, monotonous emotions, ashen personal relations. And although Moretti acknowledges that Ibsen is drawn to this grey area because “it reveals with absolute clarity the great *unresolved dissonance* of bourgeois life,” he nevertheless reaches a condemning conclusion, resolving, at any rate, his own verdict on the

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Franco Moretti, “The Grey Area: Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 61 (January - February 2010): 117, emphasis in original.

dissonance: “Recognizing the impotence of bourgeois realism in the face of capitalist megalomania: here lies Ibsen’s unforgettable political lesson.”³³

Both Mayer and Moretti judge bourgeois habits and proclivities under the socio-economic rubric of class and capitalism and find them wanting. Although undeniably relevant to crucial aspects of the plays, this method does not represent the sole, or even the best, approach to Ibsen’s contemporary dramas, even those that touch on a theme like sovereignty with all of the political baggage it carries. Moretti takes for granted that Ibsen, by putting bourgeois individuals on his stage, seeks to teach a “political lesson.” Much Ibsen criticism makes this assumption, despite the playwright’s own claim (in a speech to the Women’s Rights League, no less) that he “had been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people have generally been inclined to believe.”³⁴ This statement has been quoted often enough, only to be ignored in favor of a reverse emphasis, perhaps because the stakes of his distinction have not been adequately understood. But as Robert Brustein points out in his chapter on Ibsen in his classic *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama*, “We would do well to remember, should we ever be tempted to regard Ibsen as the champion of such things as women’s rights, divorce, euthanasia, or cures for syphilis, how sublimely indifferent he is to social amelioration or political reform.”³⁵ Brustein quotes a letter Ibsen wrote to his friend Georg Brandes: “Yes, to be sure, it is a benefit to possess the franchise, the right of self-taxation, etc.. But for whom is it a benefit? For the citizen, not for the individual.”³⁶

³³ Ibid., 125, emphasis in original; 131.

³⁴ Henrik Ibsen, *Speeches and New Letters*, trans. Arne Kildal (Boston: Richard G. Badger, The Gorham Press, 1910), 65.

³⁵ Robert Sanford Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 38.

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

The contrast Ibsen draws between *citizen* and *individual* goes some distance in showing that Ibsen's philosophical position is more existential than social: the problems of the bourgeois that interest him are not the problems of a member of a class or community but of an individual with the freedom to stand apart. The modern bourgeois individual has the potential, in other words, to achieve a *personal* sovereignty, to be a sovereign *self*, but freedom is a burden fraught with perils and pitfalls.

With *personal sovereignty* - understood as self-realization over and against societal categories - as the goal of the individual, the contours of my inquiry begin to come into focus. Rather than tracing the "persistence of the old regime," my examination of the stakes of Ibsen's project - and those of the other modern dramatists my study takes up - finds a closer description in what Robert Pippin refers to as the "persistence of subjectivity" (in his book by that title). Pippin identifies this persistence as a patently modern philosophical problem - an anxiety having to do with "being called on by a historical situation 'to be a subject,' lead a life, take up the reins, as it were, and that this is something at which, 'modernism' discovers, *we can fail* (oddly, especially when we try very hard to do it)." ³⁷ Discernible in the arts as well as in the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and others, this anxiety has its roots in the political and sociological transition experienced by the bourgeoisie.

The derisive sense of being "bourgeois" has come to indicate philistine cultural taste, unimaginative morality, and small-minded business practices. But denigration stretches even further back. Pippin notes, "the bourgeois is originally held in contempt because he cannot act as the nobleman paradigmatically acts - *independently*, in majestic

³⁷ Robert B. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21, emphasis in original.

indifference to what unworthy others think of what he does.”³⁸ This charge against the bourgeois is important to comprehend since it forms the basis of the problem of subjectivity, and also begins to reveal the connections to sovereignty. First, subjectivity is centered on action, prioritizing what someone does with full agency and responsibility. Second, it involves an attitude of unapologetic self-regard toward those actions. Third, the freedom of action and detachment from social judgment is inextricably linked to the question of sovereignty: Pippin’s characterization of the indifference as “majestic” notwithstanding, implied within the disparagement of the bourgeois is a precise acknowledgment that the nobility possessed the legitimate right to make use of force.

In its original, medieval sense, “bourgeois” was simply a legal term designating an inhabitant of the fortified area surrounding a princely household, known as the *bourg*. It was a “middle” class between the nobility and the peasants, but as political historian Paul Corcoran makes clear, among the most fascinating aspects of its feudal origins is that “discriminations between noble and bourgeois had nothing to do with property, wealth, or intellectual and cultural refinement. The nobleman was able, in the *ancien régime*, to be military, to serve the king, as a privilege. The bourgeois did not have the privilege of carrying arms.”³⁹ These two original marks of the “bourgeois” - proximity to the sovereign or lord, and the lack of right to bear arms - fall away as the bourgeois develops into the dominant class. Pippin relegates this historical background to a footnote, focusing his discussion on philosophical developments contemporary to Ibsen in the mid-nineteenth century and later, but on my reading of the modernist situation

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Paul E. Corcoran, “The Bourgeois and Other Villains,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1977): 479.

there are vestigial traces of precisely these two signature - I am tempted to say ontological - features of the bourgeois, adding a further dimension to the tensions Pippin describes. Simply put, I shall suggest that what characterizes the bourgeois in Ibsen's plays is at once a nearness to sovereignty - personal sovereignty is within reach - and an impotence to secure and protect it.

The elusive nature of personal sovereignty may produce anxiety, but by no means would Ibsen value a personal sovereignty easily obtained once and for all. In a letter to Georg Brandes dated 17 February 1871 - just before Ibsen renewed his work on *Emperor and Galilean* - Ibsen reflects at length about his understanding of "liberty." "I never permit myself to make liberty synonymous with political liberty," he clarifies to his friend. "What you call liberty, I call liberties, and what I call the fight for liberty is nothing more than the unceasing, living absorption of the idea of liberty." To my mind, one could substitute the term "sovereignty" for "liberty" in these lines and arrive at the sense I am giving to personal sovereignty in contradistinction to political sovereignty. The swap of terms does no injury to Ibsen's insistence on an individual, relentless search for liberty, for he incisively describes the ongoing quest for autonomy that I am referring to as personal sovereignty: "He who possesses liberty other than as something striven for, possesses it dead and soulless; for the concept of liberty is characterized by the fact that it constantly develops as it is being acquired, and if therefore during the fight a man stops and says 'Now I have it,' he simply shows by this that he has lost it."⁴⁰

PERMANENCE?

⁴⁰ *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 108.

Before leaving the matter of sovereignty's persistence and turning to Ibsen's plays, a further abiding dimension of sovereignty and its relation to theater is worth considering. In specifying individual, personal sovereignty rather than social-class issues as the primary sphere of interest for the modern plays under consideration, I do not mean to elide the momentous shifts in the political domain. After all, the displacement of absolute, monarchical sovereignty by popular sovereignty is precisely the political change that allowed the bourgeoisie to become the dominant class. In his careful consideration of the aftermath of the French Revolution, political philosopher Claude Lefort notes yet another kind of persistence -- or better, yet another way to understand the persistence of sovereignty in modern democratic society: "the permanence of the theologico-political" (in his essay by that title). Indeed, though he poses it as a question (and considers it a mark of the tragic condition of modern democracy), the "permanence" of the theologico-political suggests in even more vigorous terms a characteristic of sovereignty that is not just obdurate in its persistence, but probably ineradicable. Even so, the "theologico-political" (or "politico-theological"), which refers to the interdependence of theology and politics in establishing authority, is an elusive quality, and is perhaps best understood - its religious inflection notwithstanding - as an aesthetic quality.

Lefort is able to discern the persistence of the theologico-political by juxtaposing the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and Jules Michelet, two major French historians of the Revolution. Without disparaging Tocqueville's analyses, Lefort recognizes that he "tends to reduce the history of the ancien régime to the breakup of aristocratic society to such an

extent that the new society appears to be no more than the final product of that process."⁴¹ What escapes Tocqueville in this reduction is "the figure of power," that is, the figuration of sovereignty, its symbolic register and form of representation. Lefort points out that Michelet, by contrast, "having judged inevitable and visible to all 'the defeat of the nobility and the clergy'" reaches a profound conclusion about this socio-political upheaval: " 'The only obscure question was that of royalty. This is not, as it has so often been said, a question of pure form, but a fundamental question, a question more intimate and more perennial than any other question in France, a question not only of politics, but of love and of religion. No other people so loved their kings.' "⁴²

Lefort's contrast draws out a similar parallel to the divergence I have been outlining between standard assumptions about and approaches to the modern theatrical revolution and the one I am taking: just as Tocqueville's account of the revolution is recognizably accurate in so far as aristocratic society inarguably gave way to democratic society, theater historians are not wrong to see the emergence and revolutionary rise of the common individual on the modern stage. However, at the most basic level, the claim I am putting forward in "Pretenders to the Throne: Sovereignty and Modern Drama" is that there is more to the story. Sovereign figures were not simply rendered obsolete and discarded as, for example, gas and then electric lighting led to the abandonment of candles for the indoor lighting of theaters. In other words, sovereign figures were not merely serving a technical, convenient function in dramatic aesthetics. Political *power* may have changed hands, but Michelet's account helps to locate the "obscure,"

⁴¹ Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions In a Post-Secular World*, eds. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 175.

⁴² Ibid., 175.

“fundamental,” “intimate,” and “perennial” issue of *royalty* that remained for the new society to confront -- as it also remained, I am arguing, for the new aesthetics to confront, and especially theatrical aesthetics. To borrow Michelet’s splendid formulation: no other art form so loved its kings.

But what is royalty, and how is it connected to sovereignty such that it can be detached from sovereign power? What does theater have to do with it? Michelet's point regarding royalty is subtle, but it speaks to the investment the French had in their sovereign, not simply as a political ruler (whose leadership was being superseded matter-of-factly enough), but as a majestic figure whose sovereignty was both modeled on and supported by Christian theology. As Lefort interprets Michelet, "men regard royalty as a condensation of immortal life, and that life takes the form of a living man: the king."⁴³ The “question of royalty,” then, was a question of what to do with the regard and esteem hitherto elicited by and directed toward the king, a figure understood to occupy an invaluable intermediate place between God and man. As Lefort puts it, what Michelet wants to fathom is "the mystery of the monarchical incarnation,"⁴⁴ thereby placing Michelet, *avant la lettre*, in the tradition of scholarship that has come to be most readily identified with Ernst Kantorowicz. Kantorowicz’s indispensable study of medieval political theology, *The King's Two Bodies*, details the juridical efforts to reconcile - with recourse to the christological divine incarnation - the representational problem posed by the king’s duality: his mystical body (the body politic which is inviolable) and his natural body (which is susceptible to the usual physical vulnerabilities).⁴⁵ Proceeding

⁴³ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁵ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957; 1997).

from this distinction, Lefort notes Michelet's remarkable insight that it is the *natural body* of the king that "exercises the charm that delights the people," and furthermore, "because royalty is embodied in a man, the royal phantasmagoria is revived when the man is turned into a spectacle."⁴⁶

At least two points need to be underscored. First, the physical body of the king registers royalty not only because it is understood to be combined with the mystical body, but also because - and not despite the fact that - it is replete with all that is quintessentially human: mortality, fallibility, desires, and needs. Second, the corporeality of the king produces the effect of royalty as an aesthetic effect, "the charm that delights," when it is present as "a spectacle." Within the context of the Revolution, this becomes particularly problematic, and all the more so for being unanticipated. Lefort explains Michelet's aggrieved tone regarding the detention of Louis XVI:

It was believed, he suggests, that the deposition of the individual would have the effect of desanctifying him. On the contrary: "The most serious and the cruelest blow that could have been struck against the Revolution was the ineptitude of those who constantly kept Louis XVI before the eyes of the population, and who allowed him to relate to the population both as a man and as a prisoner." Why? *Because the more he was revealed in his human singularity, and the more visible the living individual became, the more he remained a king...All the signs that designate him to be a man restore his kingship.*⁴⁷

Paradoxically, what the king has in common with ordinary persons - his physical humanity and human familial relations - contributes to securing his royalty. Yet Lefort is careful to point out that the public's unforeseen response to the debased king is not

⁴⁶ Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" 177; 179.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 179; emphasis mine.

merely a sympathetic reaction to human suffering and affection for the king, but reveals "the attraction of the unique object of every gaze."⁴⁸ These descriptions help not only to identify the politico-theological persistence of sovereignty, which Lefort ultimately designates "the royalty of spirit" and associates with a variety of humanism, but also to apprehend the mutual entwinement of sovereignty and theater.⁴⁹ The king need not have the standard regalia marking him as king, he need only be set up and spotlighted, so to speak, before "every gaze." If royalty is dependent on the corporeality and physical presence of the king, on the king's visibility such that he draws all eyes to his "human singularity," then that visibility that manages to "restore his kingship" requires a stage.

SOVEREIGNTY AND THEATER

This link between sovereignty and theater has been long acknowledged, perhaps nowhere so nakedly as in the second edition of the *Basilikon Doron*, where King James I of England informs his son: "A King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold."⁵⁰ In other words, a king is an actor, one who plays a role; the king is watched, observed by an audience of subjects who will judge and acknowledge his performance. Even more shrewdly, in the first edition of the treatise, this line reads the same but for one word: "A King is as one set on a skaffold." Stage and scaffold are both terms of theater; scaffold contains the additional implications of being a structure comprising scaffolding, temporarily erected to facilitate the maintenance and repair of a building, as well as being a site of deposition and execution.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 179; emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁰ *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. J.P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49.

In this way, the role of sovereign is both a performative and a precarious one; the staging and scaffolding of sovereignty an ongoing project of attending to an edifice. This lines up with Lefort's reading of Michelet, where theater plays a critical part in both supporting and dismantling the sovereign. The inherent theatricality of sovereignty, then, provides a foundational, intuitive reason for the persistence of sovereign figures on the modern stage.

A further reason for that persistence, related to the connection between sovereignty and theater but more specific to modernity, might well be to test the strength of that connection, and in particular to test the power invested in the theater for making a "living individual" a king. If Louis XVI "restored his kingship" precisely by appearing on the scaffold as a common man, it is by the same logic that the common individuals who populate the stages of modern theater might hope to be understood as sovereign figures. By virtue of appearing before an audience on stage, a "living individual" has his or her "human singularity" acknowledged. I am using Lefort's terms in order to draw attention to how this acknowledgment of a unique person manages to act as a coronation, even during a scene of deposition. As I have been stressing, the sovereignty at stake is not necessarily political; rather, the theater - its Greek root designates it as the place of seeing - is the place where an individual is eligible to be recognized as royal whether wielding power or suffering the loss of it.

As might be expected, I am gesturing toward the conditions for tragedy here, a topic to which I will be returning at other moments throughout this dissertation. The plays under consideration participate in the test of theater's power to consecrate and crown a common individual, providing linguistic, visual, and ritual hints of sovereignty

that recall the long history of relations between sovereignty and theater. (I am also gesturing, in noting "acknowledgment" as a key moment of registering and granting royalty, toward what Stanley Cavell singles out as vitally important in our relations to others, which will likewise play a role in my analyses).⁵¹ Moreover, an inverse test could also be understood to be at work as well. If theater makes the sovereign visible; does the sovereign make theater visible? As theater joined the other arts in struggling to define itself in modernist terms - that is, as its own sovereign art - the reciprocal relationship with sovereignty comes to the fore. I am proposing that in attempting to isolate what makes theater *theater*, several significant modern dramatists were motivated to have recourse to themes and characterizations grounded in this alliance.

In tracing the persistence of post-revolutionary sovereignty as a theme in modern theater my interests coincide with approaches other scholars have undertaken, while also branching off in a distinctly different direction. Two studies in particular stand out in this regard. Eric Santner, in his book *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, creatively explores "the modern afterlives of the king's body, the ways in which something of the royal remain."⁵² Santner pursues the emphasis on the natural body as well - his guiding interest is "the flesh" - and while he also looks to texts of modernist literature and political thought, he frames his study in issues of biopolitics and psychoanalysis. According to Santner, "biopolitics assumes its particular urgency and expansiveness in modernity because what is at issue in it is not simply the biological

⁵¹ See especially two early essays, "Knowing and Acknowledging" and "The Avoidance of Love" in *Must We Mean What We Say*, but this theme runs throughout Cavell's work.

⁵² Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ix.

life or health of populations but the “sublime” life-substance of the People, who, at least in principle, become the bearers of sovereignty, assume the dignity of the prince.”⁵³

The transition to democratic popular sovereignty creates a further problem of visualization and representation, not least because mass assembly has come to have fascist associations. In his essay, "The Living Image of the People," Jason Frank surveys and theorizes the new difficulty faced by political aesthetics of envisioning and imaging popular sovereignty. Political theory, Frank explains, while interested in following out the theologico-political "predicament" (as designated by Leo Strauss), has largely ignored the "parallel problem of political iconography, liturgy, and form, considering such questions to be, in Richard Rorty's words, no longer 'salient' to the practical problems of our shared political life."⁵⁴ Despite the presumed rejection of aesthetic practices by democracy in an effort to mark its distance from the ancien régime, Frank follows the thread of an ongoing struggle to visually imagine and represent the People.

Focusing instead on the history of drama and theater, my own interests dovetail with the concerns specified by Santner and Frank. Theater overlaps with the vital sphere and issues of sovereignty on the level of content and aesthetics. To give examples that will surface in later chapters: most contemporary accounts of both the ancient and modern versions of *Antigone* understand the stakes of the conflict with Creon in overwhelmingly biopolitical terms; and the use of living actors (in the presence of a live audience) comes to be considered a problem for certain ideals of modernist aesthetics, in particular those detailed by the Symbolists. By the same token, the anxieties of excess

⁵³ Ibid., xi-xii.

⁵⁴ Jason Frank, "The Living Image of the People" in *Scaffolding Sovereignty: Global Perspectives on the History and Aesthetics of a Concept*, eds. Zvi Ben-dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

and inadequacy Santner describes as surrounding the People's newfound sovereignty are closely related to the existential concerns I understand to be at work in the plays of Ibsen and others.

If I insist on an existential inflection in my inquiry, it is because theater seems to ask different questions of the revolution, questions stemming from its own distinct relationship to sovereignty, and especially from a representational challenge posed by the revolution. Alain Badiou claims "great theater of the revolution is so rare" that he is forced to conclude that theater "avoids the revolution."⁵⁵ Badiou's complaint is that theater has not - to his satisfaction - explicitly taken up historical revolutionary events for its subject matter. This dogmatic standard of historical representation, though not a specific concern I share, serves as one possible example of the larger aesthetic difficulty of representing the shift from absolute to popular sovereignty as delineated by Frank. Yet if theater "avoids the revolution" in overt terms, it is not the case that it ignores it, as demonstrated by the subsequent use of common individuals as protagonists rather than those from noble ranks. I will be taking up the relationship of theater and the revolution in greater detail in my chapter on Modern Macbeths, but the crucial point here is that theater focuses on the ordinary *person*, not one or another version of the People.

Seeking to understand the particular individual (or an ensemble of particular individuals), modern drama is neither avoiding nor disapproving of the shift to popular sovereignty. Rather, while relying on democratic principles of equality, modern drama simultaneously registers a concern about the dangers of popular rule. This has long been the province of theater, and - considering Attic theater's contemporaneous emergence

⁵⁵ Alain Badiou, "Rhapsody for the Theatre: A Short Philosophical Treatise," trans. Bruno Bosteels. *Theatre Survey* 49:2 (November 2008), 205.

with that of Athenian democracy - arguably stands as a foundational element of theater's birth and development. Concerns regarding popular democratic rule date as far back as its establishment in Greek antiquity, and are given expression in the theater even before Plato famously rates democracy as only one step above tyranny as a form of government in Book VIII of *The Republic*. Democracy is dangerous because popular will not only could lead to revolt and uprising, but also, perhaps more ominously, to passivity and complacency. As the classicist Glenn Most has pointed out, the structural contrast at work in Greek tragedy - a named king who acts and suffers, observed by an anonymous chorus of lower status which advocates moderation, survival and self-control (and which never dies) - stages the tension between the political values of monarchy versus those of democracy: the "temptations of individualism" are set against the "consolations of solidarity."⁵⁶ Reflecting a post-monarchical society working to establish and define what democratic rule means, modern drama thus finds a significant commonality with ancient drama that has so far been neglected by scholars. Having inherited the additional problematic of medieval political theology as explored on the early modern stage, modern drama and its relations to the idea of sovereignty can be understood to be engaging with the political and aesthetic issues bequeathed to it by both ancient and baroque drama. The project of modern drama as it relates to sovereignty gets its bearing, then, from these two coordinates of its past.

A term that has hovered over the discussion of sovereignty's persistence and the aesthetic challenge of representation but has yet to be mentioned is "the crowd." The

⁵⁶ Glenn W. Most, "Sad Stories of the Death of Kings" in *Scaffolding Sovereignty: Global Perspectives on the History and Aesthetics of a Concept*. (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

crowd plays crucial but fundamentally different roles within the logics of absolute and popular sovereignty: its passive and corroborative role giving way to an active and commanding one. I will be elaborating on the anxieties surrounding the crowd - specifically in fin-de-siècle France - as a decisive interpretive key to Jarry's *Ubu roi*, but a few comments here will bring these general introductory remarks to a close. By and large, the modern theater does not stage popular will as such, in part because "the crowd" is no less difficult to effectively represent on stage than it is by means of a single image (as Frank discusses). Groundbreaking and influential modern directors such as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, André Antoine, and Konstantin Stanislavsky - all with realist commitments - took up the challenge of staging the crowd, but their successes are noteworthy as much for their rarity as for their achievement. As theater design took on smaller-scale proportions, Jarry, among others, found crowds to be aesthetically problematic - unwieldy and inelegant. Yet physical practicalities present only the most literal obstruction. The crowd, even for a realist playwright dedicated to the common person, like Ibsen in his prose dramas, turns out to be a threat - and precisely to the common person he studies and celebrates. In his 1882 play, *Enemy of the People*, Ibsen explicitly presents "the People" as a menacing entity guided by the base desire of profit, but throughout his oeuvre, the individual and personal sovereignty are determining concerns.

The belief in the equality of human beings that entitles popular will to its sovereignty also provides the common person the same access to the modern stage as that enjoyed by the sovereign figures of ancient and baroque drama. Drama, perhaps owing to its reciprocal relationship with sovereignty, demonstrates a clear investment in the

individual human being. As Lefort notes, it is the "human singularity" of the "living individual" that bears the mark of royalty.⁵⁷ In taking up matters of *personal* sovereignty - individual freedom and agency - rather than those of popular sovereignty more generally - the citizen, the public, the crowd - my study of modern drama seeks to answer the critical demands issued by the plays themselves.

SOVEREIGNS IN IBSEN'S THEATER

To repeat: I want to argue that there are sovereigns in (at least) two of Ibsen's late plays (*The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*), and furthermore that these sovereigns do not necessarily exist in a political or social-class register so much as an existential one in which the characters' aspiration is toward a personal sovereignty born of individual self-realization. Where there is political weight attached to sovereign status, it is never at the expense of such existential concerns, for the existential anxieties exceed the political desires.

Moreover, I want to claim that the bourgeois sovereigns of these late plays hark back to the issues surrounding sovereignty that interested Ibsen in (especially) two plays from the last phase of his early career, *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean*. Not that I am the first to have perceived links between the sovereign figures of Ibsen's early career and the metaphorical ones who show up in his late plays. A contemporaneous observation made soon after the publication of *The Master Builder* recognizes in unapologetic terms that this late play is connected to *The Pretenders*. Indeed, I have an illustrious predecessor, for it was the breathtakingly gifted eighteen-year-old Hugo von

⁵⁷ Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" 179.

Hofmannsthal (who himself went on to write plays that took up the theme of sovereignty and its discontents, most formidably *The Tower* [1925], his reworking of Calderón's 1635 *Life is a Dream*) who noted the connection in his essay, "The People of Ibsen's Plays":

Meanwhile *The Master Builder* has appeared - a strange mixture of allegory and real-life description. Like those lights that peasant children put in hollow pumpkins at night and which shine through the thin orange pulp, so the allegorical meaning here shines through hollowed-out, lifelike dolls. The whole play has been interpreted ingeniously and certainly not incorrectly as a symbolic representation of Ibsen's inner development, of his attitude as an artist to God, to others and to himself. The artist, the great master builder, stands between the two kings of *The Pretenders*. For with Ibsen, kings are also master builders, and master builders kings; or both are poets, royal master builders of souls. Master builder Solness therefore stands between King Haakon and King Skule. He has the demonic luck of the one, and is torn by doubts, like the other. He has the 'ingenium', the innate sense of vocation, the status of master builder by the grace of God, the right and the duty to win though, like Haakon, the born king, 'the one with the kingly thought'; he also has the limitations, fears, pangs of conscience, and craving for power and facility in life, like King Skule, who has no right to be king. The artist, seen from within, looks like these kings and master builders.⁵⁸

I have quoted at length because Hofmannsthal's insightful description is marvelous both on the level of color and tone - the staggering image of *The Master Builder* as a glowing jack-o-lantern brilliantly captures the fairy-tale aspect of the play, including the atmosphere of menace - as well as of critical content. Observing crucial connections between Solness and the kings of *The Pretenders* in an essay that also considers Emperor Julian as a peer of other Ibsen characters such as Ekdal, Lyngstrand, Helmer, Brendel, Hedda, Ellida, and Nora, Hofmannsthal seems not at all aware of, let alone sheepish about somehow having mixed otherwise discrete categories of character types. On the contrary, Ibsen's earlier "sovereignty" plays, for this shrewd critic in 1892,

⁵⁸ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Die Menschen in Ibsens Dramen," trans. by Carla Hvistendahl and James McFarlane, in *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 139-40.

have not been treated as separate from those known for their contemporary social realism.

Again, a question emerges for theater historians in line with the admonishments already mentioned above by Postlewait and Hulfeld: if the link between the two plays is valid, and if the connection between Ibsen's kings with bourgeois master builders and artists was self-evident to the young Hofmannsthal, why has it gone unremarked in these intervening decades? After all, Hofmannsthal is not a figure scholars of modernist literature dismiss as irrelevant, yet his reading of Ibsen has failed to inspire further studies along these lines. The point here is not to deplore a critical blindness, but rather to register how trends in criticism come at a price.

What is overlooked in neglecting Hofmannsthal's assertion of continuity between Ibsen's sovereign and bourgeois characters is the pivotal conversion he notes from sovereign care for one's subjects to sovereign care for one's own subjectivity. Hofmannsthal's pronouncement that "both are poets, royal master builders of souls," comprehends that the shared element of sovereignty for Ibsen's characters is not political rule and mastery, but rather the power to create and establish. Crucially, the sovereign power to effectively demarcate territory and build an empire gives way to another form of construction and institution: the creative capacity to imagine, generate, care for, and fashion souls. I take this to be a reference to the power to shape the individual self, the sovereign self. It also coincides with Lefort's sense of the "royalty of the spirit" as the permanent theologico-political feature found in modern democracy.

To be sure, Hofmannsthal's intervention in "The People of Ibsen's Plays" is not under the sign of "sovereignty," per se, but the impulse behind my project is very much in accord with the thrust of his essay, and shares a similar starting (and ending) point.

Noting the trend in Ibsen commentary as centering exclusively on ideas and problems "extraneous to the characters," Hofmannsthal's effort in his essay is to demonstrate that Ibsen's dramas are concerned with "a variant of a very rich, very modern and very precisely human type."⁵⁹ The corrective, in other words, is to bring into focus the individuals Ibsen puts forward qua individuals, rather than allowing discussions about topical social issues to eclipse them or turn them into mere representations of social types. The "very modern" individuals Hofmannsthal discovers in Ibsen are modern first and foremost because they are men and women confronting the modern problem of subjectivity. Hofmannsthal does not attend to the historical circumstances at work that are calling upon these characters to "lead a life, take up the reins," as Pippin puts it, but he recognizes their condition, capturing all of its tensions and contradictions with exquisite precision: "they hold their life in their hands, they finger it anxiously and want to give it meaning and style; they would like to submerge themselves in life, they would like something to come and carry them forcefully away and make them forget themselves."⁶⁰

While my ultimate interest is in how and why Ibsen has recourse to sovereignty in the later plays (my focus will be on *The Master Builder* with passing references to *John Gabriel Borkman*), following Ibsen's wishes, I will look first to the earlier plays to establish how concerns with sovereignty are conceived of there. It will turn out that Ibsen's existential considerations are not new measures in the later plays, but instead are inextricably bound up with sovereignty in his earlier work. The anachronisms, if they

⁵⁹ Ibid., 132-33.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 133.

must be considered such, are reciprocal: a king from the middle ages and an emperor from late antiquity are shown to be plagued by existential worries; and a bourgeois architect and a bourgeois banker at the end of the nineteenth century are shown to be sovereigns with almost identical anxieties as their earlier counterparts. I will have more to say about the choice of these early and late pairings of plays and what they "skip over," as it were, in Ibsen's oeuvre. And I admit at the outset that my analyses will be unevenly distributed. *The Pretenders*, a seminal work introducing themes, moods, and structures of sovereignty that will recur in Ibsen (and other playwrights), will receive the lengthiest consideration (it is also the play to which current scholarship has least attended, generating greater need of analysis). As a means to note the modern shift at work - away from literal sovereignty involving the governance of a political state and toward a personal sovereignty involving the exercise of personal will in an effort to achieve an individual potential - my reading will focus on the existential overtones that establish a distinctive timbre to Ibsen's characterization of the desire for sovereignty. Additionally, my analysis of *The Pretenders* will look ahead to Edward Gordon Craig's 1926 production for the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The production is noteworthy to historians because it marks the final practical undertaking of this highly influential modernist theorist of the theater. An examination of Craig's treatment of Ibsen's work allows for a better understanding of why (and which parts of) this sovereignty play set in medieval Norway appealed to an exacting theatrical modernist. My discussion of a literal staging of the drama will in turn highlight the aesthetic and philosophical problem of theatricality intrinsic to the theme of sovereignty.

More significantly, I am claiming that evident within the complex of plays under

consideration are some of the directions that twentieth-century drama will pursue with regard to sovereignty. In order to register the themes, issues, and approaches toward sovereignty found in these plays, I have adopted several categories based on corresponding likenesses between these modern plays and paradigmatic dramatic predecessors: Modern Macbeths, in which ambition for power motivates the sovereign figure; Modern Creons, in which the sovereign faces off, not with a military opponent, but with a rival on intellectual or spiritual grounds; and Modern Lears, in which the sovereign figure desires or opts to abdicate. Each of these modern categories can be observed, or perhaps have their nascency, in Ibsen's work. In *Emperor and Galilean*, for example, Julian's ongoing struggle with "the Galilean" - Jesus of Nazareth - and those so willing to be martyrs on his behalf, reveals crucial politico-theological issues concomitant with sovereignty and foregrounds a variety of drama that has its roots in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Theological defiance similarly animates *The Master Builder*, although in this case Solness's aggressive drive to obtain and maintain the title that distinguishes his preeminence creates a more emphatic thematic correspondence with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In *John Gabriel Borkman* Ibsen presents a protagonist who has lost the empire he had established, yet continues to fantasize about regaining power while exiled, after serving a prison term, to the top floor of a borrowed home. Borkman is frequently received as a Napoleon figure, and while that suggests one aspect of the style of sovereignty to which Borkman aspires, a more evocative counterpart is precisely Shakespeare's *Lear*. In what follows, then, my readings of Ibsen provide something like a survey of my strategies at work throughout this dissertation, where I will take up two of these categories in more detail: Modern Macbeths and Modern Lears.

A few final remarks, by way of bringing this introduction to a close. In all the instances just cited, my intention will not be to pigeonhole a work or character into an ironclad classification. For one thing, categories inevitably overlap or prove inadequate. For another, *Antigone*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* are not perceived by me as archetypal dramas to which successor works must conform. Rather, in the spirit of Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance," I have found that thinking about these modern plays alongside earlier dramatic figures and situations allows for analyses that not only take into account the affinities that have remained important to modern drama, but also provide a way to notice the differences and distinctions that mark them as modern.

Hans Sluga has observed that Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance "draws on two quite different sets of ideas, two different vocabularies, but treats them as if they were one and the same. The first is the vocabulary of kinship, of descent, of some sort of real and causal connection and of the links established by them, the second is that of similarity, resemblance, affinity, and correspondence."⁶¹ For Sluga the elision of the distinction between kinship, with its implied consanguinity or traceable ancestry, and similarity, which suggests compatibility and likeness but not necessarily blood-ties, is problematic. Yet it is precisely the ambiguity of the concept that makes it so suitable a rubric in regard to sovereignty and modern drama. For a concept like sovereignty, with its history of sometime insistence on "royal blood" and lineage to designate legitimacy, the vocabulary of kinship is more than germane. By the same token, in the context of a discussion of Ibsen, regularly invoked as the "father" of modern drama, tracing a line of descent is a relevant consideration. Of course, family trees are notoriously knotty, and

⁶¹ Hans Sluga, "Family Resemblance," in *Deepening Our Understanding of Wittgenstein*. Grazer Philosophische Studien, vol. 71, ed. Michael Kober, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 14.

not dependent on biological parentage nor even, in the case of modern drama, on direct or acknowledged influence. As it happens, in his late texts especially, Ibsen reveals an interest in surrogate parents and surrogate children, questioning the logic of strict genealogy. What is more, Ibsen hauntingly uses the phrase "God's stepchild on Earth" to designate Skule's fundamental status, and this description would equally serve to characterize Julian as well. In this mood of modern shifts and familial reconfigurations, it will perhaps be necessary to reconsider Ibsen as the "step-father" of modern drama.

II. *THE PRETENDERS* (1863)

MEDIEVAL CHARACTERS, MODERN ANXIETIES

In a letter to his friend Peter Hansen, Ibsen declared, "Everything I have produced as a poet had its origins in a state of mind and a real life situation. I have never written anything simply because – as they say – I had 'found a good subject'." He went on to say, "The fact that everybody was against me, that I had nobody standing apart of whom I could say that he had faith in me, this – as you will realize – produced a state of mind which found vent in *The Pretenders*."⁶²

After years of struggling to make a living as a dramatist, *The Pretenders* marked the young Ibsen's first critical and theatrical success, and as such served as a key catalyst for the work that was to come after. Not that it served as a formal template for the other plays, but in choosing for his subject matter the battle for the throne in thirteenth-century Norway between Haakon Haakonsson and Earl Skule, and the civil wars that ensued, Ibsen found a register for the admixture of aspiration and self-doubt he was himself

⁶² *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:368.

confronting as an artist; indeed, had *The Pretenders* met with failure rather than approval, it is reasonable to think that an even longer and bumpier road lay ahead for the playwright. Surely, the self-assurance with which he wrote and defended his next two almost ruthlessly different but complementary works, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, and the animus against his critics on display in *League of Youth*, might not have gained their momentum without an unquestioned triumph behind him. Indeed, the timing of *The Pretenders* in Ibsen's career seems to be rather more charged than is generally acknowledged, supplying the dramatist not only with confidence in his capabilities, but also with a thematic framework – the desire for sovereignty – to which he will return in a variety of guises in the course of his oeuvre, most obviously and immediately in *Emperor and Galilean*, but nowhere more crucially than in two of his final four plays, where the desire for sovereignty is manifestly modern, *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*.

A few events on the Ibsen timeline are worth citing here. The bankruptcy of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania in June 1862 left the thirty-four-year-old Ibsen without a job, without regular income, and without any sure prospects. The critical reception of *Love's Comedy*, published at the end of 1862, gave Ibsen the distinct impression that “everybody was against [him].” And although he may have conceived of *The Pretenders* as early as the summer of 1858, he appears to have written most of it during July and August of 1863, after returning from a choral festival in Bergen where he enjoyed encouragement and camaraderie, most notably in the company of the successful writer (and potential rival) Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson.⁶³ A welcome respite from the worries and frustrations that plagued him in Christiania, the trip to Bergen seemed to ignite Ibsen's

⁶³ Ibid., 2:19.

creative energy. As he put it in a letter to his host, being at the festival gave him “a powerful sense of being uplifted, a feeling as it were that one’s thoughts were being ennobled and elevated.”⁶⁴ It is tempting to make a link here between Ibsen’s “ennobled and elevated” reflections and the “kingly-thought” that *The Pretenders* centers on, especially since, alongside the bonhomie experienced at the festival, there is further reason to believe that Ibsen’s thinking took an optimistic turn with regard to his artistic ambitions. Ibsen could anticipate freedom and release (temporarily, at any rate), from Norway, where he felt increasingly misunderstood and stifled, for in late May of 1863 he received the good news of a government grant that would allow him to study art and literature, primarily in Rome, for a year. In retrospect we know that this turned out to be the beginning of a voluntary twenty-seven-year exile from Norway that broadened Ibsen’s scope as a writer while simultaneously allowing him the distance to train his eye on Norwegian life in his dramas.

With so much to look forward to, and riding high on the esteem of friends and colleagues in Bergen, perhaps it is not surprising that Ibsen was drawn to work on a play about ascending a throne. But if we follow the thread of how Ibsen describes his dominant state of mind at the time of writing *The Pretenders*, we find it is not just the desire for the crown of success that drives the writing, but the desire for someone to believe in his potential, for someone to be willing to “stand apart” in loyalty to him and his artistic vision. Just when the doors were beginning to open for the playwright, if rather tentatively, self-doubt consumes him. Another way of putting this is that the desire for sovereignty seems to be at its most acutely galling when the path seems clear but for one’s ability to take advantage of it. This is certainly the experience of Earl

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2:20.

Skule, the primary pretender to the Norwegian throne in the play. Furthermore, while political sovereignty in *The Pretenders* relies on traditional signs and rituals to legitimize a king, those very endorsements are thrown into question due to their theatricality; it is the internal wrestling with one's right and ability to be sovereign that Ibsen makes his subject.

In other words, the professional and personal concerns weighing on Ibsen at the time of writing *The Pretenders* together suggest that the play's emphases go beyond Ibsen's last-gasp romantic nationalistic aims, which is how the play tends to be interpreted. To be sure, the drama describes the unification of Norway, and Haakon's "kingly-thought," initially so absurd to Skule before he succumbs to its grandeur, is that "Norway was a *kingdom*. It shall become a *people*."⁶⁵ While this sentiment bespeaks a universalizing agenda geared toward national identity, and the plot oversees the success of the aspiration, the play itself works to destabilize this goal by focusing dramatic interest solely upon the intensely individualistic concerns of Skule.

Earl Skule, a member of the aristocracy, and therefore eligible for the throne, ironically but fundamentally understands himself in bourgeois terms -- as impotent. His desire to be sovereign defines him from the beginning. As they wait for the Assembly's verdict on which of the claimants shall rule as king, Lady Ragnhild, Skule's wife, remarks "*with despairing strength*" that "The Earl must be chosen king. It will harm his soul if he is not the first in the land!"⁶⁶ He admits to Bishop Nikolas (who harbors his own cravings for sovereign power) the hold his yearning has on him, confessing "Every

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2: 283.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2: 230.

night when I sleep I am King of Norway.”⁶⁷ These are not the idle dreams of a commoner, however, but of one for whom the possibility is real. Identifying the way in which proximity is more distressing than outright unattainability might be, Skule explains, “The great curse this, that has shadowed all my life, to stand so near the highest - just a ditch between - one leap and I should be across. The other side the name of King, the purple robe, throne, power and all. It is there every day before my eyes, but I never reach it.” The problem, as the Earl understands it, is that “I felt that help must surely come from above. [...] Each evening I thought, tomorrow will bring the miracle which will lay him low and set me on the empty throne .”⁶⁸

Ibsen is notoriously cagey when it comes to admitting a familiarity with the work of his fellow Scandinavian, Søren Kierkegaard, and yet - intended or not - Skule’s description of the curse that attends propinquity to sovereignty has compelling parallels in Kierkegaard’s account of despair in his 1849 text, *The Sickness Unto Death* (written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus). For Kierkegaard, “a human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis” and despair is a result of wanting to realize the full potential of that synthesis, but being unable to do so by one’s own strength.⁶⁹ Put more plainly, Kierkegaard’s view is that a human being is not merely an existing material object nor an animal lacking rationality; rather, a human being is conscious of having been created by a higher power, and of that higher power having transcended the individual’s existence. “If

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2: 243.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2: 244.

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

there were nothing eternal in a man, he could not despair at all.”⁷⁰ To despair, then, undeniably leads to “misery” and even “ruination,” but on Kierkegaard’s account *to be able to despair* is also a sign of “a surpassing excellence” and “infinite advantage” because “the descent is as infinitely low as the excellence of possibility is high.”⁷¹ In other words, one sinks to despairing depths only if there is the potential for supreme heights, a position Kierkegaard gives to all human beings (noting the particular privilege of the Christian in recognizing this predicament).

Ibsen’s portrayal of a would-be sovereign in *The Pretenders*, a sovereign whose doubts and anxieties he relates to his own as an artist, indicates a similar view. Skule despairs precisely because the throne is within reach and he wants help “from above” - a “miracle” (what Nora in *A Doll House* also waits for) - to secure it. An example offered in *The Sickness Unto Death* places Skule more firmly on Kierkegaard’s despairing terrain. “When the ambitious man whose slogan is ‘Either Caesar or nothing’ does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it. But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself.” Skule, whose *soul*, his wife claims, will suffer harm in not being King, could have been modeled on this ambitious man, particularly as Kierkegaard renders the distinction: “it is not his failure to become Caesar that is intolerable, but it is *this self* that did not become Caesar that is intolerable.”⁷²

In response to Skule’s self-described “curse” of having sovereignty within his grasp but nevertheless eluding him, Bishop Nikolas points out all the times the Earl has sabotaged his own desires rather than acting on them: “You did not dare;” “You still

⁷⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

⁷² Ibid., 19.

waited;” “And still you waited.”⁷³ These accusations accumulate into Nikolas's crushing diagnosis:

That is the curse that has blighted your life. You have wished to see all paths open at all times before you. You have never dared to smash all the bridges, leaving only one, and guarding that alone, to conquer or die in the attempt. You set snares for your enemy. You build traps for his feet, hang sharp swords above his head. You poison all his dishes, and lay out hundreds of nets in which to catch him, but if he makes to enter you dare not spring the trap. When he puts out a hand to take the poison, you think it safer that he should fall by the sword; if he looks like being caught in the morning, you think it better that it should happen at night.⁷⁴

Although the extent of Ibsen's acquaintance with Kierkegaard's philosophy is uncertain, the playwright's ability to articulate existential anxieties is not. Indeed, the above speech by Bishop Nikolas is astonishing for its remarkable resonance with a crucial episode in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a text to which Ibsen could not possibly have had access, for it was published in 1864, the year following the publication of *The Pretenders*. Recognized as a groundbreaking existential literary voice, Dostoevsky's underground man relentlessly asserts that he is a sick man, and his sickness is that of being overly conscious. The trouble with heightened consciousness is that it results in inertia and “the too vivid consciousness of one's own humiliation.”⁷⁵ To spell out what he means, the underground man imagines a situation in which revenge is called for, and relates the opposite responses of the man of heightened consciousness, whom he regards as a mouse, over against those of the man of action, whom he regards as “normal”: simple, frank, artless, and stupid. The mouse, though insulted,

⁷³ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:244.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:245.

⁷⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 9.

has already managed to fence itself about with so many other nastinesses in the form of questions and doubts; it has padded out the one question with so many unresolved questions that, willy-nilly, some fatal slops have accumulated around it, some stinking filth consisting of its dubieties, anxieties, and finally, of the spit raining on it from the ingenuous figures who stand solemnly around it like judges and dictators, guffawing at it from all their healthy gullets. Of course, nothing remains for it but to wave the whole thing aside with its little paw and, with a smile of feigned contempt, in which it does not believe itself, slip back shamefacedly into its crack.⁷⁶

Read alongside *Notes from Underground*, Skule distinctly resembles the mouse in the way he hedges his bets and talks himself out of seizing the throne. Revenge comes very near to describing his relation to sovereignty, for he feels offended in not being recognized as king, offended, also, by the untroubled ease with which Haakon - an “ingenuous figure” spitting on him - assumes his own right to be king. Yet like the mouse, who “may even begin to take revenge, but somehow in snatches, with piddling things, from behind the stove, incognito,” Skule’s attempts are trifling, and it is he who is thwarting his own efforts.⁷⁷ He might blame his delays and tepid endeavors toward clearing his own path on God being slow to step in somehow and take decisive measures, but, ironically, it is the Bishop who points out that Skule must take matters into his own hands. Stressing that neither courage, faith, nor learning is a virtue guaranteed to lead to performing the world’s greatest actions, Bishop Nikolas boldly advises: “Follow your desire, use your strength. Every man has that right.”⁷⁸

The Bishop suggests a model of sovereignty based on force and will, not divine right. In terms of class and rank, he seems to be reminding Skule that he is a member of the aristocracy, with the right to bear and use arms, thus highlighting the way his passive,

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁸ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:247.

impotent behavior resembles that of a bourgeois in the medieval sense of a piece with the world of the play. But the likeness between Skule and the underground man's mouse points to a modern quandary not necessarily bound up with categories of social class as they bear on political rights. Ibsen has given this predicament to a noble character and used a traditional plot featuring ambition for a throne, but they are the ideas and experience of a modern individual struggling to find a rationale to fight for what one wants, to be who one wants to be. This is the anxiety Pippin describes in terms of "being called on [...] to lead a life, take up the reins" -- an anxiety born of the unverifiable suspicion that neither God nor other external circumstances can be blamed for who one is, that it is entirely the responsibility and creation of the individual. Ibsen's choice of character and plot indicate a limitation to his modernism in this 1863 play, whereas Dostoevsky's underground man, nearly contemporaneously in 1864, as a former civil servant, is squarely bourgeois and thoroughly modern.

The underground man identifies a core problem of the mouse as "believing neither in its right to revenge itself nor in the success of its vengeance."⁷⁹ Here, too, Skule smacks of mouseyness, for it is a fundamental self-doubt that governs his character over the course of the play. His goal is only ostensibly political sovereignty, but more accurately a *personal* sovereignty, a sense of his own meaningful individuality. If the point is not political power as such, but actually leading the life one wants for oneself, we are again in the province of Kierkegaard's example of the man whose slogan is "Either Caesar or nothing." Failing to achieve one's aspiration, one despairs over the self that has failed and is in embarrassment with itself. For Skule, this finds expression in his continued need for someone to affirm him, because he doubts himself. His despair is

⁷⁹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 12.

undisguised when he exclaims, “I *must*, must have one person who can believe in me! Just one! I know that if I have that one, I shall be saved.” To this, Jatgeir, his bard, responds: “Believe in yourself and you will be saved,” emphasizing, like the Bishop, Skule’s need to rely on himself rather than others, including God, for validation.⁸⁰ Further bearing out that political power is not at issue, but rather a sense of his own individuality, Skule has this conversation about salvation with Jatgeir precisely when he *is in possession of* political power. Like the mouse and the bourgeois, however, he doubts his legitimate right to it, having seized the throne by force.

Initially believing in the divine right of kingship, a sacrality of the office passed through the lineage of the sovereign, Skule’s efforts in the first half of the play seek to prove Haakon is not the legitimate heir to the throne. Within the drama, Bishop Nikolas cultivates this suspicion, and Ibsen, in keeping with a standard plot device of the nineteenth-century “well-made play,” supplies the existence of a letter that will disclose the truth of the matter once it arrives from afar. Yet Ibsen confounds this dramatic expedient by having Skule - who is desperate to have the information the letter contains - unwittingly burn it, destroying any chance of certain knowledge of Haakon’s bloodlines. This corroborates the Bishop’s earlier injunction to Skule to pursue his desire without regard to the usual technicalities, to break from the essentialist concept of being “born a king.” Skule is emboldened to seize the throne, asserting himself as king and satisfying the outward condition of an existentialist action. What he discovers, however, is that although the position does not require ancestral pedigree, it requires something else one can neither steal nor fake: the imagination of a king. Skule realizes it is a habit of mind - one constitutionally alien to his own - that makes Haakon a king, not his

⁸⁰ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:300-301.

superiority over others. The "kingly thought" of Haakon's that Skule comes to envy, however, likewise translates as a criterion of personal sovereignty.

Much to his chagrin, Skule recognizes that Haakon's sovereign disposition is characterized above all by his relation *to himself*, and only subsequently to others. It is the "great health" of that relation, to borrow a Nietzschean phrase and mood, that allows for the robust thought Skule sees so clearly as "kingly." In contrast, Skule had misunderstood his own desire, believing its object was simply position. His ambition for the throne, however, masked his desire for an authentic self, in which his pretension matches his aspiration.

STAGES: ONE STEP BACK TWO STEPS FORWARD

As previously mentioned, Ibsen enjoyed his first real success with *The Pretenders*, a play often considered his most "Shakespearean" drama.⁸¹ This points out a manner in which Ibsen explored modern ideas while engaging with previous dramatic models. Interestingly, "Shakespearean," when it comes up as a descriptive adjective for Ibsen's drama, seems to be code for no more than a play tracing the rise and fall of a king (and also, perhaps, includes a ghost scene). Far from being a singular invocation of one of Shakespeare's depictions of sovereignty, *The Pretenders* is rife with glosses - intentional or not - on a variety of Shakespearean sovereign figures and situations.

Skule's naked ambition for the crown suggests a likeness with Macbeth, as well as

⁸¹ Ibsen seems to have first encountered stage productions of Shakespeare as late as 1852, and there is reason to believe he had not even read much of the bard before then. For more on Shakespeare's influence on Ibsen, see Thomas F. Van Laan, "Ibsen and Shakespeare" in *Henrik Ibsen: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999).

with Richard III. But Macbeth, having been assured by the witches that he would be king, acts impatiently, and Richard III has no qualms about killing all those in his path to the throne, including children. In this regard, Skule more closely resembles Hamlet in his procrastinations and doubts, but is perhaps even nearer in temperament to King Lear, about whom his daughter Regan perceptively says, “he hath ever but slenderly known himself.” Indeed, along with a lack of self-awareness, particularly in regard to his own desire for sovereignty, Skule also bears a painful likeness to Lear in his final moments. In their misguided quests for sovereignty, both Lear and Skule wrong a beloved child and heir, and as a result they witness their sovereign lineages come to an end.

Clearly, the attitude toward and experience of sovereignty shifts as they are explored in early and then late modern drama. I am bringing up Shakespeare's sovereigns in order to mark the ways in which Ibsen's distinctively modern rendering of the stakes of sovereignty and the personal form it takes nevertheless pick up on themes and concerns evident in the work of his dramatic predecessors. It seems all but certain Ibsen borrowed dramatic form and characterization from Shakespeare in writing *The Pretenders*, but looking backward to the influence of Shakespeare represents only one chronological side of the timeline, and one facet of *The Pretenders'* lineage. Looking ahead to the production history of *The Pretenders* - and in particular to the 1926 production designed by Edward Gordon Craig, one of modern theater's most innovative and influential figures - introduces another lens through which to examine Ibsen's pivotal drama. I will return to the text of Ibsen's play, but a slight detour to consider its staging by Craig at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen provides an opportunity to surmise some of its modernist strengths and weaknesses according to this theatrical pioneer.

It turns out that despite the relative triumph of the play in Ibsen's early career, it proved unwieldy six decades later in the context of high modern theater.⁸² The staging of *The Pretenders* in 1926 marks Craig's last direct practical work for the theater. As such, it has been studied by theater historians eager to understand it in the context of his other productions and theoretical writings. My aim in bringing it into the discussion here is not to rehearse the reception of this controversial production, nor to evaluate Craig's stage practices and legacy. Rather, I will briefly consider three scenes - Inga's trial by fire, Haakon's wedding to Skule's daughter, and the final confrontation between Haakon and Skule - alongside Craig's interpretation of the characters, in order to elucidate how his modernist vision highlights a profound problem of sovereignty: theatricality.

It remains something of a mystery why, exactly, Craig agreed to do this particular production. He had turned down other, seemingly far more enticing staging opportunities (Paris Opera, Shakespeare in London, La Scala) but offered no resistance to the request from the Royal Theatre's managing director, Johannes Poulsen, aside from the frank disclaimer that "my mind likes to concern itself very little with historical tragedy."⁸³ Without discounting his potential reasons for wanting a chance to work in a reputable but somewhat remote theater, I am reluctant to believe Craig would have agreed to staging a work that did not significantly engage his aesthetic commitments, and I would argue he was persuaded to undertake this production precisely because Ibsen's drama explored issues of sovereignty alongside those of theatricality. Even if, as he claims, Craig had

⁸² Despite its nationalistic ideas, *The Pretenders* propelled Ibsen onto the international stage: it was the first Ibsen play to be produced outside of Scandinavia.

⁸³ As quoted in Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 203.

only just begun reading the play, what he encountered in Ibsen's drama clearly proved compelling.⁸⁴

Expressing frustration, however, Craig described the play as “exceptionally difficult to make theatrically effective.”⁸⁵ Notoriously dissatisfied with his productions and given to making snide comments and reaching ad hominem judgments about actors, playwrights, and rival directors, Craig's declaration is nevertheless worth taking into account. According to Craig, *The Pretenders* is “full of very wonderful ideas and written so well, but, except here and there, it does not thrill you as a play should thrill, for there are long wearisome passages, and, what is worse, long and wearisome development of over-subtle ideas.”⁸⁶ His assessment is certainly not to be taken as the definitive last word, not least because it is contradictory. How does one square a “wonderful” play “written so well” that is also “long and wearisome” with “over-subtle ideas”? My suspicion, based on the notes and designs for his production, is that Craig was drawn to Ibsen's dramatization of a fight for the throne, and intuitively responded to the shifting conception of sovereignty at work in the play. If he lost patience with it, perhaps it was because he would have preferred to see Skule - the protagonist for whom his interpretation clearly has the most sympathy - ultimately defeat Haakon, rather than relinquish his claim to the crown.

⁸⁴ In their case study on the production, Marker and Marker take Craig at his word when he claims to have only just begun reading the play, and therefore dismiss the text itself as providing sufficient interest to motivate his decision to undertake the production (Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, *Edward Gordon Craig and The Pretenders: A Production Revisited* [Carbondale: Published for the American Society for Theatre Research by Southern Illinois University Press, 1981], 21).

⁸⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, *A Production, 1926: being designs projected or realized by Edward Gordon Craig, for 'The Pretenders' of Henrik Ibsen* (Oxford University Press, London, 1930), as quoted in *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2: 371.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:371.

Craig does not specify which ideas in *The Pretenders* he considers "wonderful," nor those he feels are "over-subtle." But it should come as no surprise that someone as keyed as Craig was to a project of theater reform that on the one hand sought absolute directorial control, and on the other pursued an ideal of "total theater" (meaning the eschewal of anything not specifically "theatrical"), should be drawn to a play with sovereignty and theatricality so tightly woven into its themes. What is more, theatricality is presented as deeply problematic in *The Pretenders*, an attitude in keeping with Craig's characteristically radical assertion that "To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed."⁸⁷ This is a provocative pronouncement, yet I think it fair to suggest a similarly bold parallel assertion in turn, one never articulated in words, but rather in the staging of Craig's production of *The Pretenders*: To save sovereignty, the sovereign must be destroyed. In order to see how these contentious statements operate in tandem in *The Pretenders* requires an examination of the aesthetic principles at work in Craig's production as well as further consideration of Ibsen's play.

What Craig explicitly sought to destroy, of course, was a theater bound by representational strategies of historical realism and the use of pictorial illusion for set design. "Local color is not something we will place very much emphasis upon - but then neither does Ibsen," he explained in an interview in the weeks leading up to his

⁸⁷ Quoted in Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 119. The latter part of this statement - "theatre must be destroyed" - resonates with Michael Fried's claim in response to 1960s minimalist art that "theater must be defeated" (Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]). While both are concerned with high modernist aesthetics, it should be noted that their statements are in the service of different problems. Neither Craig (obviously) nor Fried (often misunderstood in this regard) is interested in demolishing the theater as an artistic form. Craig is repudiating a tradition of theater practice; Fried is noting the aesthetico-philosophical problematic of theatricality as it inheres to any work of art's ontological "to-be-seenness."

production of *The Pretenders*.⁸⁸ "If a stage picture consisted of a single 'back-cloth', then you could pass all the elaborate details on to the back-cloth," he writes in *A Production*. "But then your actors would simply be acting in *front* of a *picture* and not in *the midst of a scene*."⁸⁹ Craig was willing to use Ibsen's dialogue, yet ignored the scene descriptions. His own designs stressed the three-dimensional space of the theater, and emphasized architectural elements. He directed his energies toward capturing "the spirit" of the places and events of the play, recognizing that "drama is a product of our inner life, and we create on the stage a world for that inner life."⁹⁰ Two scenes will suffice to demonstrate how these theatrical objectives were entwined with Craig's staging of sovereignty in *The Pretenders*.

First, drawings and costume lists provide evidence that Craig wasted no time emphasizing the theatricality at the heart of *The Pretenders*. The full space of the stage is vigorously used by Craig in the initial scene, where a massive crowd awaits the verdict of Inga's trial by fire. The stakes are nothing less than sovereignty: the trial is meant to prove that Haakon is the legitimate heir to the throne of Norway. But sovereignty, in Ibsen as elsewhere, requires an audience to affirm and acquiesce to the sovereign - a claim to sovereignty without such confirmation is an empty claim. More than a hundred and ten actors were enlisted to populate this scene, making the awareness of an immense assembly unmistakable.⁹¹ Craig's sketchbook indicates his own awareness of the sovereign interests motivating the overall visual effect. "Inga must bear with more

⁸⁸ "Gordon Craig om Teatret og Digterne" (Craig on theater and playwrights), *Berlingske Aftenavis*, October 27, 1926, as quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 13.

⁸⁹ Craig, *A Production*, 8, emphasis in original.

⁹⁰ As quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

ceremony,” he writes, and more to the point, “Inga not to look like the witches in *Macbeth* -- she is a queen.”⁹²

Second, in a scene that met largely with disapproval from contemporary reviewers, Craig used large blocks in staggered heights as architectural elements to compose the wedding banquet of Haakon to Skule's daughter, Margrete. Aside from establishing the fact of the union, meant to achieve a peace between the two men and their followers, Ibsen's text reveals the squabbles and feuds that nevertheless persist, as well as the continuing machinations of Bishop Nikolas and Skule. One favorably disposed Danish reviewer of Craig's production summed up the scene this way: "an elevation along a diagonal line in the stage space, running from common quarrels, through vicious intrigues, up to the untouchable power of royalty. From this composition alone one was made to realize that Haakon was and would remain king." ⁹³ Assuming this reviewer's description is correct, it appears that Craig aspired to use the space of the stage to visually deliver these levels of interplay in a single total image, rather than have the various groups taking turns on stage. While the large blocks and the lighting Craig used may have proven less than ideal in carrying off the desired effects, his ambition hardly seems to have been misplaced.

Nor, it becomes necessary to interject, does his guiding interpretation of the characters seem ill-considered, although oddly enough this has met with overt resistance in the most thorough scholarly work done on this production to date. In their case study, *Edward Gordon Craig and The Pretenders: A Production Revisited*, Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker fault what they call "Craig's more bizarre scenographic ideas" as

⁹² Ibid., 42.

⁹³ Vilhelm Saxtorph in *Berlingske Tidende*, December 13, 1926, as quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 50.

having been "dictated by his own rather eccentric opinions of Ibsen's play and especially of its two principal characters."⁹⁴ Setting aside Marker and Marker's own ("eccentric"?) projection of what they perceive as Craig's projection of a personal paranoia about rival director Max Reinhardt on to his interpretation of the competition between Skule and Haakon, the contrasting portraits reveal penetrating insights on Craig's part.

As the reviewer above notes, "Haakon was and would remain king," and Craig's *mise-en-scène* of the wedding banquet corroborates this. Marker and Marker take issue with this reviewer's analysis, however. "Although one might perhaps admire its critical ingenuity," they write, "this glowing assessment mirrors nothing of Craig's actual intent here, which is shaped by his attitude toward Haakon as someone who 'must *play* the king and overdo it.'"⁹⁵ It seems hard to imagine that emphasizing the uncontroversial fact of Haakon's kingship at this moment (and indeed at the end of the play) falls outside the bounds of Craig's intentions. More to the matter, though, what Marker and Marker apparently count toward Craig's "topsy-turvy" (their term) view of Ibsen's characters has to do with an association of theatricality with Haakon, theatricality linked explicitly to sovereignty.⁹⁶ The objection to "the interpretation of Haakon's rather conventional wedding banquet as the grotesquely flat and nightmarish feast of a cardboard king," stands out as a particularly problematic (and hyperbolic) reading of the scene, not only because it misses how Ibsen's text has knit together the concepts of sovereignty and theatricality, giving Craig more than enough cause to fashion Haakon as a "player king," but also because it misses the opportunity to explore a fascinating friction in the context

⁹⁴ Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 51.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

of Craig's aesthetic commitments.⁹⁷ Among the nonrepresentational theatrical theories Craig put forward, his call to replace the actor with the "Über-marionette" remains the one with which he is perhaps most closely associated. Haakon as a puppet king - that is, the sovereign understood to be a performing entity - creates an interesting moment of tension with Craig's predilection for the marionette as an ideal, especially since it is clear from his notes that he has greater sympathy for Skule, and seems to disdain Haakon's efforts - "he must *play* the king and overdo it."

In other words, what I am suggesting as a tension is that while Craig elsewhere advocates for the abstract value of the marionette as a way to avoid human ego and contingency on stage - an argument I take to be one of positing an aesthetic ideal for the living actor rather than one that seriously seeks to rid the theater of humans on stage - a character such as Haakon, for whom this structure of puppet-performance is built-in, is nonetheless held in contempt in Craig's interpretation and staged in such a way so as to force Haakon to confront the certainty with which he has adopted this role. It is in this regard my suggestion that "to save sovereignty, the sovereign must be destroyed" comes into play: Haakon as sovereign must, in Craig's production, be seen ultimately to hesitate and doubt himself, albeit not in as debilitating a way as Skule. In this way, Craig ensures that the drama is not solely a study of Skule's coming to a personal sovereignty from an initial position of irresolution and misgivings, but also a study of Haakon's political sovereignty moving away from an untenable absolutism.

Craig's notes for his production of *The Pretenders* reveal the contrasts he draws between Haakon and Skule in both their physical appearance and habits, as well as his broader understanding of what differentiates them as characters. Regardless of whether

⁹⁷ Ibid., 51.

these evaluations betray personal preferences and prejudices on Craig's part (as Marker and Marker conjecture), they certainly provide a vivid picture of two distinct types of individuals. Whereas Haakon's comportment is stiff: "His eyes are *round, open & fixed*. His body rigid except at the *end*"; Skule's is restless: "Often stops & is seen to be squinnying up his eyes - with head raised as though looking for something". Whereas Haakon is described as "Stupid *because a man of purpose* - going straight on - convinced;" Skule "suspects that a *fixed purpose* is little for a man. He wishes to understand & taste the whole of life." Perhaps most damning is the specific distinction between Haakon, who is "System, not personality"; and Skule, who is "*Personality, not system*."⁹⁸

Craig's designations, more manichean than other interpretations - Haakon is not generally construed as having vexing character issues, but of being enviably self-assured - nevertheless strike me as perceptive and intriguing on several levels. Craig's schema echoes with an arresting exactitude the distinction made in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* between the man of action and the man of heightened consciousness (the mouse), returning us to the existentialist concerns previously explored. Haakon is a "stupid" "man of purpose," and like the man of action does not countenance impediments to his desires. Skule is not only "squinnying up his eyes" like a mouse, he is always searching for larger meanings and allowing this search to hinder the fulfillments of his desires. Dostoevsky's underground man rails against the science that claims man acts according to laws of nature, i.e. a system, - as though "nothing but a sort of piano key" playing a predictable note at every turn - rather than by will or caprice.⁹⁹ Craig, like

⁹⁸ As quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 52; emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 24.

Dostoevsky, affords the greater nobility to Skule despite his paralyzing behavior precisely because in choosing, in his final moments, to act *against* his own advantage he is exercising his "Personality" rather than allowing a "System" to determine what he does and who he is.

As a further elaboration of system versus personality, yet in a direct twist to the standard view of Haakon as King and therefore superior and unique, Craig casts Haakon in the role of the bourgeois and gives Skule the marks of sovereign comportment. The "bourgeois" category is subtly defined, but emerges more legibly in comparison to the postures and attitudes Craig extends to Skule. Whereas Haakon "is an organizer - he will control things" and "nods when he answers;" Skule is "*Autocratic* - the old kind - big lord no organizer, not shopkeeper," he has "no *contempt* for others but often does not see them. Never nods - *leans an ear to attend* but often is not attending to what is being said."¹⁰⁰ The differentiation at work here recalls not only the sense of "bourgeois" as it has developed to indicate petty, hidebound business practices, but also the early sense as we have already seen recounted by Robert Pippin: "the bourgeois is originally held in contempt because he cannot act as the nobleman paradigmatically acts - *independently*, in majestic indifference to what unworthy others think of what he does." Although innocuous habits on the face of it, Haakon's potentially obsequious nodding and Skule's contrasting obliviousness to others show up in this context as tell-tale signs of a different order of sovereignty at work here than the play's medieval narrative suggests.

The curious reversal of estimation that understands Haakon as more objectionable than Skule on account of their respective orientations toward system and personality

¹⁰⁰ As quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 52; emphasis in original.

points to the form of sovereignty Craig might want to see destroyed: the one Franco Moretti described, for the bourgeoisie is "the ruling class." For Dostoevsky's underground man, and one suspects for Craig as well, personality - the individual - will ultimately prevail against the system, because human nature cannot bear to understand itself as pre-programmed only to seek out its own advantage in terms prescribed by the system or majority. The system, according to the underground man, forgets a crucial detail when it presumes human nature will always act in accordance with what is "profitable," generally deemed to be a material advantage: "One's own free and voluntary wanting, one's own caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, though chafed sometimes to the point of madness - all this is that same most profitable profit, the omitted one, which does not fit into any classification, and because of which all systems and theories are constantly blown to the devil."¹⁰¹

Ibsen's drama does not seem to end with a clear victory for personality. Not, that is, if Haakon stands for system, and victory means the throne. Yet in examining *The Pretenders* through a lens that looks beyond its nationalistic themes, it turns out that in Ibsen's hands there is another mode of sovereignty at stake that arguably interests him far more than state sovereignty though it will only fully emerge in his work when he dispenses with historical drama. Turning one last time to Craig's production, the play's final scene highlights this shift in sovereignty. Skule's long struggle, presumably against Haakon but primarily against himself, ultimately results in the climactic decision to renounce his claim to the crown and submit both himself as well as his son to the mob, allowing Haakon to reign and carry on his project of unification. Under Craig's direction, Skule's counterintuitive resolution was not to be played as a "pathetic" defeat, but rather

¹⁰¹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 25.

with Skule "still gay & proud," and this interpretation lines up with what I have been charting as a shift away from an emphasis on political sovereignty and towards achieving a personal sovereignty. According to Craig's notes: "Skule ordinary and at ease when he goes to die ...Really at ease -- because no more uneasy."¹⁰² What is more, Haakon, in confronting the dead body of his rival, is no longer as wholly self-assured as he was at the beginning of the play. Significantly, he is reluctant to step over the dead body of his erstwhile competitor, and under Craig's direction this moment of indecision is underscored. In Craig's notes, Haakon is "deeply moved and actually afraid."¹⁰³ He does not conceive of the character as undergoing a conversion from system to personality, but an important moment of uncertainty is registered: "His first doubt is born now. Begins one immensely puzzled sigh - for he is a man of purpose - he sometimes suspects he is the honest fool he is - perhaps he has another look at Skule."¹⁰⁴ Within this moment of self-doubt, Haakon has come to understand Skule not merely as a political opponent, but as - in the striking phrase that would aptly describe Julian of *Emperor and Galilean* as well - "God's stepchild on earth."¹⁰⁵

PRETENDING

The traditional rites and signs of legitimate sovereignty are overtly theatrical, and in Ibsen's hands, the site of extreme skepticism. *The Pretenders* opens with a scene in which Haakon's mother has just undergone a trial by fire, where her ability to hold a hot

¹⁰² As quoted in Marker and Marker, *A Production Revisited*, 76.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁵ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:341. According to Bjørn Hemmer ("Ibsen and Historical Drama" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 26), Ibsen used this phrase to describe both Skule and Julian, but I have not been able to locate the reference to Julian.

iron in her bare hands is understood to be proof that she gave birth to the legitimate child of the former King. But whether *that* son was in fact *Haakon* is thrown into question. Later, when Skule has seized the throne, he must have a certain shrine brought out of a church in order to lawfully confirm his title. This is accomplished by an act of blatant sacrilege, collapsing any positive meaning in the event, even for Skule. This skepticism toward political sovereignty and its dependence on theatricality casts a shadow over personal sovereignty as well.

In my analyses, I have made a point of emphasizing Skule's quest for personal sovereignty within his ostensible quest for political sovereignty. In so far as it *is* political sovereignty he seeks, Skule's achievement is presumably unambiguous: only *one* can be sovereign in the political context of a recognized territory. A single individual reigns; all others are subjects. Yet, having become sovereign, Skule's more haunting and persistent plight is revealed, and even exacerbated, for the title of King proves not to be a protection against self-doubt. At least two distinct yet connected issues - the construction of kingship, and the role of king - come to the fore when Skule, alone on stage, discloses his anxieties. Importantly, both have as much to do with theatricality as they do with sovereignty. "Whenever I catch myself thinking unawares about the rights of kingship," Skule admits, "these rights are always Haakon's, never mine. To endow myself with them, I have to use artifice - create an illusion - construct it cunningly. I have to banish memory; force belief."¹⁰⁶ As I argue in the general introduction, the inherent theatricality of sovereignty makes the position of sovereign susceptible to fraud. An actress or a brothel madame - as in Yeats' *The Player Queen* and Genet's *The Balcony* - can play the role of queen with a change of clothes and the adoption of what are construed as regal

¹⁰⁶ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 2:294.

mannerisms.

For Yeats' Decima and Genet's Irma, the political objective in "playing" a sovereign is to placate an angry mob threatening insurrection. Skule faces a similar menace from those who remain loyal to Haakon. But Skule *is* a king when he speaks these lines; if he feels he is an impostor it is because he recognizes the scaffold upon which sovereignty is assembled and recognized. The subjects constitute an audience and are complicit in establishing and accepting the sovereign, but Skule's worries go beyond whether he has convinced others that he is their ruler. Far more difficult is the task of convincing himself. As he indicates above, it is his own memory he must banish, his own belief he must force, for what he describes is an internal scene of contemplation, not an external scene of pageantry. On my reading, the marrow of Ibsen's play is located precisely here, in the links between sovereignty and make-believe. Skule has admitted he must *force* belief in his own sovereignty, for he is worried he has merely created "an illusion" -- a fabricated, make-believe king.

That this conundrum which loops back upon itself is Ibsen's primary concern is underscored by the title he has given his drama, *The Pretenders*. Another playwright might well have given this history play the name "King Skule" or "King Haakon." But the drama is inexorably motivated by what it means to be a pretender. Technically, "a pretender" simply identifies a status as claimant or aspirant for a title or position, but as Ibsen dramatizes it, to be a pretender is *to suffer a condition*: a state in which pretense, dissimulation, and fakery haunt the desire for and even the purported achievement of sovereignty, for the pretender bears the ongoing threat of being disclosed as a counterfeit. In other words, it is a condition brought about by intertwined theatrical and

existential anxieties regarding sovereignty. As the chapters to follow aim to show, *The Pretenders* thematizes a crucial link binding sovereignty and modern drama. The link hinges on the performative nature of sovereignty, on the problem of theatricality within modernism, and also on the long history of relations between sovereignty and theater.

III. *EMPEROR AND GALILEAN* (1873)

Pretense and theatricality haunt the issues of sovereignty explored in *Emperor and Galilean*, just as in *The Pretenders*. Indeed, the twin threats of flattery and skepticism (towards self, others, and the gods), are nowhere more conspicuous than in this epic drama where nearly every scene - whether depicting the imperial court, conversations between brothers and childhood friends, philosophers with their students, lamenting women, tortured insubordinates, or soldiers on the march - is performed within the world of the play with a consciousness of a triple audience: those in their immediate presence, those in political power who may learn of what they say and do, and, crucially, the ever-watchful eye of whichever god or gods hold sway at that particular moment.

Ibsen's "world-historical" drama also resembles *The Pretenders* in so far as it reveals an emphasis on personal sovereignty beneath its outward narrative theme of political sovereignty. Although Julian occupies a stage located at the convergence of major epochs and his actions seek to change the course and texture of the world, his struggles are intensely personal. Self-doubt is a crucial feature of Ibsen's exploration, not only in Part One, "Caesar's Apostasy," where Julian has not yet arrived on the throne, but

also in Part Two, "Emperor Julian," where there is no question as to his political title. But while *The Pretenders* probes issues of legitimacy - who can be sovereign - *Emperor and Galilean* more vigorously explores what it means *to be* sovereign.

Specifically, Ibsen brings into focus a critical tension within sovereignty -- between the earthly, material, and temporal world, on the one hand, and the spiritual, inscrutable, and infinite world, on the other. The scope and effect of Julian's sovereignty are shown to have unbearable limitations. Unbearable, because for Julian limited sovereignty is tantamount to negated sovereignty. Julian's historical significance will certainly figure in the following examination of the play, but my primary concern will be to trace Ibsen's account of how the politico-theological friction within political sovereignty chafes even within the sphere of personal sovereignty.

Ibsen considered *Emperor and Galilean* his most important work (*hovedverk*), a fact that has proved something of either a puzzle or a nuisance to scholars since the play does not resemble the subsequent prose plays on which his reputation was secured. The lengthy ten-act double drama (clocking in at over eight hours), based on the fourth-century Emperor Julian and his struggle with Christianity - culminating in a direct "enemy" distinction for the crucified "Galilean" and harsh persecution of his followers - seems worlds away in form, subject, historical time, and scale from the nineteenth-century Norwegian parlors with which Ibsen has come to be associated. Yet this is the first play that Ibsen wrote in which "realism" took on aesthetic value for him.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ In her central chapter on *Emperor and Galilean* in *Henrik Ibsen and The Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, Toril Moi establishes this play as Ibsen's crucial but imperfect turn to realism and the everyday. According to Moi, Ibsen's efforts in this play manage to hit on nearly all the core features of what come to be recognized as his realist concerns in the second half of his career. My own analysis of

To be sure, Ibsen's initial foray into realism does not correspond to gritty social realism. His effort was not guided by a desire to move away from protagonists of elevated position in order to celebrate the common individual; rather, two simple but significant maneuvers indicate his strategy: he forgoes idealization of the sovereign and he is emphatic about the use of prose. In fact, Ibsen links these strategies, explaining in a letter how "the form of the language must be adapted to the degree of idealization that is given to the account. My new play [*Emperor and Galilean*] is no tragedy in the old style; what I wanted to portray was people, and it was precisely for that reason that I did not allow them to speak with 'the tongues of angels.'"¹⁰⁸ Ibsen not only portrays Julian as fallible in terms of his political and military decisions, but he indicates repeatedly that he physically reeks as a result of prioritizing philosophy over hygiene. The unglamorous depiction of the emperor did not vex Ibsen's critics, but Edmund Gosse notably objected to Ibsen's use of prose with his subject matter. Ibsen took the disapproval as an opportunity to voice his intentions to "cast [the play] in a form as realistic as possible; it was the illusion of reality I wanted to produce... If I had used verse, I would have run counter to my own intentions and to the task I had set myself."¹⁰⁹

On my reading, Ibsen's desire to display the concept of sovereignty under siege and embattled contributed to his choice of prose. Julian's political power and sense of

Emperor and Galilean and its decisive role in understanding Ibsen's oeuvre is in line with Moi's assessment, differing mainly in emphasis and scope: proceeding from my sense that Ibsen addresses issues of sovereignty as a chief tension in his dramas, I place greater weight on the significance of his earlier play, *The Pretenders*, and look to his final plays as well (aside from a brief discussion of *When We Dead Awaken* in her epilogue, Moi does not take up Ibsen's last four plays). Where it differs from her account, I would like to think it complements rather than disputes. Indeed, I am grateful to Moi for a conversation we had in June 2011. I was in the very early stages of formulating this project and Moi helpfully put me on the scent of *The Pretenders* and its potential relevance.

¹⁰⁸ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 4: 606. [Letter to Edmund Gosse, 15 January 1874].

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4: 3. (One wonders how 'realistically' Ibsen expected certain scenes to be staged, for example, the rather Senecan moment when the Christian throws a chunk of his tortured flesh at the emperor to show how little he cares for his physical life).

personal purpose are constantly in question. Verse might have gestured toward the neat resolutions Ibsen sought to avoid. In prose, then, Ibsen presents what is arguably the very form of his realism: the story of an individual grappling with what it means to be sovereign; the story of an individual who questions - among other things - whether such a thing as being sovereign is even possible with a divine sovereign thwarting him.

HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND DRAMA

Along with insisting on its realism, Ibsen considered *Emperor and Galilean* to have contemporary relevance. As with *The Pretenders*, although the material events took place in a distant past, his objective was not to give a discrete account of history, but rather to convey circumstances that continue to be germane, in this case, both because the Judeo-Christian tradition turned out to dominate Western thought and morality, but also because the ideological contest against that tradition had emerged anew with considerable strength in the late nineteenth century. "History" records Julian's anti-Christian efforts as futile. Ibsen's drama suggests that the course Julian's life took was necessary and perhaps authorized by either the very god against whom the emperor fought, or, a historical force even more powerful. Ibsen's play conveys the possibility that the battle on this larger scale is not over.

Philosophical considerations - political and theological - dominate the mood and action of the play. Julian's personal predilection for philosophical study over and above political power immediately distinguishes him from the rest of the imperial court. Even when Julian has led a successful military campaign, he longs for the solitude that would

allow him to study and write. Indeed, Julian is a philosopher before he is a sovereign, and it is only because (and when) his philosophy suggests to him that it uniquely falls to him to be sovereign, that he embraces the position. In this chapter I have been discussing the anxieties of the bourgeois, using Pippin's description of "being called on by a historical situation to lead a life, take up the reins." In no way does Julian's character remind one of a bourgeois, but he consummately demonstrates the heaviness of the burden the bourgeois has inherited. No one could be more conscious of the historical situation and its demands than Ibsen's Julian, who thinks in precisely these terms. To be sovereign is not his primary goal -- to the contrary, Julian seeks to fulfill the role history has for him.

With good reason, the two philosophers most often invoked in discussions of *Emperor and Galilean* are Hegel and Nietzsche. Regardless of the level of Ibsen's direct familiarity with these philosophers, his interest in a dialectical movement responsible for underwriting world history obviously bears an important likeness to Hegel's thought, and it is difficult not to see his reliance on Apollo and Dionysus as two of the most prominent Greek gods Julian seeks to worship as perhaps inspired by Nietzsche's favoring of these divine entities in *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, it is on a different level of perceived overlap that I would like to mention these two philosophers, and I neither claim an intentional appeal on the part of Ibsen, nor will I dwell at any length on the work of the philosophers. But it is nevertheless the case that the Greek dramas on which each focused sustained attention - namely, Sophocles' *Antigone* in Hegel and Euripides' *The Bacchae* in Nietzsche - have significant thematic relevance to Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*.

Both *Antigone* and *The Bacchae* center on sovereignty, and specifically, on the importance of recognizing the sovereignty of the gods. My focus will be on *Antigone* in what follows, but I will point out here the intriguing fact that the account of Dionysus in Euripides' drama - his background and narrative arc - bears a striking resemblance to the account of Jesus of Nazareth (the invisible antagonist of Ibsen's play): born of a woman whose conception by a God is sneered at as a ludicrous attempt to cover up a commonplace act of human promiscuity; unrecognized as a god; arrested for being a nuisance to the local ruling powers; escaping by means of divine acts. These shared features suggest the mythical abstraction of a contest between earthly sovereign power and the divine.

But whereas in *The Bacchae* a direct confrontation between a god and a king is staged, the struggle in *Antigone* takes the indirect form of a sovereign versus a subject (a structure which lends itself more easily to modern circumstances). By taking up a divine cause in her fight against the king, Antigone, though socially lower than Creon, arguably achieves the sovereign position on spiritual grounds. Obviously, this is not to say Antigone takes over rule, but to indicate the subtler way in which her position is held in higher esteem -- not just by audiences of the play (increasingly this is the case), but more significantly, within the play, as both Antigone and Haemon report, by the majority of Theban citizens.¹¹⁰ The well-documented reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* in the modern and contemporary theater focuses on undisguised adaptations and direct invocations of the Greek tragedy, typically favoring an interpretation that understands

¹¹⁰ Sophocles, and Mark Griffith, *Antigone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ll. 504-07; 690-700, 733-41.

Creon as an unjust tyrant.¹¹¹ In borrowing the form of a challenge to sovereignty by a subject willing to suffer and die on theological grounds, *Emperor and Galilean* differs from these adaptations, yet anticipates a notable twentieth-century interest in martyrs such as Joan of Arc, Thomas Beckett, and Thomas More, all of whom dare to test the limits of earthly sovereignty.¹¹²

To reiterate the overarching argument I have been putting forward, my point in considering Ibsen's drama as an heir to *Antigone* is twofold. First, it is in keeping with my larger project to understand the means by which modern dramatists charted a modernist course not simply by rejecting former aesthetic models but also by availing themselves of previously mapped territories in the history of drama. Second, the specific province that Sophocles' *Antigone* has staked out for theater in this regard is a variety of drama in which the sovereign figure is eclipsed not by an outright rival for the throne but instead by a subject whose leverage comes by way of a theological position. In many respects, Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean* has been understudied, yet it is still surprising - especially given the abundance of Hegelian interpretations of Ibsen's drama - that in none of the critical literature with which I am familiar is a parallel drawn between the contest of wills so famously propounded in Sophocles' tragedy and the one Ibsen dramatizes between Julian and Jesus and his followers. My inquiry, it goes without saying, is guided by what this debate reveals about sovereignty as it is explored in drama.

¹¹¹ See, for example, George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) and *Antigone On the Contemporary World Stage*, eds. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Among the most significant modern adaptations is Jean Anouilh's 1944 version, which maintains the ambiguity of Sophocles' Creon, showing him to be sensitively engaged with matters of sovereignty and rule, rather than a one-dimensional, cruel tyrant.

¹¹² This line of the *Antigone* legacy will be the subject of my future chapter, "Modern Creons."

Generally speaking, the concept and practice of sovereignty - of one person's rule over others - historically has been grounded upon theological premises. In the West, Christianity's unsurpassed influence on the nature and characterization of political rule makes the study of sovereignty necessarily the study of the status and authority of Christianity during that period. Julian's recognition of the threat posed by the newly established Christianity investigates a historical progression, for the Greek gods he puts in opposition to the Galilean are the Greek gods whose laws regarding burial Antigone is moved to obey in spite of Creon's decree. Although many considered Julian increasingly mad for persecuting Christians and attempting to resuscitate observation of the Greek gods, Ibsen ensures that the emperor's desire to defeat his long-dead enemy is comprehensible, precisely by insisting on Julian's philosophical sensitivity to the concept of sovereignty. Indeed, far from being irrational, Julian's assessment of the threat posed by Christianity rightly recognizes it as an even more absolute theological threat than the one Creon faces in creating a law that contradicts those of Antigone's gods.¹¹³

Ibsen's conviction about the relevance to modern life of this historical moment from late antiquity was well founded. Not only did the struggle with Christianity line up with the intellectual mood of a late nineteenth-century Europe coming to terms with Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead," but more specifically, it speaks to the politico-theological heritage haunting the concept of sovereignty. *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman* provide the surest evidence of this unrelenting torment even in the shift from political to personal sovereignty, for the metaphorical sovereigns in Ibsen's late plays feel themselves to be in competition with God. Solness takes the opportunity

¹¹³ Monotheism is far more of a threat to sovereignty than pantheism because a single, omniscient, omnipotent god demands total allegiance and displaces an earthly ruler, whereas pantheism allows constant deferral of responsibility and loyalty to any number of gods.

to brazenly declare to God his independence as a master builder while atop the Lysanger church tower, but ten years later feels he must reassert his determination. Borkman does not name God outright as an adversary, but when he has similarly climbed high up the mountain he surveys all below as belonging to *his* "infinite" and "inexhaustible" kingdom. "And now it lies there," he laments to Ella, "defenceless, leaderless, exposed to thieving and plundering and attack." Borkman eventually enunciates his blasphemy, for in striving after "the kingdom...and the power...and the glory," he has rejected Ella and her love, as well as the doxology typically said after the Pater Noster: "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."¹¹⁴

WAR ON SOVEREIGNTY

Emperor and Galilean: the conjunction links the two figures as though a couple, but Julian recognizes it is nothing less than war between them. What is at stake in this war? How does the sovereign of the Roman Empire come to feel he must fight with a long-dead Jewish upstart from a provincial corner that could hardly be considered a military threat? As Ibsen recounts it, Julian arrives at this battle position through a series of highly personal attempts to understand his own significance. Interestingly, although he fights for absolute authority, he did not always seek such sovereign status, nor was he always against the Christian faith. On the contrary, Julian initially shuns the throne and is on the side of Christianity, two crucial factors that later serve to add to his spleen. Had Ibsen only wanted to record a pagan emperor's attempt to overturn Christianity, he could have dispensed with Part One of his epic drama. Instead, "Caesar's Apostasy," which traces a double reversal - away from Christianity and toward

¹¹⁴ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 8: 231.

sovereignty - foregrounds Ibsen's insistence on showing the quest for political power as a deeply personal one. When Julian calls for the conversion of his subjects away from Christianity, his own personal history of religious rebirths complicates - *for him* - his claim to sovereign authority. "It is more than a doctrine [Jesus] has spread over the world," Julian tries to explain to his counselor, the mystic Maximus, admitting "it is magic which makes your soul captive. Once you have come under his spell, I don't think you can ever really escape."¹¹⁵ Macrina, a faithful Christian, shrewdly identifies Julian's former conviction as his source of frustration. "What is it you hate and persecute?" she asks Julian. "Not him, but your belief in him." Macrina further recognizes that Julian's attempt to eradicate Christianity is counterproductive: "Isn't he alive in your hate and persecution, just as he is alive in our love?"¹¹⁶

From the beginning of the play through to its end, Julian is above all a seeker of signs, and he has reason to suspect his life is marked for significance. The dream that brings his childhood friend from afar suggests a noble purpose for the prince. Coupled with repeated references to his mother's dream in which "she was giving birth to Achilles," Julian seizes on the notion that he is withholding from battle where he is most needed. He eagerly embraces these portents that signal he is an actor not only on an earthly stage but, more urgently, on a metaphysical stage. Emperor Constantius is worried about the Persian War, but Julian recognizes a *spiritual* war being waged, initially, "with the Prince of Golgotha."¹¹⁷ It is precisely in the philosophical arena that Julian feels he has a calling. "My path is marked out," he tells his brother Gallus, who

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 4:310.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 4: 418.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 4: 212.

accuses Julian of merely acting disinterested in the throne.¹¹⁸ Yet when Gallus is named emperor-elect, Julian is not the least envious, but relieved and overjoyed, exclaiming “I am free, free, free!”¹¹⁹

This incantation of freedom will be echoed in the pivotal scene where Julian consults with spirits conjured by the mystic Maximus in another attempt to ascertain the significance of his existence, and yet again when Julian decisively breaks his covenant with Christianity and chooses to be sovereign.¹²⁰ Although he had sought to wage war against pagan philosophies in order to uphold the truth of Christianity, Julian's spiritual journey has led him to change the terms of the battle: Life versus The Lie. Julian's hunger for life in the temporal world persuades him Christianity has distorted truth by standing as a wall, obstructing individual freedom and desire.

As earnest as Julian is about freedom and "life" in the sentient realm, ironies abound in his efforts to distance himself from Christianity, principally because of his simultaneous attempt to claim sovereignty. For one, Julian makes the error of attempting to *impose freedom* on his subjects, ultimately devolving into plain tyranny. For another, his increasingly ascetic lifestyle in tandem with his obsessions with the spiritual world and his historical legacy belie the joy he anticipated in choosing freedom within this world. Ibsen exposes these contradictions of Julian's character, but the drama goes to great lengths to avoid judging him. Julian unravels, not simply as some power-hungry emperor, but as an individual wrestling with the philosophical complexities of sovereignty.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 4: 224.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 4: 228.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 4: 263; 316.

Julian is Skule's opposite in his initial resistance to sovereignty, but once he claims the throne, he will brook no dissent, least of all by a spiritual rival. Unlike his counterpart in *The Pretenders*, Julian does not wistfully long for a "kingly thought" to justify his sovereignty; he does not doubt his political supremacy, but in asserting his power, he learns its limitations. Fundamentally, Julian is like Sophocles' Creon: a new sovereign, establishing his authority in the aftermath of a civil war (averted, in Julian's case, only because Constantius dies before they engage in battle).¹²¹ In Sophocles' tragedy, Creon enters as the chorus twice brings up newness – "a *new* <ruler> in these *new* circumstances."¹²² It is, of course, Creon's newness as king that creates the impetus for him to establish his sovereignty in some signature way, and his edict prescribing death to anyone who should give burial to Polyneices works precisely to inaugurate his rule over Thebes. It is also his effort to create terms of peace at the close of the war, to efface the existence of traitorous elements within the city still caught in the momentum of war.

Julian, however, is more philosophically motivated than Creon; his strategies are not attempts to merely demonstrate he is first in the land, but rather bids to test and define sovereignty as such. Creon does not understand himself to be engaging in a war with the gods; he sees merely a contest of the wills with a stubborn, insubordinate girl. Julian

¹²¹ The famous confrontation in *Antigone* comes about explicitly as a result of the civil war, for Creon could not assume the power to declare and enforce his decree until the sons of Oedipus had died and left the Theban throne to him. Sophocles' tragedy makes it clear in the first choral song that the mood of Thebes is one of tremendous relief that the terrifying war is over. Νίκη – goddess of victory – has arrived, and now the twofold task at hand is to forget and celebrate. Significantly, the chorus calls upon Dionysus to lead them in this effort, foregrounding not only the singing and dancing associated with bacchic worship, but also potentially pointing to theater's role and involvement in the double task of forgetting and celebrating.

¹²² Sophocles, and Mark Griffith, *Antigone*, ll. 156-7, emphasis mine. The Greek text is corrupt in this line; the noun that νεοχμὸς modifies is missing. Ταγός or ἀρχων – ruler – could be supplied. But as Griffith notes in his commentary, "It is likely that the corruption is more extensive, since ... νεοχμὸς is nowhere else applied to a person" (154).

looks past the Galileans who are his political subjects to the source of their strength and declares Jesus "the greatest rebel who has ever lived...he murders every Caesar and every Augustus alike."¹²³ Recognizing the complete sway Jesus has over the *wills and minds* of his followers, Julian comes up against the boundaries of his earthly political sovereignty, which can only reign over the *actions* of his subjects.

Julian finds this galling because wills and minds are capable of authentic belief and loyalty, whereas actions may be only outward displays. The Emperor acknowledges that the readiness with which the Christians are tortured and martyred would find no parallel in followers of Socrates, Plato, or Diogenes.¹²⁴ At core, Julian yearns for something else that falls within the province of wills and minds: love. Julian recounts a dream in which he succeeds in expunging the memory of Jesus from earth, only to discover the futility of his victory, for he sees Jesus in another world leading a procession with a cross on his back. The point of the dream for the Emperor goes beyond the impossibility of vanquishing his enemy; he recognizes just what would elude his grasp even if he managed to triumph. Earthly sovereigns, Julian speculates, are remembered "with cold astonishment...while the other one, the Galilean, the carpenter's son, reigns as the king of love in the warm believing hearts of men."¹²⁵

For Ibsen, the high cost of sovereignty that excludes warmth and human love turns out to be an abiding insight. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, he again takes the temperature of sovereignty and the mercury reading is identical: Ella tells Borkman "an icy blast" blows from the kingdom with which he is obsessed, whereas he might have had love, since "up here, in the light of day, there throbbed a warm and living human heart.

¹²³ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 4:399-400.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4: 438.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4: 446.

Beating for you."¹²⁶ Following through with this motif, "an icy hand of iron" grips Borkman's heart as he dies.¹²⁷

In choosing Julian the Apostate for his subject matter, Ibsen's first dramatic undertaking motivated by "realism" forcefully manifests Ibsen's interest in a realism that explores and gives voice to an internal struggle. On Ibsen's account, Julian's discontentment extends to, if not originates in, his desire for a personal, individual sovereignty (that happens to coincide with political sovereignty). Despite the occult nature of some of the signs Julian consults, and despite the "world-historical" nature of the lens through which he sees himself, there is at base an attempt to determine what his unique role or mission in life might be, a pursuit that links him with Ibsen's later "ordinary" characters. Julian wants to bring about a new, changed world, one that takes pleasure in itself, and the divine signs seem to indicate that it fits his hands to do this. But Julian never forgets it was he who has read them this way. Indeed, once Julian determines *for himself* in his first act of sovereignty that the *conflicting* signs mark him elect as the creator and ruler of a new empire, his increasing intolerance of Christianity must be understood as a mounting fear that he was wrong *about himself* and what he was meant to do, since he has been unable to do it.

Ibsen's treatment of Julian's situation is distinctly modern in this regard. Recall once more Pippin's description of the persistent problem of subjectivity: "being called on by a historical situation 'to be a subject,' lead a life, take up the reins, as it were, and that this is something at which, 'modernism' discovers, *we can fail* (oddly, especially when we

¹²⁶ Ibid., 8: 231.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 8: 233.

try very hard to do it)." In other words, what Ibsen considers "real" is the arduousness of presiding over one's life, a difficulty the playwright considers comparable to that of a sovereign seeking to rule over and expand his empire with a divine sovereign checking his every move. Moreover, Julian demonstrates yet another path to despair for the person who says "Caesar or nothing" for Julian despairs over his self not for failing to achieve the title of Caesar, but for failing to realize the sovereignty implied by possession of the title. His pursuit of sovereignty reveals the boundaries of political sovereignty, for being Caesar leaves Julian with strictly "nothing" on an interpersonal level, a fate, mentioned above, that Ibsen confers on his later bourgeois sovereign, Borkman.

IV. *THE MASTER BUILDER* (1892)

Solness' ambition, sense of calling, and fear of usurpers, as well as Borkman's single-minded aspirations to establish his entrepreneurial empire despite overwhelming setbacks, might at first seem like simplistic transpositions of Ibsen's previous work on the thematic of sovereignty to modern bourgeois settings. However, Ibsen does far more than merely "update" his earlier plays when he explicitly invokes the language of sovereignty in his later plays. The "kingdom" in *The Master Builder* turns out to be a richly nuanced everyday world, highly subjective, lying beyond conventional morality. Above all, Ibsen's modern kingdom is *shared*. Hilde knocks on Solness's door, the obvious embodiment of the "youth" he fears is endangering his position, but it is *with Hilde* that Solness will build castles. A focus on personal relationships and on the situation of

women are precisely the modern features Toril Moi identifies as missing in *Emperor and Galilean*, but will soon thereafter become the signature thematic concerns of Ibsen's prose theater.¹²⁸ With his artistic developments in mind, my approach to Ibsen's late "sovereignty" plays aims to go further than discussing the challenges and burdens faced by the male protagonists who are unmistakably set up to be considered in sovereign terms. Ibsen's female characters not only share in the concerns of sovereignty, but give the concept fuller shape and color. In what follows, I will focus on *The Master Builder*, and my analysis will have two overlapping emphases that would equally apply to a reading of *John Gabriel Borkman*: Ibsen's strategies in creating bourgeois sovereigns and the role played by interpersonal relationships in discovering the stakes of sovereignty and mapping out its modern territory.¹²⁹

In *The Master Builder* - significantly, the first play Ibsen wrote in Norway since *The Pretenders* in 1863 - Ibsen returns nearly thirty years later to the issues surrounding sovereignty he addressed in his early play, shifting the discussion to the bourgeois world of the architect's practice and family life while weaving in additional subtleties to the concept of sovereignty. To be sovereign in this later play does not involve a literal throne, but the local title of "master builder." But just as Ibsen reveals a search for personal sovereignty underlying the ostensible desire for political sovereignty in *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean*, so too the master builder's publicly recognized form of

¹²⁸ Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 190.

¹²⁹ As noted in my discussion of *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen similarly stresses in *John Gabriel Borkman* that the accomplishment of achieving power is cold comfort when compared to love and affection, which falls outside the province of sovereignty. In forsaking Ella and acting as if her twin sister were her personal equivalent, Borkman reveals how shortsighted he is about the sphere of personal relations.

ascendancy is shown to have limited value in Ibsen's drama while achieving personal sovereignty is the ultimate goal.

Solness, as noted by Hofmannsthal, is related to Haakon and Skule of *The Pretenders*; he is temperamentally both assertive and tormented by fear. Ibsen seems also to have drawn on his characterization of sovereignty in *Emperor and Galilean*, for Solness' attempt to attain sovereignty entails an explicit struggle with God. These traits, coupled with Solness' swift rise to preeminence, his conviction of having been specially marked out and of having unusual, possibly supernatural powers available to him, as well as his unscrupulous attempts to maintain dominance, also align his character with Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Just as Julian believed himself to have exceptional significance in world history, Solness, the protagonist of *The Master Builder*, understands himself to have rare access to control over his local world. Solness' uncanny ability to will things to happen to his advantage seems to extend even to what Julian longed for but recognized was beyond his grasp, that is, power over the wills and minds of others. But were these two Ibsen characters to somehow meet, Solness would no doubt tell Julian to be careful what he wishes for. The master builder is grateful for but also haunted by these unusual powers, for although he seems to have achieved his supremacy by means of these gifts, it has not been without considerable cost and loss. Solness' success as the master builder, or architect, has been built upon the literal ashes of his wife's family home. Solness had long recognized that if that house were to burn down, it would enable him to build homes

on the property, and with this knowledge, he does not make it a priority to fix a crack he happens to notice in the chimney.

In another play, a play narrowly concerned with, say, exploring the slippery slope of depravity encouraged by ambitious pursuit, it would be this sin of omission driving the plot. But in Ibsen's drama, a drama intent on examining a more complex problematic of personal sovereignty, it is not, after all, the crack in the chimney that causes the fire, but something in a cupboard in an entirely different part of the house. With this deft maneuver, Ibsen forecloses any easily derived causal relationships (the hallmark of naturalistic drama) and offers instead a play situated within - and clearly undaunted by - the intangible and inexplicable, even as it insists on what is "real." This last point about the dual presence of the spiritual and the material is important, less for reasons of categorization (the usual arguments over whether Ibsen has forsaken his realist commitments in favor of symbolist ideals), than because it is in keeping with the politico-theological tensions at work in the concept of sovereignty.¹³⁰

For Solness, knowing the crack in the chimney was not responsible for the fire does not bring relief, for he does not feel this detail lessens his culpability. By merely wishing for the artistic and business opportunity that would result should the old house burn down, Solness is convinced he has in fact willed the event into existence. The eccentric self-importance characterizing Solness' interpretation indicates his desire to be a person of consequence but the language he uses patently announces a sovereign figure. He believes he has "been singled out, specially chosen, gifted with the power and the

¹³⁰ As I discuss later in this chapter as well as in the general introduction, Maurice Maeterlinck made an early bid to claim Ibsen's play as a work of symbolism and modern tragedy in his essay "The Tragical in Daily Life." Ibsen himself, as well as subsequent critics, have pointed out that even if, according to Maeterlinck, Hilde and Solness are "living in the atmosphere of the soul," the play is also grounded in material reality.

ability to want something, to desire something...so insistently...and so ruthlessly...[he] inevitably get[s] it in the end.”¹³¹ The drama reveals Solness to be something of a tyrant, and even a vampire, in the way he wields his power and allows others’ lives to become subsumed into his personal goals. But lest there be any doubt that Ibsen conceived of Solness in terms of sovereignty, the crisis of the play centers on the *kingdom* Solness has promised to the young Hilde. The term and its fairy-tale connotations are jarring in the context of the play, but it is precisely the discordant note that Ibsen seeks to examine. What kind of kingdom is accessible to the common individual? What sort of sovereignty is available, and how does one achieve it?

At the height of his power, which is shown to be artistic, social, and erotic, Solness built a church in Lysanger with a high tower. Following custom, he climbed the scaffolding to the tower with a wreath to hang at the very top. This has become a legend to those who know him because Solness suffers vertigo and has only climbed a tower that one time. But Hilde Wangel remembers something else from that day. As she puts it, it was afterwards that “the real thing happened.”¹³² Solness draws a blank trying to recall a noteworthy incident, but according to Hilde, when he came down from climbing the tower, he took her, a young adolescent girl, kissed her again and again, and promised her a kingdom. He would provide a kingdom and she would be its princess.

What could this mean? A man thrilling at his accomplishment and making grand, impossible, heady claims and promises. Or, a delusional girl. Ibsen's drama refuses to dismiss the event in either of these convenient ways, instead taking the proposition

¹³¹ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 7:411.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 7:382.

seriously: "the real thing happened." What exactly is *real*? That the young Hilde took Solness at his word is understandable, but now an adult Hilde has come to collect her kingdom. "I was probably fooling," Solness tells her, trying to make sense of an event he fails to remember, but Hilde's response, "Was that all you wanted to do? Make a fool of me?" – shows what little esteem she has for a casual interpretation of her experience.¹³³ Furthermore, her demand for respect shows that she can more than hold her own with the master builder, something the other characters in the play are unable or unwilling to do.

The role Hilde plays in Solness' subsequent decisions stands at the center of the play's mysteriousness. Is she for good or ill? One interpretation understands her goading of Solness to climb the tower despite his vertigo in sinister terms. On this reading, Hilde is selfish and monstrous, taking perverse pleasure in a triumph with a bloody end -- a modern incarnation of Lady Macbeth taunting Macbeth to be a man. Another interpretation understands Hilde in more benign terms, as a helpmate to Solness who encourages him to fulfill his potential. On this reading, Solness' daring to climb the tower offsets the fatal fall. Here, too, however, Ibsen's drama foils attempts to neatly understand Hilde in these predictable roles.

Ibsen renders Hilde as a strong, cheerful, earnest, and independent woman, a "bird of prey" with a "robust conscience," daring to do what she wants.¹³⁴ In other words, Hilde is as concerned with her own personal sovereignty as she is with Solness'. That this complicates matters is a gross understatement, and this is precisely the terrain Ibsen seeks

¹³³ Ibid., 7:386.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 7: 412-15. The reference to a "bird of prey" within a discussion of having a "robust" or "vigorous" conscience, calls to mind Nietzsche's outrage in *The Genealogy of Morality* that beasts of prey are expected, in the morality derived from Judeo-Christian principles, to act as domesticated animals.

to explore. In other words, the conflict he puts before the audience is not whether Hilde is a femme fatale or a supportive woman, nor even whether Solness is foolhardy or courageous in finding inspiration in her exhortations. Rather, among the most important questions Ibsen raises in *The Master Builder* is what happens when one's personal sovereignty is enmeshed with someone else's. Ibsen may be interested in the individual over and above community and society, but his individuals are inexorably involved with other individuals. Ibsen recognizes that in the modern, bourgeois and democratic world of individuals, personal sovereignty cannot comfortably model itself upon absolute sovereignty, in which a single figure reigns over the rest. Repeatedly, his sovereign figures - Skule, Julian, Solness, and especially Borkman - exhibit the loneliness of being sovereign. Though they attempt to steel themselves against it, Ibsen's characters discover again and again that personal sovereignty cannot be reconciled with isolation.

Solness counts Hilde's story of their past encounter as another proof of his ability to desire a situation into existence. Initially Solness is only willing to grant he was moved to kiss Hilde, a shallow impulse that hardly warrants her journey to find him ten years later. Talking further with Hilde, Solness recognizes that the *real* desire he was expressing, and the desire she has come to see realized, was his desire to rise to the challenge of presenting her with a kingdom. For Hilde, envisioning the kingdom *together* with Solness was "the real thing," and she considers the promise binding. As she puts it, "It [doesn't] actually have to be an ordinary, real kingdom [... but something else] at least as good."¹³⁵ The tone of their exchange is as slippery to pinpoint as the kingdom and the promise they are trying to articulate:

¹³⁵ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 7:386.

HILDE. If you could build the highest church tower in the world, I thought to myself, then surely you'd be able to arrange some kind of kingdom or other.
 SOLNESS [*shaking his head*]. I don't really follow you, Miss Wangel.
 HILDE. Don't you? It seems simple enough to me.
 SOLNESS. No, I just can't make out if you mean all you say. Or whether you are just joking...
 HILDE [*smiles*]. My turn to make a fool of you, perhaps?
 SOLNESS. Exactly. To make...fools of us both. [*Looks at her.*] Did you know that I was married?
 HILDE. Yes, I've known it all along. Why do you ask that?
 SOLNESS [*casually*]. Oh, I was just wondering. [*Looks earnestly at her and says quietly.*] Why have you come?
 HILDE. Because I want my kingdom. The time's up.
 SOLNESS [*with an involuntary laugh*]. Ha! That's good!
 HILDE [*gaily*]. Bring out my kingdom, master builder! [*Raps with her finger.*] My kingdom on the table!¹³⁶

Considering the above passage, were it not for the stage directions of smiles and gaiety, it would indeed be tempting to interpret Hilde as a demonic Lady Macbeth figure, impatiently inciting and coaxing her Macbeth to dispense with laws and seize the throne. By the same token, the assertive demands and confident self-regard prevent a construal of Hilde as a meek and humble girl playing only a supporting role in Solness' life. For my part, I hear these lines, and this insistence on a kingdom, as containing the same combination of merriment and seriousness as the conversations about a leopard in Connecticut in Howard Hawks' 1938 film, *Bringing Up Baby*. Like *The Master Builder*, *Bringing up Baby* ends with a catastrophic fall from scaffolding attached to the work of the male protagonist. In fact, the denouement of the film is more calamitous in a certain respect, for it includes the collapse of the brontosaurus skeleton David Huxley has been painstakingly reconstructing. But comedy accommodates such debacles, the ruins helping to fashion the happy absurdity of a couple discovering and naming their love for one

¹³⁶ Ibid., 7:386-87.

another. I mention this film because although Ibsen's play ends on a vastly different set of notes with Solness' gruesome crash from the height of the tower, it is to the model of remarriage comedies as discussed by Stanley Cavell, and the moral perfectionism at work there, that I find a way to understand and describe the urgency of Hilde's and Solness' kingdom.

About halfway through *Cities of Words*, Stanley Cavell begins one of his chapters with the question: "Why Ibsen?"¹³⁷ His query aims to situate Ibsen in the conversation he is following about Emersonian moral perfectionism (he places Ibsen on the "side" of the philosophers, with discussions of Hollywood films taking up the other "side" of the dialogue). Cavell's title, taken from Plato's *Republic*, refers to the endeavor to found a just city by means of conversation and imagination. Cavell speaks of cities, Ibsen of kingdoms -- are the two synonymous? Perhaps not technically, but as a term to map out a province of the world in which one might thrive and over which one may be sovereign, both designations serve aptly. After all, Socrates' ideal city has a philosopher-*king*.

But there are more germane links between Cavell's understanding of moral perfectionism and the goal of personal sovereignty I am claiming certain modern playwrights have sought to dramatize. In one of the quotes Cavell uses to launch his book, Emerson resorts to the language of sovereignty in the opening paragraph of his essay on "Self-Reliance": "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty."¹³⁸ Emerson's statement suggests that the rediscovery and reclaiming of certain thoughts - those that, if pursued,

¹³⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 247.

¹³⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 17.

may have led to a work of genius - is a way to recoup one's majesty, that is, the dignity, beauty and splendor that attends rule (in this context, rule signifies individual autonomy). Thoughts that have been "rejected" - perhaps for the sake of propriety or "duty," as it is underscored in *The Master Builder* - confront an individual as an event from the past, with the power to derail or to crown one's individuality all over again. In other words, these rejected thoughts express a previous negotiation within one's personal history that is marked by acquiescence and capitulation -- but it is not necessarily a settled matter, for the thought recurs, affording the opportunity to refine one's response. Significantly, Emerson describes an estrangement from majesty - "alienated" - that lines up with the bourgeois predicament of sovereignty being near at hand yet beyond reach. One way of describing moral perfectionism's aim, then, is the ongoing effort to recognize the majesty of those thoughts and desires that seek to found such a good city or kingdom; such a recognition paves the way to the recovery of one's rightful majesty.

In *Cities of Words*, Cavell asserts that each of the texts and films he takes up there "contains some vision of and arguments about the good city" and that "part of the business of each of the works is to demonstrate whether and how this matters to the characters who harbor these visions and engage in these arguments."¹³⁹ That such a description could be applied to *The Master Builder* and its working out of the stakes of personal sovereignty finds an additional felicity in Cavell's comment that the tendency within conversations of moral perfectionism to seize on a utopian vision "is an effect of the estrangement of philosophy from theology. It expresses the sense that a transcendental element is indispensable in the motivation for a moral existence."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 17-18.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

Cavell's discussion of *A Doll House* in his chapter on Ibsen - an examination of what might be considered the moral grounds of Nora's departure from her husband and children - explores the implications of this transcendental element in Ibsen's realist drama and helps to seal the links I am making between Cavell's understanding of Emersonian moral perfectionism, personal sovereignty, and Ibsen's drama. Nora's decision does not find an explanation in a Kantian categorical imperative, although her dilemma, as Cavell patiently formulates it, seems to be revealed by her discovery that she is not dwelling in the Kingdom of Ends: Helmer does not treat her as an end, nor has she had the space to exercise her own powers of legislation. But her decision to leave the family home is hers to make whatever the consequences. Nora can choose against what others may declare are her duties, or determine that such duties have become devoid of recognizable meaning for her.

The scandal of any decision along these lines (I am tempted to refer to it as "deciding the exception" in the context of personal sovereignty) is related to the "scandal of skepticism" Cavell discusses elsewhere: ultimately it is my call that decides, for me, a matter about which you may, for your part, make quite a different call. Put plainly, the scandal of personal sovereignty is the scandal of asserting oneself, not necessarily as ruler over others, but as one separate from others; that is, acknowledging (and acting upon the knowledge) that one is answerable to oneself. Significantly, the acknowledgement and assertion of sovereignty as explored by Ibsen and other modern dramatists is not only a scandal, but also a burden – a weight, a worry, and a torture. The easiest way out of this difficulty is to depose oneself, to make oneself subject, not sovereign. This temptation to conformity is what I take Emersonian moral perfectionism (and its close cousin

existentialism) to be working against.

The "miracle" Nora hopes for (she wants an equal partnership with Helmer; she does not want to be his "little lark") is closer at hand in *The Master Builder*, and the miracle in this play is called a kingdom. Solness tells Hilde, "You are the very one I have needed most," and her response reflects relief and readiness: "Then I *have* my kingdom...almost."¹⁴¹ The kingdom consists of the two of them needing each other in a particular way, and together they will "build the loveliest...quite the loveliest thing in all the world," which in their language turns out to be "castles in the air."¹⁴² It is fair to wonder what exactly Solness and Hilde are talking about but the play does little to clarify in unequivocal terms. For Solness, building a castle in the air with Hilde seems to imply breaking free of the "doll house" in which he finds himself: the house with Aline that will never be a home, with its empty nurseries as a reminder of the children he suspects God has demanded as a sacrifice in order to be the master builder. Solness wants to shake off the complacency with which he has accepted this "deal" with God. He made his initial revolt when he climbed the church tower ten years previously, declaring he would never build another church for God.

Solness has made good on this promise, building only houses for people in the intervening years, yet Hilde's demand for a kingdom strikes a chord precisely because Solness recognizes he has not exercised the full extent of his self-assertion. What is left to do? When Hilde asks Solness to build "a *proper* castle in the air," he is quick to understand that this castle must be built "with a real foundation."¹⁴³ Here, in this seeming paradox, the imagined city of words finds its legitimacy – and perhaps its majesty – in

¹⁴¹ *The Oxford Ibsen*, 7:390.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 7:431.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7:432; emphasis in original.

having a "real foundation." I take this to mean that the immaterial castle they are constructing must also be grounded in everyday, interpersonal reality, not only in spiritual defiance of God.

Solness may be "master builder," but he lives at an emotional remove from those with whom he is presumably most intimate. Furthermore, his misguided sense of sovereignty generates a toxic working environment: afraid to lose his title, Solness has systematically exploited Old Brovik and his son Ragnar. Hilde finds this attitude and arrangement unacceptable. She wants to see Solness "great," see him with a garland "high, high up on a church tower;" but in nearly the same breath, linking the greatness of climbing the tower with commenting positively on Ragnar's architectural drawings, she commands: "So get out your pencil."¹⁴⁴ Hilde perceives that the young architect's talents are no threat to the master builder's personal sovereignty and counsels Solness to be braver - more honest and generous - in his interactions. One could also say she guides him to be more kingly, magnanimous in praise and support.

To speak of the kingdom, to converse and envision it with someone else, as Solness did with Hilde ten years previously, has the potential – to return to Cavell's comment – for being a transcendent moment that mobilizes personal sovereignty, and it clearly has been this for Hilde. The unattainability of the kingdom is less important than that they imagined and will strive after it together. As with the tower, they must be courageous enough to climb as high as they have built. That the play's end witnesses Solness' fall does not change, for Hilde, that he has dared to climb rather than succumb to anxieties and feelings of impossibility. Hilde's final words, and the final words of the play, are of possession and consummation for, in daring to climb, Solness has secured for

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 7:417.

her their kingdom: “My...my... master builder!”¹⁴⁵

Bringing this discussion of *The Master Builder* to a close, I would like to dwell a little longer on Hilde Wangel and her impertinent demand for a kingdom. I am calling her early encounter with Solness transcendent because it raised the hope for a different, better, indeed utopian world. Hilde has experienced something transformative. Her youth might explain her impressionability, but Ibsen provides a more complex character to contemplate. Hilde believes in the kingdom that Solness will give her because she has had a taste of it in their encounter, a taste, that is, of being specially selected for an important, sovereign, role.

The causes and circumstances of Hilde's bewildering conviction would be intriguing enough to examine in the context of *The Master Builder*. But adding substantially to the puzzle of this play, Ibsen himself has singled out Hilde Wangel, for she is his only character to appear in two different plays, first introduced as a supporting character in *Lady from the Sea*. Why Hilde Wangel? Why this precise character reprised in *The Master Builder*? Why a girl from a rather isolated town with a difficult family history? Ibsen certainly had it at his disposal to come up with a new character with all the necessary personality traits, yet he chose someone he had already created. Oddly enough, Hilde Wangel's recurrence in Ibsen's oeuvre has not aroused the curiosity of critics. I understand her reappearance in direct relation to the playwright's return to matters related to sovereignty, following the trajectory of one individual's struggle toward personal sovereignty in the everyday, bourgeois world.

Who is she? She is the younger daughter of a doctor. Her mother died when she

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 7:445.

was a child and her father remarried a woman not much older than Hilde's sister. *Lady from the Sea* is one of Ibsen's most optimistic plays for in it, Dr. Wangel is brought to a point of acknowledging his love for his wife such that he is willing to set her free. This in turn, brings his wife back to him. It is Nora's miracle. Critics of *Lady from the Sea* are dubious about Dr. Wangel's offer of freedom, feeling it is an unmotivated conversion and does not bode well for the future of the marriage. On my reading, Ibsen provides a verdict on the Wangel marriage in his later characterization of Hilde.

In *The Master Builder*, Hilde's references to her home life are vague, but she counts the decision to leave (permanently, she believes) as one so difficult she could not have gone through with it were it not for her "robust conscience" and the inner drive compelling her to seek her kingdom. I would like to attribute the vigorousness of her conscience and her belief in the legitimacy of her own personal sovereignty to the success of her father's loving conversion, that is, she has witnessed a true transformation and therefore she is able to set great store in Solness's promise of a kingdom. Had the subsequent relationship between her father and stepmother failed to continue in its freedom and commitment - their kingdom - Hilde would likely be cynical rather than insistent on building castles in the air with Solness.

Hilde might, like Emperor Julian, feel she is choosing among conflicting signs as to the likelihood of building a kingdom with Solness, and like Julian, she has her moments of doubt. But what seems important to her is that what she experienced was not only "terribly exciting" (as she repeatedly describes Solness' climb) but it was a "real thing" as well. What I hear in her calling this shared moment *real* is also that it is not a moment to shrug off or take lightly; it is not temporary, not merely an affair, not simply a

chapter in either her or Solness' life.¹⁴⁶ Hilde refuses to believe she is an episode in Solness' story, because they have envisioned a kingdom together. When she claims this is real, it is because she believes in the real promise of the transcendent moment.

V. IBSEN AND MODERN TRAGEDY

As noted, *The Pretenders* (1863) and *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) mark the end of Ibsen's early career, and *The Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) are a part of Ibsen's final quartet of plays, plays he deemed an "epilogue." Notably, these late plays are often referred to as Ibsen's "metaphysical" plays since he moves away from the social realism that marks the core of his career. This shift toward the metaphysical - where, for example, arguments with God come to the fore - is an intriguing and perplexing aspect of Ibsen's work, and it is certainly the case that the playwright was influenced by contemporary trends and debates regarding symbolism, and especially the possibility of a symbolist theater. A potential mark of his "success," were a symbolist theater his goal, is plainly evident in Maurice Maeterlinck's championing of *The Master Builder*. Maeterlinck uses Ibsen's play as the sole contemporary example in his groundbreaking essay, "The Tragical in Daily Life." According to the Belgian symbolist, Hilde and Solness are "the first characters in drama who feel, for an instant,

¹⁴⁶ There are echoes of this theme in other Ibsen plays. In his final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, it is precisely when Rubek tells Irene she was an episode for him that she leaves him, and claims he has killed her soul. Perhaps more telling is when this exasperation is expressed in *Lady from the Sea*. When Hilde's sister Bolette complains to a would-be suitor that she feels isolated, and his response is that she lives where everyone comes to vacation during the summer, she rejects the idea of a getaway spot, of a rendezvous, of an interlude as being sufficient access to the world.

that they are living in the atmosphere of the soul; and the discovery of this essential life that exists in them, beyond the life of every day, comes fraught with terror.”¹⁴⁷ What is chiefly of interest to Maeterlinck as he develops his theory of modern tragedy and the "somnambulistic" theater he advocates, is Ibsen's attention to the internal dialogue as a response to the revelation of a metaphysical reality. I offer a more detailed analysis of Maeterlinck's text in the general introduction, but it is essential to note here that, Maeterlinck's endorsement notwithstanding, Ibsen's broadening of the scope of these late plays to metaphysical concerns is accomplished *without* forsaking the realism that has come to define his work. These late plays are grounded in the finite and everyday world even as they explore the eternal.

When the question of tragedy comes up in discussions of Ibsen (or when the question of Ibsen comes up in discussions of tragedy), twentieth-century critics tend to note that, although he accomplished momentous dramatic advances, the plays of his social realism period failed to make it into the rarefied category of tragedy.¹⁴⁸ A play such as *Ghosts*, in which Darwinism rules out the individual choice necessary to produce tragic conditions is an example of why dramas with an emphasis on naturalism fall short in this regard. More important, in the context of this present study, Ibsen's use of bourgeois protagonists also barred the path toward being labeled as tragedy. Sverre Arestad puts it in no uncertain terms: “No Ibsen drama, however, whose chief protagonist is of common cast is a wholly successful tragedy.”¹⁴⁹ Clearly, for Ibsen and

¹⁴⁷ Maurice Maeterlinck, "The Tragical in Daily Life," 116.

¹⁴⁸ See for example, Brian Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948); Georg Lukács, "Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay" in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

¹⁴⁹ Sverre Arestad, "Ibsen's Concept of Tragedy," *PMLA*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (Jun., 1959), 286.

other modern dramatists with similar commitments to the common individual, modern tragedy was rocky terrain to negotiate.

Curiously, although social realism did not allow for tragedy, the final four dramas - the plays which Ibsen deemed, and chronologically served as his epilogue - strike critics as having marked a return to the form of high tragedy and to have produced a model for modern tragic heroes.¹⁵⁰ On these accounts, Ibsen realizes his feat of tragic form on a renewed interest in Idealist values against a metaphysical backdrop. What has gone all but unnoticed, however, is that Ibsen also accomplishes a return to tragic form by explicitly using the language and imagery of sovereignty.

Perceiving this connection between Ibsen's concomitant return to both sovereignty and to tragedy, my objective is not to stamp Ibsen's late plays as "Tragedy." The debates over tragedy have subsided considerably in Ibsen criticism (it is noteworthy that they were in full swing through the middle of the twentieth-century and 1960s, precisely during what has come to be identified as the period of "modern drama"). Although the current early twenty-first-century trend is overwhelmingly inclusive toward tragedy, toward both who as a character and what circumstances might count as being tragic, in my view it is more productive to simply recognize Ibsen's strategies in this regard than to declare a play or body of plays "true" tragedies. There is, after all, no explicit record of Ibsen having declared *tragedy* as his goal.

Nevertheless, Ibsen clearly wanted his work, his characters and the situations in which they find themselves, to be taken seriously. George Steiner, in spite of being

¹⁵⁰ See for example, Sverre Arestad "The Ibsen Hero"; Richard Gilman, "Ibsen and the Making of Modern Drama"; and Thomas Van Laan "Ibsen and Shakespeare" in *Henrik Ibsen: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999).

perhaps the most vocal naysayer in regards to the possibility of modern tragedy, has, I think, understood Ibsen's project and more carefully situated it within the history of drama than is often presumed or recognized. Discussing Ibsen's final four plays, which he states "are among the summits of drama," Steiner admits "a related sense of tragic form when Agamemnon strides across the purple carpet and Solness mounts to his tower." Arguing, however, that "the focus is utterly different," he explains:

Ibsen starts where earlier tragedies end, and his plots are epilogues to previous disaster. Suppose Shakespeare had written a play showing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth living out their black lives in exile after they had been defeated by their avenging enemies. We might have the angle of vision that we find in *John Gabriel Borkman*. These are dramas of afterlife, engaging vivid shadows such as animate the lower regions of the *Purgatorio*. But even in these late works, there is a purpose which goes beyond tragedy. Ibsen is telling us that one need not live in premature burial. He is reading the lesson of meaningful life...There is a way out, even if it leads up to the glaciers. There is no such way for Agamemnon or Hamlet or Phèdre. In the gloom of the late Ibsen the core of militant hope is intact.¹⁵¹

Hope and redemption are guilty of canceling tragedy, but Steiner is not chiding Ibsen for insisting on hope in these late plays. To the contrary, expressing disappointment that Ibsen's social realist plays garnered disciples (most notably Shaw), Steiner asks, "Why is it that this magnificent body of drama has not exercised a greater or more liberating influence on the modern theater?"¹⁵² I would argue that it has, in particular in the work of Pirandello, Beckett and Ionesco, which I will discuss in my chapter on Modern Learns.

Inner struggle with who one is, with what one's calling in life might be, the risks one would be willing to take to achieve one's goals – these are familiar internal dilemmas that confront Ibsen's characters, and I suggest that they found a fundamental expression

¹⁵¹ Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 296-7.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 297.

in the sovereign figures of *The Pretenders* and *Emperor and Galilean*. Ibsen drew upon this figuration with his lay characters in his later prose plays such as *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, perhaps as one tactic to show them to be eligible for tragedy; but perhaps, as Steiner suggests, to show how to go "beyond tragedy."

PART II

MODERN MACBETHS

**MODERN THEATER AND THE REVOLUTION
JARRY'S *UBU ROI* AND IONESCO'S *MACBETH***

I. REVOLUTION IN THE THEATER

In his philosophical treatise, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, Alain Badiou goes so far as to say that "great theatre of the revolution is so rare...we must conclude that the theatre avoids the revolution."¹⁵³ Badiou's complaint is that theater has not explicitly taken up historical revolutionary events as its subject matter. Failing to find the French Revolution on stage, he continues to search: "Is there," he asks, "a truly convincing Russian theatre with 1917 as its subject matter? A Chinese theatre on the sequence 1923–49? There are books, poems, movies, nobody will doubt that. But has the theatre, grand theatre, gone this way?"¹⁵⁴ Setting aside both Badiou's dogmatic standard of historical representation - the absence of blatant historical referents in a staged work of art hardly seems damning - as well as his assertion that theater's unwillingness to stage these revolutionary events is a manifestation of its alignment with the State, the general charge still carries force: *theater avoids the revolution*. What rankles about this imputation is that modern theater is understood to be, precisely, a theater of revolution, a "theater of revolt" (as it has been classically dubbed by Robert Brustein in his book by that title).¹⁵⁵ The long list of assorted avant-garde movements that constitute modern theater - Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Epic Theatre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of the Absurd -

¹⁵³ Alain Badiou, "Rhapsody for the Theatre: A Short Philosophical Treatise," trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theatre Survey* 49:2 (November 2008), 205.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964).

whatever their particular preoccupations, these movements hold in common a spirit of rebellion, an emphasis on breaking with conventions. Individually and collectively, these movements constitute an aesthetic revolution, with parallels in other modernist arts, and closely tied, of course, to the political, theological, and social revolutions that mark late modernity. How, then, could theater be troubled by the revolution?

In this chapter I will explore what I take to be the complex contours and limits of the relationship between theater and revolution. To be sure, provocative examples of revolution do show up on the modern stage, and I consider two such plays in what follows, namely, Alfred Jarry's 1896 *Ubu roi*, and, at much greater length, Eugène Ionesco's 1972 *Macbett*. It turns out that both plays, by two of modern theater's most significant avant-garde playwrights, "avoid the revolution" even as they stage revolution, providing compelling clues toward a more nuanced understanding of the interrelations at work between theater and revolution.

As Badiou's several historical examples of "the revolution" indicate, it is a *certain* revolution that is missing in the theater: the revolution from absolute sovereignty to popular sovereignty. And yet, arguably the most significant, farthest reaching, and seemingly incontrovertible aesthetic revolution in the modern theater is the shift from royal protagonists to the common individual. This transfer of attention is the rallying cry within Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, where Linda says of her husband: "I don't say he's a great man. Willie Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid....Attention, attention must

finally be paid to such a person."¹⁵⁶ No longer bound to an interpretation of Aristotle that seems to call for tragedies to focus on characters from a privileged class, modern drama overwhelmingly relates the stories of those who had been sidelined in ancient and baroque drama: bourgeois housewives, salesmen, peasants, and the disenfranchised. Broadly speaking, domestic concerns receive more stage time than matters of state, and the fate of citizens and soldiers receive more attention than those of the rulers and leaders.

The indisputable fact of this revolution notwithstanding, the adjustment in attention was not spontaneously achieved, nor was it as unalloyed as theater history accounts tend to portray it. Consider for example, that even in a play such as *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's son, Biff, insists, "You've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hard-working, unappreciated prince."¹⁵⁷ The loaded invocation reveals at the very least a desire to make associations between the royal and the common person on the elementary linguistic level. But just what this desire signifies is far from self-evident, particularly in an American play, where, politically, royalism is anathema. Making it all the more intriguing, this gesture toward sovereign figuration is hardly a rare instance on the modern stage, as demonstrated by the plays studied within this dissertation. As I have mentioned in my previous chapter, Thomas Postlewait upbraids theater historians for all too willingly embracing and fostering the narrative of modernism as a story of insurgence. Notably, it is within his case study of *Ubu roi* that he makes this charge. Failing to heed the counter-revolutionary tension indicated by the presence of sovereigns in the work of some of modern theater's most exceptional playwrights is one

¹⁵⁶ Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, ed. Gerald Clifford Weales (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 56.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

casualty of the tunnel-vision Postlewait derides.

Conveniently marking the rough chronological parameters of modern drama, both Jarry's 1896 *Ubu roi* and Ionesco's 1972 *Macbeth* take their plot cues from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, allowing for comparison of modern theater's handling of revolution at the opening and close of this period, and bearing out some of modern theater's complex stakes in sovereignty. The plays are significant for their farcical interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedy, generically demonstrating theater's ability to complicate the discourse on sovereignty by introducing an ambivalence toward the notion of sovereignty understood narrowly as will and might. Less obviously, Jarry's fin-de-siècle play stages a set of concerns relating to the shift to popular sovereignty that Ionesco develops in *Macbeth*.

II. REVOLUTIONARY BEGINNINGS: THE CROWD AND JARRY'S *UBU ROI*

The December 1896 premiere of *Ubu roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre is typically heralded as *the* theatrical event that ushered in many of the various forms of avant-garde theater. Theater history has delighted in the story of the uproar and mayhem on the opening night of the play, a charged beginning to an unmistakably new era in theater. *Ubu roi* – with its crude, craven, and raunchy sovereign wielding a toilet-brush for a scepter – gave birth to far more than the sum of its swaggering, soiled parts. To be sure, Jarry's primary contribution is to be found in his comprehensive aesthetic challenge to the theater rather than strictly in the narrative content of *Ubu roi* (and my attention will be directed accordingly), and yet the plot is what discloses a king who gets away – not only with copious scatological references, but also with tyrannical atrocities. A rather

obvious way to understand Jarry's choice of rank for Ubu is the contrast provided between the elevated position and the base person holding it. The disparity unmistakably heightens the comedic effect, but a study of the role of Ubu's sovereignty makes it clear that Jarry's artistic goals cannot be limited in any simple way to parody and antagonism.

Père Ubu is, after all, a colossal affront to conventional sensibilities, and not simply because he is on stage representing a king. From his off-color language to his off-putting diet, both often finding their source in excrement, to say nothing of his boorish, self-serving policies, childishly vain cowardice, and heinously violent procedures such as the notorious disembraining machine, Ubu is calculated to harass and disgust at every turn. Indeed, Ubu patently undermines traditional models of human nobility, revealing – in his plot to assassinate King Venceslas and his subsequent strategies to maintain the throne and rule his people – not the medieval ideal of a rational, deliberative mind that chooses the good and acts out of love, nor even, like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a troubled conscience that manically seeks to reassure itself, but rather the base, untempered, animalistic desires and appetites that drive him, and presumably, by extension, that drive humankind. Ubu's assault is generally understood as an attack on the materialism of the bourgeoisie, but surely Ubu has staked out a larger, more complex kingdom than that. Critics throughout the twentieth century have also read Ubu as a critique of tyrannical regimes, and although tempting, this interpretation is anachronistic. So we must look further for the concept of sovereignty at work in this play.

In his letter dated 8 January 1896 to Aurélien Lugné-Poë, the manager of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Jarry proposes a production of *Ubu roi*. He casually suggests it will be "interesting, perhaps" to the director, and that he thinks it would be "curious" to stage

it in a certain way.¹⁵⁸ The nonchalance gives way, however, to what amounts to a systematic rejection of Naturalist and Realist theatrical principals, along with highly specific ideas for presenting Ubu on stage, animated by a strong *guignol*, or puppet, aesthetic. One seemingly innocuous point in Jarry's letter bears further scrutiny: the fourth item, which allows a single soldier to suffice for a crowd. His solution is noteworthy not only in terms of its simultaneous anti-realism and theatrical restraint, but also because it hints at an attitude Jarry will make explicit elsewhere: disdain for the masses. As he explains, crowds pose a theatrical difficulty and "are an embarrassment to intelligence."¹⁵⁹ Peppered throughout his other texts, the desire to minimize the crowd is shown to be not only a visual advantage and dramaturgical strategy, but also a survival tactic for the theater. According to Jarry, theater has been plagued by an uncomprehending audience since antiquity, when the crowd only "understood or pretended to understand" what they watched because the stories were familiar.¹⁶⁰ He rejects, for this reason, theater that conforms to the taste of the public, scornfully referring to "the infinite mediocrity of the crowd," "the multitude," "illiterate, by definition."¹⁶¹ In fact, pointing out that the substance of plays by Molière and Racine are lost on the crowd, Jarry bemoans the fact that the theater has "not yet acquired the freedom to forcibly remove those who do not understand."¹⁶²

Jarry's contempt for the masses runs parallel to socio-political tensions of the fin-de-siècle. Discussions of the crowd – *la foule* – were embedded in concerns regarding sovereignty, dating back at least to the French Revolution. The question of *what kind* of

¹⁵⁸ Alfred Jarry, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. Michel Arrivé (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 1043.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 1043.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 405.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 412; 408; 415.

¹⁶² Ibid., 405.

popular sovereignty had replaced the divine right of kings with the execution of Louis XVI, and the question of how to control and organize this kind of sovereignty had been central to French (and more broadly European) writers since the event itself. The ongoing anxieties and uncertainties over issues of authority and the role of the masses became a matter of as much concern to socialists (from Henri de Saint-Simon through Karl Marx and on to Jean Jaurès and Georges Sorel) as to conservative thinkers loath to accept new democratic regimes.

Yet the disdain for the crowd exhibited by Jarry is particularly significant for its appearance as a major motif concerning legitimacy and authority in the almost exactly contemporary work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (*La psychologie des foules*, 1895), which the social psychologist Gustave Le Bon published to considerable acclaim just as Jarry was working to bring *Ubu roi* to the stage. For Le Bon, the crowd is the defining sovereign power of the era, “the last surviving force of modern times” for which he has no admiration: “the tyrannical and sovereign force of being above discussion.”¹⁶³ Le Bon views the masses as a destructive force to every level of society, consisting only of bearers of hypnotic suggestion, rather than individual subjects. Jarry's misgivings (perhaps even influenced by Le Bon) are fundamentally in the aesthetic domain, yet with similar concerns regarding popular sovereignty's tendency to efface the individual, especially as a being capable of critical thought and creativity.

The initial crowd that failed to find anything witty in *Ubu roi* provoked bitter criticism from Jarry. He accused the audience of being not only incapable of comprehending anything profound, but moreover, of having missed what is plainly and repeatedly articulated throughout the play by Mère Ubu: “What a stupid man!...What a

¹⁶³ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 2; 4.

sorry imbecile!”¹⁶⁴ Jarry’s position could easily be taken as one of mere snobbery and elitism, yet the dangers of an unthinking public are embodied in the figure of King Ubu, giving particular force to Jarry’s grievances. He is full of vitriol in an article published just a few weeks after staging *Ubu roi*: “When the curtain was raised, I wanted the scene to confront the public like a [magic] mirror in which the vicious see themselves with bull horns and a dragon’s body, according to the exaggeration of their vices.”¹⁶⁵ Although the crowd was appalled by what they saw – “the sight of its own ignoble double” – Jarry had taken pains to set up this equation.¹⁶⁶ In the brochure passed out at the performance, the playwright announces his protagonist in precisely the same terms. “M. Ubu is an ignoble being, which is why we resemble him at all.”¹⁶⁷

Jarry chooses the word *ignoble* to describe Ubu both times, which neutrally could express Ubu’s low or common status, but more likely is meant to register Ubu’s vile, unprincipled character. The term *ignoble* highlights the distance from nobility, whether of class status or mores, which in turn calls attention to the travesty of Ubu’s sovereign status. In wanting the crowd to face its dishonorable double in the mirror provided by the theater, and making that other self turn out to be a king who rules “by the power of the lower appetites,” Jarry is not calling attention to the dangers of tyranny but rather pointing to the dangers of a lack of self-governance.¹⁶⁸ At core, he is issuing a challenge to the audience to participate in artistic creation, to rise above the crowd instead of being passive puppets moved by base instincts: in other words, to be a sovereign individual. He understands his own artistic motivation along these lines: “if there are, in the whole

¹⁶⁴ Jarry, *Oeuvres complètes*, 416.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 402.

universe, five hundred people who, relative to infinite mediocrity, have a bit of Shakespeare and Leonardo in them," it is only fair to write plays for them, and to give them "the active pleasure of creating."¹⁶⁹ Jarry's optimism even conquers the disappointment he feels about the crowd's response to *Ubu roi*; in the end he declares the crowd harmless despite its large numbers since it is fighting against intelligence. Intelligence, for Jarry, is explicitly equated with nobility (though not equated with class) when he triumphantly announces, "Ubu has not disembained all the nobles."¹⁷⁰ Ubu's revolution, in which Ubu figures as popular sovereignty against individual sovereignty, has not been achieved. But neither has Ubu been dispatched. The Ubuses are last seen fleeing by ship, at-large in the world, happily beginning a new adventure.

III. REVOLUTION AND REPETITION: IONESCO'S *MACBETT*

The thinking, intelligent being versus the stupid person is also a concern in Eugène Ionesco's *Macbett*. Indeed, Ionesco builds this theme into the title -- that is, into the name Macbett. With the alteration of just one letter - the final *-th* becoming a pair of *ts* - Ionesco not only begins the doubling and twinning that will guide the characters and plot of the play, but he also phonically registers the French pronunciation of Macbeth, where the aspirated <th> does not exist. This, in turn, introduces a beast, for the French hear *bête*: a term that can mean beast, and also a stupid person, an idiot, a fool.

While the nuances of the French pronunciation are occasionally noted in the scholarship on this play, the implications have gone unexplored, as though it is self-evident just what Ionesco means to be doing by introducing this ambiguous *bête* into his

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 406.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 417.

play on sovereignty.¹⁷¹ Audiences of the play should have no trouble identifying instances of Macbett, the character, acting both as a brutal beast, assassinating his sovereign, and as an idiot, taken in by the most banal of sexual seductions - to name only the most basic examples. But more important, in what ways might *Macbett*, the play, be understood to be negotiating the stakes of sovereignty with terms such as beast and idiot haunting it?

Several approaches offer inroads toward what I will call the soul of Ionesco's 1972 *Macbett* and what it has to say about sovereignty. One could begin with Shakespeare's play, charting fidelities, changes, additions and subtractions. Ionesco has asserted that his *Macbett* is perhaps closer to Jarry's *Ubu roi*, so one could begin there and with the aesthetics of the Theater of the Absurd.¹⁷² In terms of genre, Ionesco has taken a tragedy (in its quintessential Renaissance form - the rise and fall of a king) and delivered a farce, so one could begin with the question of modernity's ability to produce tragedy. As for content, *Macbett* offers a rather blatant critique of unbridled ambition for power, so one could begin with the twentieth-century political landscape and in particular the various totalitarian regimes pockmarking it. Closely related, one could begin with Ionesco's personal traversing of that landscape, tracing a formative flight from the Iron Guard of Romania to Nazi-occupied France. Another strategy would begin with Ionesco's 1962 play, *Exit the King (Le Roi se meurt)*, the only other play of his that explicitly includes royal figures as protagonists. Still another approach would begin with Ionesco's 1959 play, *Rhinocéros*, a modern classic that vividly depicts Fascism - or indeed, as

¹⁷¹ See for example: Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Ann Arbor Press, 1993); Nancy Lane, *Understanding Eugène Ionesco* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); Deborah B. Gaensbauer, *Eugène Ionesco Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1996).

¹⁷² Claude Cezan, "Les Paranoïaques de la politique," *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (24 janvier 1972).

Ionesco insists, all collective hysterias - as a highly contagious disease turning those who succumb into horned, hard-skinned beasts.

Discussions of *Macbett* tend to focus on its exposure of the ruthlessness of authority figures, referring to it for this reason as Ionesco's most overtly political play.¹⁷³ As I hope to show, however, critics have been too content with understanding *Macbett* solely on this level of politics. While he certainly makes assertions about the nature of leadership, it is my contention that here, as in the rest of his oeuvre, Ionesco resists writing a merely topical play about the current political situation and maintains his larger interests in the nature of human existence, which includes but is not reduced to politics. In exploring the means and methods of Ionesco's engagement with sovereignty in his retelling of *Macbeth*, I will be paying particular attention to the subtleties of what he ridicules and the stakes of his aesthetic choices. Ionesco not only offers a much less consoling picture of sovereignty than Shakespeare (an interpretation that analyses of the play seldom miss, but have not reached beyond), but his play also harbors hopes that return modern theater's interests in sovereignty to issues of humanism.¹⁷⁴

An acute awareness of the human potential for foolishness and stupidity - rather than reason - stands at the center of Ionesco's contribution to his reflection on sovereignty in *Macbett*. The beast and the sovereign - as those familiar with Jacques Derrida's last seminars given under precisely that name will remember - though ostensibly distant from each other and forming the poles on either side of man, nevertheless inhabit the same

¹⁷³ See, for example, Marie-Claude Hubert, "Le politique de plus en plus affirmé," *Eugène Ionesco: Classicisme et modernité*, eds. Marie-Claude Hubert et Michel Bertrand (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2011), pp. 109-19.

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Rosette Lamont, "From *Macbeth* to *Macbett*," *Modern Drama* 15, no.3 (1972): 231-53; Sven Rank, *Twentieth-century adaptations of Macbeth: writing between influence, intervention, and cultural transfer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

territory in so far as each is outside, above, or beyond the law.¹⁷⁵ Unlike *Rhinocéros*, *Macbett* boasts no beasts on stage. But when the witches reassure Macbett, just as in Shakespeare, that he is invincible to all who are "of woman born," in Ionesco's version the one who vanquishes Macbett is not "untimely ripped from [his] mother's womb" but born of a gazelle. In providing a gazellean rather than a Caesarean birth for Macbett's conqueror, Ionesco's playful gesture reveals the interchangeability of beast-gazelle and sovereign-Caesar. In this chapter, however, I will argue that *Macbett* is not ultimately concerned with the trope of beast and sovereign in the animal sense of being beyond the law, but more crucially in the thinking sense of idiocy or stupidity - of failing to exercise discernment, of lacking judgment.

Although I am not attempting a Derridean reading of *Macbett*, what I am borrowing from Derrida's seminar on the beast and the sovereign is the term in the middle - "man" - and the inquiry into the "enigma of the place of man, of what is proper to man."¹⁷⁶ What Derrida's analysis makes clear is that stupidity and foolishness are "never appropriate attributes for animals," but rather, these are "proper to man." In other words, Macbett, if he is a beast, cannot be a beast (an animal-beast) on account of being an idiot - because the capacity for stupidity is the special province of the *thinking* being.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷⁷ Derrida's interest, ultimately, is in the problem of the death penalty, which does in fact surface briefly in the play in a spectacular fashion: the execution of rebel troops, provide titillating entertainment for Duncan and his wife (until they grow bored). Yet the play does not dwell on this issue.

THE AESTHETICS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN *MACBETT*

At a glance, with a Macbett, a Lady Macbett, a Duncan, a Banco, Witches, and a Macol as the ultimate inheritor of the throne, the cast of Ionesco's *Macbett* looks to have straightforward parallels to Shakespeare's tragedy. As an ostensibly minor variation, Ionesco gives stage time to Candor and Glamiss, the traitorous equivalents to Cawdor and Glamiss - who are merely named and described by Shakespeare. A further twist is found in the provenance of Lady Macbett, who is, to begin with, an unhappily married Lady Duncan, and who, it turns out, is one of the witches in disguise. The smaller walk-on parts are in line with a court or war environment, with the exception of two who are generally chalked up to Ionesco's absurdist aesthetic: a lemonade seller at the battle scene (raising the specter of Brecht's *Mother Courage*), and a butterfly hunter who wanders on stage just after the play's greatest moment of tension, and appears again at the end, when all the other characters have left the stage.

Interchangeability is a crucial feature of Ionesco's aesthetics in *Macbett*, and nowhere is it more highly pronounced than in the characters of Macbett and Banco. The two generals so closely resemble each other that, as Macbett puts it, "People often take me for my twin brother. Or for Banco's twin brother."¹⁷⁸ Macbett and Banco have nearly identical soliloquies mid-battle (to be discussed later), where they reflect on the bloodshed and death count at their hands and each reassures himself of his loyalty to his sovereign's cause. Significantly, when their dutifulness has run its course, their frustration takes the form of a near verbatim repetition of Candor and Glamiss's initial decision to revolt, restarting the cycle of insurgency, and linking them in no uncertain

¹⁷⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Macbett*, in *Exit the King, The Killer, and Macbett: Three Plays by Eugène Ionesco*, translated by Charles Marowitz and Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 26.

terms with the play's original rebels (and the play's other set of doubles). The effect of the déjà vu is to introduce a sense of inevitability as well as banality to the revolutionary attempt. History is repeating itself in a predictable way: a sovereign is in power and the subjects rouse themselves to revolt with the same catch phrases as though learned by rote in school for just such an occasion.

The emphasis on interchangeability - and, related, on repetition - provides a significant entry point not only to Ionesco's comic aesthetic (the category to which it has been limited by critics and scholars) but, more importantly, to Ionesco's approach to sovereignty. In *Macbett*, interchangeability points to the structure of sovereignty and subjecthood. Ionesco diminishes the particularities of individuals by twinning them, thereby laying stress on the singularity of the sovereign - who is always only one - over and against the plurality of the subjects - who are always many, and undifferentiated. Furthermore, the interchangeability of the subjects also indicates the crowd.

While focusing attention first on the abuse of power, and then on their ambition to take over that power, the rationale of Candor and Glamiss - and later of Macbett and Banco - also lays bare the cyclical nature of sovereignty at work in the play. They tell themselves they are Duncan's equals, if not his betters, and *they* will establish justice - a typical fantasy of pretenders to the throne. In Ionesco's hands, democratic ideals of equality mix with *ancien régime* notions of ancestral rights. While the hopeful usurpers fashion themselves as seekers of justice, the crux of the motivation is found in the logic of exchange, belying their ostensible desire to improve upon the office: "We'll take his place," Candor declares.¹⁷⁹ This turns out to be both true, and not true. Not true, of course, because the rebellion fails and they never rule. However, Ionesco devotes

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

significant stage time to the battle, its noise and destruction, its bloody brutality (pointedly extended even to the civilian lemonade seller), and in particular to the inability to distinguish one side from the other in either cause or tactics. In other words, had Candor and Glamiss succeeded in taking Duncan's "place," there is nothing to suggest their rule would have been any different than his. Moreover, as will be discussed further, the distinction of the sovereign in this situation lies not in any principles of legitimacy, but only in he who has the stronger force.

Ionesco's critique of force as the deciding factor of sovereignty is discernible when Duncan interviews a wounded soldier to get details of the war. A clear parallel to Shakespeare's Act I, scene 2, where Macbeth's bravery in battle is introduced and established, Ionesco's scene offers no heroes for consideration. As the scene unfolds, the stress is quite clearly on the similarity between Duncan and his adversaries. "Who's won?" Duncan demands, to which the injured man responds with his own question: "Does it matter?"¹⁸⁰ This is not so much insouciance as it is an honest assessment of the commensurability of the two sides. In *Macbeth*, it turns out the soldier was forcibly conscripted to fight - along with others - first for the rebels, then, after becoming a prisoner-of-war, for the Archduke. As far as the soldier is concerned, as someone who would be a subject in any case, either side may as well win. Wholly undifferentiated in their methods and strategies, there is nothing to suggest it would matter one way or the other who would be in authority. Duncan's "place" is a placeholder for anyone who manages to gain entry; the place of sovereignty determines the sovereign.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

The *equivalence* at work in Ionesco's *Macbeth* - between the pairs of characters he twins and, in the case of the war and later the assassination, between the sovereign and those who would be sovereign - is not to be confused with the *equivocation* at work in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Ionesco's slant underscores a critical difference worth spelling out, precisely because comparisons with Shakespeare run the risk of understanding Ionesco as being no more than farcically reductive of the complexity found in Shakespeare's tragedy. The divergence between the two playwrights on this point is fundamental to their respective aims. In Shakespeare, antithetical values and ideas are shown to be confused ("Fair is foul and foul is fair"), in keeping with a focus on the moral aberrance of Macbeth's ambition for power, and on the monstrousness of his choices. In Ionesco, resemblances verging on the identical are highlighted, in keeping with a focus on Macbeth's lack of originality, on the prosaicness of his desires.

The endless repetition of revolution is a pet theme of Ionesco's throughout his writings, and the equivalence and interchangeability emphasized in his aesthetics in *Macbeth* work to this end. In "More Pages from My Diary," published as a part of *Notes and Counter Notes* in 1962, Ionesco expounds on the misguided optimism that revolution will bring about change. "The word revolution is badly chosen by the revolutionaries," he points out. "Unconsciously it helps us to see through revolutionary action, which is itself synonymous with reaction, for etymologically revolution means a return, and is opposed to evolution."¹⁸¹ Hannah Arendt will make a similar point, though to different ends, one year later in her book, *On Revolution*. She draws attention to the distinctly modern notion of revolution as tied to freedom and the creation of a truly new order, whereas the

¹⁸¹ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 239.

use of the term in antiquity was literal, implying a return to the same place.¹⁸² But while Arendt understands a meaningful shift to have taken place in the sense and concept of revolution, Ionesco maintains the original definition, perceiving it as haunting modern attempts at revolution, despite the modern expectation of real change. For Ionesco, the office of power generates its own depravity, regardless of the party in authority. Drawing attention to the return to the same is one way Ionesco's theater "avoids" revolution in general terms, but *Macbeth* also registers a radical reluctance to "the revolution" more specifically in its critique of the subtler temptations and dangers of popular sovereignty.

For Jarry, on my reading, the satirical attack on the crowd and its base appetites, embodied in King Ubu counterintuitively contains within it a humanistic belief not only in the possibility of self-governance, but, more optimistically still, in the possibility of genius and creativity in the human being. Ionesco, a noted member of the Collège de 'Pataphysique, proudly considered himself an heir of Jarry. In a 1960 interview, Ionesco admitted a kinship with Jarry in *The Bald Soprano*, but felt his work had since gone in a different direction.¹⁸³ With *Macbeth*, he unambiguously returned to Jarry. Although his Macbeth play does not rely on scatological humor, Ionesco's farce pays homage to *Ubu roi* with characterization, imagery, and language.¹⁸⁴ Yet despite their common genre, language, and Shakespearean source, there is a highly conspicuous and relevant historical

¹⁸² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

¹⁸³ Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 119.

¹⁸⁴ Examples include Duncan's extreme paranoia and cowardice during the war, the mass execution of the rebels, the gluttony of Duncan and later of Macbeth at his banquet, the use of placards when Macbeth is overthrown, and, perhaps most directly, in the last word Macbeth utters before he is finally dispatched: "Merde!" For further comparisons, see, for example, Curtis Perry, "Vaulting Ambitions and Killing Machines: Shakespeare, Jarry, Ionesco, and the Senecan Absurd," *Shakespeare without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*, eds. Donald Hedrick and Bryan Reynolds (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Jacqueline Sessa, "Deux avatars derisoires de *Macbeth*: L'*Ubu roi* de Jarry et le *Macbeth* de Ionesco," *Travaux comparatistes*, ed. Lucette Desvignes (Saint-Etienne: L'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1978).

disparity.¹⁸⁵ For while Jarry's *King Ubu* was uncannily and disturbingly prescient of the ruthless leaders who would rise to power over the course of the decades to follow the play's publication, Ionesco's drama is not innocent of that political history. For this reason, *Macbeth* is consistently read as an explicit reaction to and critique of the brutal dictatorships responsible for the atrocities that plagued the twentieth century. The historical gap notwithstanding, the parallel with *Ubu roi* I am most interested in following has to do with how both plays manage to subvert the basic interpretations of the narrative content by harboring humanist and not merely political concerns.

To be sure, Ionesco unquestionably sought to focus attention on his views of absolute power in *Macbeth*. These views were thoroughly familiar to readers of his essays, personal memoirs, theoretical writings, newspaper contributions, and interviews; certainly they were evident in other plays, most pertinently his 1959 play, *Rhinocéros*, but also in his 1953 short dramatic sketch, *The Leader (Le Maître)*. As mentioned earlier, *Rhinocéros* reveals the dangers of mob mentality and conformism by portraying the spread of political movements such as Fascism, Nazism, and Communism as an infectious disease that turns those who capitulate into rhinoceroses. While Ionesco's political position is hardly obscure, there were critics who accused him of failing to denounce totalitarianism in stronger terms, and furthermore, of failing to provide a

¹⁸⁵ In choosing to concentrate on these two "modern Macbeths," my study of modern drama and its relationship to this particular theme of sovereignty runs the risk of appearing limited to a distinct strain of French theater. Though neither purports to take place in France, it is certainly the case that France, with its dramatic modern political history - that is to say, violent and driven by spectacle - with the contentious concept of sovereignty at its core, has an investment in the relations between sovereignty and drama. See, for example, Ruth Morse, "Monsieur Macbeth: from Jarry to Ionesco," *Shakespeare Survey* 57 (2004), 112-25. Although she is dismissive of both Jarry and Ionesco, her account of the reception of *Macbeth* in France is helpful.

remedy.¹⁸⁶ Such assessments stemmed from aesthetic expectations espoused and popularized by Brecht, but eschewed by Ionesco, who insisted that the theater is *not* the place for a didactic political agenda.

The "apolitical" position Ionesco took in terms of his work for the theater has perhaps been the most daring aspect of his artistic contributions, but it has also been vulnerable to misunderstanding.¹⁸⁷ The year prior to his production of *Rhinocéros*, in what became known as the "London Controversy," Ionesco had occasion to defend and articulate his views of theater in response to English critic Kenneth Tynan's dismissal of his work for being anti-realist and anti-humanist. According to Tynan, "[Ionesco's] world is not mine, but I recognize it to be a valid personal vision, presented with great imaginative aplomb and verbal audacity. The peril arises when it is held up for general emulation as the gateway to the theatre of the future, that bleak new world from which the humanist heresies of faith in logic and belief in man will forever be banished."¹⁸⁸ The assessment struck a nerve, not for its negative evaluation of Ionesco's work, but for having misconstrued his aesthetic objectives and the carefully considered convictions behind them. In what would give occasion for one of modern theater's most prominent public critical debates, published over the course of several weeks in *The Observer*, the

¹⁸⁶ Charles Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugène Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 70.

¹⁸⁷ On the one hand, as noted, Ionesco was often dismissed for not being explicitly political, for not taking stronger sides. On the other hand, some critics have attempted to recuperate political motivations. Rosette Lamont's book, for example, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture*, is guided by Ionesco's late admission that being fiercely apolitical was in fact a political act. According to Lamont, "The time has come to do a revisionist study of Ionesco's oeuvre, to decode the presence, at almost every turn, of the forces of history and politics" (89). While Lamont is a close and often illuminating reader of Ionesco's, and while "the forces of history and politics" are no doubt important influences on his work, Ionesco's statement strikes me not as a justification to politicize his work, but as a plea to understand his apolitical stance as a powerfully political one precisely because of his aesthetic loyalties, and the prioritization of art over politics.

¹⁸⁸ Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 89. Tynan's critique is leveled at plays such as Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs*, where Tynan sees a collapse of language and human communication. Ionesco argues, "the very fact of writing and presenting plays is surely incompatible with such a view" (90).

exchange that ensued between Ionesco and Tynan (with others chiming in, Orson Welles among them) brings to the fore the sort of theater Ionesco advocates. Addressing both of Tynan's charges of anti-realism and anti-humanism, Ionesco states,

If I may be allowed to express myself paradoxically, I should say that the true society, the authentic human community, is extra-social - a wider, deeper society, that which is revealed by our common anxieties, our desires, our secret nostalgias. The whole history of the world has been governed by these nostalgias and anxieties, which political action does no more than reflect and interpret, very imperfectly. No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa.¹⁸⁹

Over the course of his career, and at his most insouciant, Ionesco was unembarrassed to exercise his right to contradict himself and change his mind. Yet this relatively early pronouncement provides a close look at what will prove to be ongoing concerns for Ionesco. He emphatically rejects the pressure on playwrights to go along with the trend of social realism, which he denounces for having a limited and superficial understanding of reality, insisting instead that a work of art should stand apart from a political position and not be reduced to an illustration of doctrine. As he put it in his initial response to Tynan, "The absence of ideology in a work does not mean an absence of ideas: on the contrary it fertilizes them. In other words, it was not Sophocles who was inspired by Freud but, obviously, the other way around. Ideology is not the source of art. A work of art is the source and the raw material of ideologies to come."¹⁹⁰ At the core of such a claim is a humanist belief in the creative potential of the artist as well as the thinking beings who encounter works of art. In this way, and contrary to the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 93.

interpretations his work often receives, Ionesco must be understood as motivated precisely by his humanist rather than an anti-humanist position.

His position here in the London Controversy of 1958 is the same as two decades later in his essay, "Culture et politique" (Culture and Politics) published in 1979 in *Un homme en question* (*Man in question*). Acknowledging that life is constituted by both culture and politics, Ionesco reiterates his stance about the primacy of art, and expresses concern that politics no longer looks to art for inspiration, but rather as a means of propaganda. For Ionesco, what is at stake is not petty one-upmanship between the spheres of art and politics, but something of far greater consequence. As the title of the volume indicates, *man* is in question. In what I consider a telling statement, Ionesco values humankind for its capacity for creative contributions of art and thought instead of as passive victims of physical and social circumstances. "I would say that it is mainly the artistic, scientific, religious and philosophical traditions especially, that are the most essential and the highest expression of culture," he writes. "For they emerge from these material conditions and structures; *it is art and thought which are constitutive of man, royally defining him at the highest level.*"¹⁹¹ Framing his understanding of humankind in language of sovereignty - "royally defined" by art and thought - reveals the way his humanist outlook is supported by the inflection of majesty. As I will discuss in my chapter on "Modern Lear," this is the link on which Ionesco relies when he chooses to introduce his everyman character, Bérenger, as a king, while exploring both the creative powers and inevitable death of humans in *Exit the King* (*Le roi se meurt*). With these

¹⁹¹ Eugène Ionesco, "Culture et politique," *Un homme en question: Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 52, translation and emphasis mine. ["Je dirais que ce sont surtout les traditions artistiques, scientifiques, religieuses et philosophiques, surtout elles, qui sont l'expression les plus essentielles et les plus hautes de la culture. Car, émergeant de ces conditions et structures matérielles, c'est l'art et la pensée qui sont constitutifs de l'homme et le définissent royalement, au plus haut degré."]

humanist concerns in mind, *Macbett*, in which Ionesco seems to have found the clearest artistic expression of his views on authority figures, presents itself as a particularly challenging work to explore. The question is where to find evidence of Ionesco's humanist motivations in a play that is not only interpreted as political, but utterly pessimistic.

Ionesco's comments about his inspiration and intentions provide some clues. When asked about choosing to adapt Shakespeare's *Macbeth* - the only time in his career that he adapted another text - Ionesco states in "Tous dans le même sac!" ("All in the same bag!"), an interview about *Macbett* that appeared in *Le Monde*, that he "wanted to write a play 'on' the madness of power" and, furthermore, that he recalled that Jan Kott had explored this theme in connection with *Macbeth*.¹⁹² In his 1961 book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (French translation published in 1962), Kott's political conviction - that absolute power corrupts absolutely - gives way to an interpretation of *Macbeth* as a play centered on murder. Critics have taken Ionesco's statement of inspiration as a straightforward endorsement of Kott's position. And yet this does not take the full measure of Ionesco's approach to the play.

Ionesco certainly makes assertions about the nature of leadership that align with Kott's. Early in the play, Glamiss describes and denounces Duncan: "A tyrant, a usurper, a despot, a dictator, a miscreant, an ogre, an ass, a goose -- and worse." Employing Kott's line of reasoning, Glamiss goes on to explain, "The proof is, he's in power. If I didn't believe it, why should I want to depose him? My motives are thoroughly honorable."¹⁹³

¹⁹² Eugène Ionesco, "Tous dans le même sac!" (*Le Monde*, 3 février 1972), reprinted in *Antidotes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 138, translation mine. ["J'ai eu envie d'écrire une pièce « sur » la folie du pouvoir. Je me suis souvenu d'abord de ce que le critique Jan Kott a écrit sur ce thème à propos de *Macbeth*."]

¹⁹³ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 10.

With this statement, Glanville not only justifies his claims with Kott's thesis that absolute power corrupts, but simultaneously condemns himself to the same inevitable dissolution. For since it is the office that corrupts, usurping power - no matter how virtuous the motives - will only lead to the corruption of the new leader. Here, again, is the force of the irony in Candor's pronouncement: "We'll take his place."

But although Ionesco shared a similar political experience with the exiled Polish critic, accounting for certain affinities, the radicality of the claim about those in power registers somewhat differently in the backgrounds of the two men. Unlike Kott, who joined the Communist party and later renounced his participation, Ionesco was careful to avoid political endorsements. Indeed, he seems to have been that *rara avis* who managed to live through the reign of a fascist regime without collecting personal regrets for his actions or involvement. Having consistently and explicitly spoken out against totalitarianism, his views on power take on substantial credibility. In a personal memoir published in 1968 - *Present Past, Past Present* (*Présent Passé, Passé Présent*) - Ionesco includes journal entries from his time living in Bucharest under the Iron Guard during the late 1930s and early 1940s along with entries and commentary nearly thirty years later in 1967. "I have been judged guilty in a court of law for pamphlets that I wrote against the army and the magistrates," he writes, admitting pride in this act of political protest. "The new authorities are as unjust, as unacceptable as the others," he proffers, marking out the same view of interchangeability he explores in *Macbett* and his other comments on the futility of revolution. Here, he supplies a reason for why he understands the seat of power as pernicious, a reason I am arguing is at the core of his concerns with authority, and motivating his exploration of the theme of sovereignty in *Macbett*. The most recent

authorities are just as unjust as those before, Ionesco explains, "because men personify them, that is to say they personify their own subjective passions, whose theoretical objectivity doesn't fool me. The official position, the decorations, the honors, the reputation of such personages merely mask abominations and profound stupidity [*bêtise*]"¹⁹⁴ His objections gesture not only toward the weakness and self-interest Ionesco perceives in humanity, but furthermore, toward the theatricality of sovereignty and its complicity in the problem. The trappings of sovereignty are described as theatrical tools of deception, in this case serving to "mask" egregious abuse of power and foolishness.

SOVEREIGN JUDGMENT

Ionesco's views on revolution were immensely unpopular in artistic circles in the context of the highly volatile decades following World War II, and especially in late 1960s France when revolution was touted as salvific. Leftist hopes in communism and Maoism dominated the French intellectual scene and Ionesco - for failing to join in the fervor, and indeed, for speaking out against it - was understood to be a right-wing conservative. More accurately, his stance was one of radical skepticism toward any political regime promising a cure-all for humanity's difficulties. This was not a blithely held position of indifference; quite the contrary, given Ionesco's first-hand experiences. Shaped by the nightmare of witnessing not only his father, but also intellectual colleagues - most notable among them the historian of religions Mircea Eliade and philosopher E.M. Cioran - submitting to and endorsing the Iron Guard, Ionesco made it his cause to resist

¹⁹⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present: A Personal Memoir*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 17.

commitments to political parties, even and perhaps especially when the trend was in their favor.

Journals and memoirs make no secret of the fact that, as a result of familial betrayals and what he perceived as extreme emotional cruelty, Ionesco held his father in severe contempt. His abhorrence was further exacerbated by his father's shifting political loyalties, and these in turn (Ionesco himself suggests), had the effect of sealing the playwright's determination to abide by his own commitments rather than allow those who manage to be in power to dictate his beliefs. More interesting than providing a psychological explanation for Ionesco's approach toward political opposition is the way his reflections reveal not mere judgment, but an attempt to come to terms with his scorn.

My father was not a conscious opportunist; he believed in the powers that be. He respected the State. He believed in the State, no matter what it represented... As far as he was concerned, the minute a party took over it was right. This was how he came to be an Iron Guard, a Freemason democrat, and a Stalinist....What I reproached him for was his being like everybody else. What I reproached him for was going in the same direction as history. But haven't Heidegger, Jung, Sartre, and so many others done exactly the same thing? He did so in a cruder, more simplistic, more candid way perhaps. Waves of pure madness swept over the world. In order to resist these currents, one must tell oneself that history is always wrong, whereas it is generally believed that history is always right.

He was like everyone else. That is what I held against him. That is what I was wrong to hold against him.¹⁹⁵

Several things stand out in Ionesco's analysis of his father's political expediencies. He is careful to note his sense that the world itself was not in its right mind, and that his father was not aware of the pattern of his behavior. Similarly, Ionesco observes that his father was not taken in due to nefarious desires, but because of his sense of duty and respect for authority. Having exploitable principles, however, does not change the moral verdict.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

The repeated accusation is that his father was "like everybody else" - a charge easily extended to Candor and Glamiss, and Macbett and Banco. That being indistinguishable from others is presented as an *indictment* goes some distance in underscoring the serious intent of Ionesco's aesthetics of equivalence, far surpassing humorous effect.

Indeed, over and above conveying the logic of sovereignty that mandates a single sovereign over indistinct subjects, similarity to others demonstrates a moral danger. The identical mid-battle soliloquies delivered first by Macbett and moments later by Banco offer a critical illustration:

The blade of my sword is all red with blood. I've killed dozens and dozens of them with my bare hands. Twelve dozen officers and men who never did me any harm. I've had hundreds and hundreds of others executed by firing squad. Thousands of others were roasted alive when I set fire to the forests where they'd run for safety. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children suffocated to death in cellars, buried under the rubble of their houses which I'd blown up. Hundreds of thousands were drowned in the Channel in desperate attempts to escape. Millions died of fear or committed suicide. Ten million others died of anger, apoplexy, or a broken heart. There's not enough ground to bury them all.¹⁹⁶

A passage such as this - with references that conjure scenes from the Holocaust, the Allied airstrikes against civilian-occupied cities of Germany, and the Vietnam War - indicates Ionesco's willingness to extend a political critique, while avoiding outright parallels that would render the play merely topical. The scope and numbers involved point to exaggeration, bombast, and fantasy. Ionesco walks a fine line between horror and humor. Yet before this can be summarily categorized as Absurdist or as a simplistic attempt to wag a finger at perpetrators of war atrocities, it will be productive to consider a further resemblance that adds complexity to Ionesco's choices. Both in what has already been cited and in how it proceeds, this speech resonates in striking and disturbing ways

¹⁹⁶ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 15-16; 17-18.

with Hannah Arendt's description of German Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann in her 1963 report on his trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

According to Arendt, "Bragging was the vice that was Eichmann's undoing. It was sheer rodomontade when he told his men during the last days of the war: 'I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews [or "enemies of the Reich," as he always claimed to have said] on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction.'" ¹⁹⁷ As Arendt points out, his claim to such numbers was "preposterous." Even so, and more important, "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a "monster," but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown." ¹⁹⁸ The puzzle for Arendt lies exactly here, for the desire to account for evil craves easily identifiable villains replete with isolatable motives for cruelty, and, not finding such a beast, the temptation is then to see only farcical characters accidentally involved. The difficulty, of course, is that evil is not obliged to be recognizable in these terms. Referring to the text of a taped police examination, Arendt describes it as "a veritable gold mine for a psychologist - provided he is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny." ¹⁹⁹ One has only to read this statement - replacing "playwright" for "psychologist" - to perceive that Ionesco has precisely this perspicacity.

The likeness between the historical war criminal and Ionesco's fictional creations extends beyond the comingling of horror and humor, and towards what I am calling the moral danger of similarity and interchangeability. After cataloguing the numbers of

¹⁹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 46.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 48.

victims at their hands, Macbett and Banco take a moment to rationalize their actions: "They were all traitors, of course. Enemies of the people -- and of our beloved sovereign, the Archduke Duncan, whom God preserve." The detachment and positive spin on the situation continue as each in turn talks himself out of feeling any guilt, remorse, or, indeed, physical pain: "I thrashed about a bit too hard. My wrist aches. Luckily it's nothing serious. It's been quite a pleasant day, really. Feeling quite bucked.... No. No regrets. They were traitors after all. I obeyed my sovereign's orders. I did my duty."²⁰⁰ A correspondence with Ionesco's father can be heard in these rationalizations. Evoking phraseology and justification from both Soviet Communism ("enemies of the people") and medieval monarchism ("our beloved sovereign"), Ionesco's generals will use any idiomatic expression they find to hand, even if they are ideologically contradictory. In addition to Macbett and Banco saying the same thing, making them indistinguishable from each other - and, by extension, "like everyone else" - they also operate from a rudimentary, unquestioned sense of duty to one's sovereign (whoever that happens to be) in the same way Ionesco's father "believed in the State, no matter what it represented."

Returning to the passage above in which Ionesco discusses his father, his striking statement at the end - that he was *wrong* to hold it against him for being like everyone else - registers an important, if perplexing qualification. His self-reproach suggests that similarity may be an unfortunate side effect, but it is not where Ionesco ultimately locates the problem. Macbett and Banco's justifications are marked by recourse to stock phrases and slogans without regard to their appropriateness, implying, at best, a sloppiness of mind, at worst, a willful desire to deceive both self and others. Arendt's penetrating

²⁰⁰ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 15-16; 17-18.

insight about Eichmann and his role in the Holocaust was to identify the "banality of evil," by which she does not mean that Eichmann was simply an ordinary person (or even an ordinary criminal), nor that evil is simply a widespread commonplace and therefore of trivial import.²⁰¹ Rather, of the paths that could lead to evil, there is a path devoid of clear criminal intent that does not necessarily look evil at all. As Arendt understands it, during the war, such a path functioned as a survival tactic, and not only for high-ranking Nazis. She points out that the "German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann's mentality."²⁰²

The 'means' to which Arendt refers, and the form the 'stupidity' takes, is a habit of mind that expresses itself in language: "Eichmann, despite his rather bad memory, repeated word for word the same stock phrases and self-invented clichés (when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché)."²⁰³ Regarding Macbett and Banco alongside Eichmann provides an important opportunity for allowing the *bête* of *Macbett* - the threat of both the beast whose actions are outside the law and the stupid person who is unable to think - to come more fully into focus. By paying attention to the human capacity to judge and articulate as constitutive elements of both personal, individual sovereignty as well as political sovereignty, the play goes beyond a predictable condemnation of tyrannical leaders to a consideration of how they come about.

HUNTING FOR SOVEREIGNTY

²⁰¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 252.

²⁰² Ibid., 52.

²⁰³ Ibid., 49.

When Candor is captured and faces execution for treason, his gallows speech has a distinctly different tone than that of his contrite counterpart in Shakespeare.²⁰⁴ "If only I had won," he wistfully remarks, before rattling off two platitudes in an effort to comfort himself: "The victor is always right. *Vae victis*."²⁰⁵ Candor, like Cawdor, presents himself as a cautionary tale, although in a bold departure he does *not* counsel against usurpation of the throne. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, that is where Cawdor - and after him, Macbeth - presumably go wrong, by taking up arms against the divinely anointed sovereign. Significantly, Ionesco's Candor gives voice to another understanding of the logic of sovereignty. Both of the cited phrases Candor relied upon can be summed up in the plain expression, "Might makes right." Candor, like Ionesco's father, believes this. "If I'd been stronger," Candor announces, "I'd have been your anointed king. Defeated, I'm a traitor and a coward." The result of the action, not its motivating principle, determines the value and character of the agent. "If only I'd won," he continues, repeating his plaintive - and patently unremorseful - refrain before providing his explanation: "But History was against me. History is right, objectively speaking. I'm just a historical dead end. [...] The logic of events is the only one that counts. Historical

²⁰⁴ Cawdor's speech (1.4.5-7), by contrast, contains confession of wrongdoing, petition for pardon from the King, and demonstration of a remorseful spirit. These elements are not only stock features of a Jacobean "scaffold speech," but they also serve in the tragedy of *Macbeth* to establish the rightful and legitimate sovereignty of the divinely anointed king by the very person who, hubristically, had sought the crown. For more on this, see Rebecca Lemon, "Scaffolds of Treason in *Macbeth*," *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002) 25-43.

²⁰⁵ Ionesco, *Macbeth*, 30. The latter phrase, "*Vae victis*," is Latin for "Woe to the conquered" and first appears in Livy's account in *Ab urbe condita*. The former, "*La raison du vainqueur est toujours la meilleure*," literally translates: "The reason of the victor is always best." It is a slight variation on Jean de La Fontaine's "The reason of the strongest is always the best" ("*La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*") with which he famously begins his seventeenth-century tale about *The Wolf and the Lamb*. This fable and specifically this phrase, have been eloquently explored by two important French theorists of sovereignty (among other things): Louis Marin, in his 1986 book, *Food for Thought and other Theologico-Political Essays*, and Jacques Derrida, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. In this way, Ionesco, in 1972, is showing himself to be within a distinguished line of French thinkers of sovereignty, although neither Marin nor Derrida seems to be aware of Ionesco's theatrical intervention.

reason is the only reason. There are no transcendental values to set against it."²⁰⁶ Ionesco considers this a treacherous line of thought. Recall the reproach he leveled at his father for "going in the same direction as history." His exhortation to resist suggests that Candor's "logic of events" has missed the mark precisely in the assessment that "there are no transcendental values to set against it." In other words, according to Ionesco, there is indeed something transcendental to set against the fatalist notion that history is always right. (Just what this might be will be discussed shortly). Crucially, what Ionesco is fighting is a notion of sovereignty as well, the belief that whoever manages to be in power is meant to be there until someone stronger comes along.

In the final scene, in something of a coup de théâtre, Ionesco returns to his strategy of repeated speech, but with amplified stakes. Here, as nowhere else in the play, Ionesco gives Macol the exact lines – several dozen in sum – said by Malcolm in Act IV of *Macbeth*. Macduff has solicited Malcolm, Duncan's heir to lead a war against the tyrant Macbeth, and reclaim the throne. Malcolm's response, however, contains little comfort: "My poor country," he forecasts, "Shall have more vices than it had before, / More suffer and more sundry ways than ever, / By him that do succeed." "Black Macbeth," he promises, "Will seem as pure as snow; and the poor State / Esteem him as a lamb, being compar'd /With my confineless harms." Indeed, Macbeth may be "bloody, / Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, / Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin /That

²⁰⁶ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 32.

has a name," but according to Malcolm, "there's no bottom, none, / In my voluptuousness."²⁰⁷

The only difference in Macol's language when he says Malcolm's lines is a change from the conditional tense - "Had I power, I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell" - to the present active tense - "*Now I have power, I shall* / Pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell." It is not a potential threat but an imminent action. In Shakespeare's tragedy, these horrifying announcements are met with disgust and consternation by Macduff, as it is hoped they will, for Malcolm claims he has spoken such only as a test to see whether Macduff has a finer sense of legitimate sovereignty or will simply throw in his lot with the stronger. (Macduff passes the test). By the time Macol finishes his address in the Ionesco play, however, all of his would-be subjects and supporters are rendered speechless and have left the stage, and he himself vanishes in mist. Macol has the last word, not only on this subject, but in this play; Ionesco offers no soothing rejoinder to counter the bleak pronouncement. Instead, he offers a final theatrical gesture that is typically read as a signature mark of the "absurd": the butterfly hunter crosses the stage.

Considering Macol's harrowing, unchecked sovereign proclamation, it is not without reason that critics take Ionesco to be putting forward a picture of sovereignty bluntly at odds with Shakespeare's conclusion, for Ionesco's vision appears to be without any redemption or hope of a good king resuming rule, whereas *Macbeth* appears to finish with just such an optimism. On the face of it, Ionesco's *Macbeth* seems unapologetic

²⁰⁷ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by A.R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.3.46-99.

about the logic of the stronger at work in the play. And yet his play works to resist the limited idea of sovereignty that dictates "might is right," and by extension, that history is always right.

Put another way, Ionesco is not making a simple pessimistic declaration; rather, he is creating a space - a theatrical space - in which the cycle might be reflected upon or potentially even be broken. In no way do I suggest that there is redemption lurking, but resistance. The question is where? On my reading, Ionesco is not quarreling with Shakespeare by reframing Malcolm's speech in the way he does, but rather allowing the force of the language to hit the audience.²⁰⁸ Instead of a confrontation between Malcolm and Macduff, Ionesco provides a confrontation between Macol and the audience, the only ones present to hear his vitriolic agenda. Who will rebuff Macol? Who will respond to him, as Macduff responds to Malcolm: "Fit to govern? No, not to live"?²⁰⁹ Where is the thinking being who will weigh legitimate sovereignty against brute force? Who will pass the test? Here, the potential for being stupid, or being a fool - the other kind of *bête* - comes directly to the fore. If it is proper to the human being to think, to consider, then it is at the risk of being an idiot or fool that one refrains from doing so. The test, as it is developed in the play, has to do with differentiating oneself from others, avoiding the sameness that works to dull thoughts, ideas, and actions. Ionesco is emphatic on this score: "What is important in a work or in an individual is not his resemblance to others but rather his difference, his originality, his uniqueness, his irreducibility. What is important is everything that I do differently from the others." Rather than stating an

²⁰⁸ Ionesco had strong notions about adaptation. "I don't like the idea of *rewriting* Shakespeare and Molière, of sticking arms on the Venus de Milo," he claimed in 1966. "You have the right to give several interpretations of an author, to show his work in a new light, but not to distort the sense of his work to provide grist for your own ideological mill." [Charles Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugène Ionesco*, 159.]

²⁰⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.3.102-104.

uncomplicated objective, Ionesco recognizes the difficulty and situates the aspiration to singularity in the human condition. "It is a cliché to say that 'nobody resembles anybody else.'" he continues. "It is also a truth. It is also true to say that 'everybody resembles everybody else.' This is man's contradictory truth."²¹⁰

Ending *Macbett* with the figure of the butterfly hunter highlights the absurdity of the situation, but it also quite plainly represents the ongoing search for that which is elusive. At least one critic has proposed that the butterfly represents power.²¹¹ Yet in Ionesco's play, power is not elusive, it is all too graspable; one must simply be the stronger. As he makes clear in *Rhinocéros*, Ionesco's concern is less with those who seek power - there will always be those - and more with those who grant them power, those who recognize them as leaders.

In 1967, Ionesco inscribed his sense of the stakes of chasing after political and social ideologies - *with terms such as "bestial" and "stupid"*:

When only the destiny of a political nation, of an economic system, interests him, when the great metaphysical problems no longer cause man to suffer and leave him indifferent, humanity is degraded and becomes *bestial*. Nothing seems more lamentably *stupid* than to sell one's life to some common, ordinary political party. Let us be on our guard against the lie that would have it that what is political is also spiritual and that politics too is a metaphysical answer.²¹²

With this latter concern for metaphysical problems in mind, I would like to put forward another interpretation of Ionesco's butterfly hunter. Hunting was evidently on his mind, for a few months after Ionesco staged *Macbett*, he published a small essay in *Le Figaro*

²¹⁰ Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present*, 142.

²¹¹ Ruby Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 85. The butterfly also suggests a potential reference to Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. There, more interesting than as a mere symbol of elusive power, it is also linked with obsession and (self-) destruction. Though, intriguing as an unintentional gloss on another Shakespearean "power" play, nothing in Ionesco's stage directions, where the butterfly hunter seems more ineffectual than violent, invites a direct comparison.

²¹² Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present*, 43-44; emphasis mine.

entitled “La chasse à l’homme” (“The hunt for man” or “The Manhunt”). There, discussing the way Nazism had made the word “humanisme” ridiculous, he mentions, “One word you cannot use today without someone laughing in your face is the word soul.”²¹³ Ionesco, it goes without saying, is not afraid of generating laughter. On my reading, his butterfly hunter is a hunter of man, and more precisely of the soul of man. The butterfly, for the ancient Greeks, is a symbol of the psyche (ψυχή) - understood as the soul, or the mind. With the elusive butterfly interpreted this way, Ionesco is registering dismay that no one is willing to play Macduff’s role (arguably the only role of integrity in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), a role Ionesco eliminated from his play, or rather, left open. The search continues for those who will not stupidly - that is, unthinkingly, mindlessly - accept the notion of sovereignty based on force.

My reading runs counter to the usual way of understanding Ionesco's *Macbeth* exclusively in terms of political sovereignty. Finding a “soul” - even an elusive one - may seem an arbitrary spiritual insertion onto an Absurdist play about political ambition and the abuse of power. But it may be easier to see that Ionesco's butterfly hunter represents a crucial tension within the play by recalling Candor's scaffold speech, in which he declares, “Historical reason is the only reason. There are no transcendental values to set against it.” Earlier, I suggested that Ionesco, who insists on the toxic quality of such thinking regarding history's presumed right or reason (*raison* translates as both right or reason), must in fact harbor the suspicion - or hope - that there is indeed something transcendent at hand to aid in resisting it. Understanding the chased-after

²¹³ Eugène Ionesco, “Journal de mon désarroi,” *Le Figaro littéraire* (6 mai 1972) as printed in *Antidotes* (1977), 41-42; translation mine. [“Il y a un mot qu'on ne peut plus employer aujourd'hui sans qu'on vous rie au nez, c'est le mot âme.”]

butterfly as the psyche in the ancient Greek sense of soul or mind deftly gestures toward the transcendent, without any heavy-handed religiosity or moralism.

Giving the butterfly hunter the final moment on stage allows Ionesco to theatrically draw attention to what has been missing along the treacherous path of revolving absolutist sovereigns *Macbett* charts. The implication is not that human beings are soulless, but quite the contrary. In much the same manner that Ionesco rejected the interpretation of his early play, *The Bald Soprano*, as stressing the failure and impossibility of human communication (whereas Ionesco understood his work as "a plea, pathetic perhaps, for mutual understanding"), I am suggesting that Ionesco is not presenting a nihilistically pessimistic picture of political sovereignty in *Macbett*, but signaling a human faculty or resource that has not been fully utilized.²¹⁴

FRIEND OR SOVEREIGN?

The butterfly hunter makes one other appearance in *Macbett*, almost exactly halfway through, punctuating a crucial moment of crisis in the play. As in the conclusion, the stage is clear of all other figures. This initial introduction to the butterfly hunter may similarly, as with the closing scene, strike an audience as an absurdist touch, a moment of lighthearted respite from the scenes of ambition driving the rest of the play. It was likely calculated to give just that impression. However, knowing the butterfly hunter has the last visual "word" of the play, it is less easy to shrug off this amusing interlude as a mere flight of Ionescan fancy. This first appearance of the butterfly hunter also indicates a search for a mind that will reason and make sound choices. Its placement

²¹⁴ Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 90.

within the action of the play corroborates this link. This requires some exposition, and I will discuss both what immediately precedes as well as what follows this vignette.

In considering the timing of Ionesco's deployment of the butterfly hunter, it is important to remember that *Macbett*, as we have seen, is structured differently than Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, beginning earlier than the action of Shakespeare's play with the decision by Candor and Glamiss to revolt. Along with setting up the aesthetics of interchangeability and repetition, this also establishes an emphasis on the way deliberation takes place, or fails to take place. Just prior to the initial arrival of the butterfly hunter, several important elements of the plot have transpired. Macbett and Banco, separated in a storm, have their first encounters with the witches, each on his own. The conversations are not identical, but both are told that Macbett will be king, and both are told that Duncan will give Macbett the title of Thane of Glamiss, even though he had promised the title to Banco.

Interestingly, although the prophecy of Macbett becoming king might seem the more shocking and intriguing of the two predictions, it is the latter pronouncement of Duncan going back on his word to grant the title of Glamiss to Banco that turns out to be more important to both generals (perhaps because it touches on a matter they find less far-fetched than Macbett on the throne, which both dismiss with the acknowledgment that Duncan has a legitimate heir in his son Macol). In any event, both make a point of insisting that Duncan is loyal and keeps his promises. Banco additionally asserts that Macbett is loyal, and not - as the witches maintain with cackles of laughter - his rival.

The audience, who has witnessed a whiny, cowardly Duncan during the war, is already well aware that Duncan is less than the high-minded and principled sovereign

Macbett and Banco have idealized. But Ionesco's efforts here serve not only to ridicule the foibles of this Ubuesque sovereign, but also to foreground a crisis that goes to the heart of Ionesco's concerns about how such sovereigns come to power; and perhaps more importantly, how sovereignty based on the model of might, force, and will, empties the world of meaningful relationships. After Macbett and Banco have had their individual sessions with the witches, they are unable, despite their efforts, to confer with one another. Ionesco registers both the passing of time and the disconnected relations between the characters as Duncan, Lady Duncan, Macbett, Banco, an Officer, and an unidentified woman cross the stage, silently following or passing each other but never engaging with one another. Next are two soliloquies in which first Banco and then Macbett reflect on how the witches' prediction regarding Duncan breaking his promise to Banco has come to pass.

The situation has deeply unsettled Banco. "Did Macbett plot to gain the title?" he asks. "Could my loyal friend and companion be a swindler? Is Duncan so ungrateful that he can disregard my efforts and the risks I've taken, the dangers I've undergone to defend him and keep him from harm? Is there no one I can trust?" He disavows the nihilism his questions propose. "No, no. I know Macbett too well to be anything but convinced of his loyalty and his virtue. Duncan's decision is undoubtedly his own; no prompter but his own nature. It shows him in his true colors. But Macbett can't have heard yet. When he does, he'll refuse to have anything to do with it."²¹⁵ Faced with having to locate the source of the betrayal, Banco is willing to step away from his belief and trust in Duncan being the honorable sovereign he had previously admired, but he is unprepared to assign blame to Macbett. The very idea of his "loyal friend and companion" being capricious

²¹⁵ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 45.

and devious, actively manipulating the situation to his advantage, is evidently too painful to entertain at any length. As Banco has it worked out, Duncan may be unscrupulous, but Macbett remains above reproach. He is convinced that Macbett will reject the offer of the title promised to his friend.

Macbett's soliloquy verifies Banco's intuitions about his friend's first impulses. "The king tells me Glamiss is dead and that I'm to inherit his title, but not his lands. The witches' prophecies are beginning to come true," Macbett frets. "I tried to tell Duncan that I didn't want him to dispossess Banco in my favor. I tried to tell him that Banco and I were friends and that Banco hadn't done anything to deserve such treatment, that he had served his sovereign loyally. But he wouldn't listen, hear me."²¹⁶ Banco believes that Macbett's incorruptibility will result in an absolute refusal to be a part of an action that is unjust. Yet Macbett's reservations have lacked that sense of outright rejection; not wanting to deprive Banco of his promised title shows preference, but it is not the same as spurning the offer as a matter of principle. Rather than Macbett refusing to listen to Duncan's reasoning, Duncan has refused to listen to Macbett's.

Still, Macbett understands there is a decision to be made: "If I accept the title, I might lose the friendship of my dear comrade, Banco. If I refuse, I shall incur the king's displeasure. Have I the right to disobey him? I don't disobey when he sends me to war, so I can't very well disobey when he rewards me. That would be contempt. I must explain to Banco."²¹⁷ The crisis is isolated to a choice between loyalty to one's sovereign versus loyalty to one's friend. On my account, this represents the most important moment of adjudication in the play - far more important, in fact, than the decision to assassinate

²¹⁶ Ibid., 46.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

Duncan. It is crucial because it begins the process that leads to the overthrow, but also because it reveals the aspects of sovereignty that Ionesco detests - the *bête* that relies on force and will and operates beyond laws and agreements, as well as the *bête* that is stupid, lacking judgment.

The butterfly hunter makes his seemingly inconsonant interjection to the tone and narrative of the play between this pair of soliloquies by the two friends and Ionesco's version of a cauldron scene, in which Macbett submits to the seduction of the witches and their curses. Yet, as I am arguing, Ionesco has placed him there, not only to offer a moment of levity, but also to register a moment of the most serious gravity. Macbett's decision between respecting someone he holds dear or someone wielding authority marks the turning point of the course of the play, and reveals the way a thinking being is necessary to counteract both beasts that hover around sovereignty. Macbett acknowledges that he stands to lose Banco's friendship, but does not explore what such a loss would mean. He does, however, spend some time considering whether he has the "right" as a subject to defy the wishes of the sovereign.

What is important to note is that where Macbett has been stupid, is in having been blind to making any decision that challenges the logic of sovereignty. Macbett lacks command over himself, not in the philosophical sense of *akrasia*, but in the banal political sense of being nothing more than a subject. (As I will discuss in the next section, the witches point out to him this very weakness in the following scene when they taunt him to "Be your own master, instead of taking someone else's orders.") In other words, the problem is not that Macbett recognizes it would be better to value his friend over his sovereign, but lacks the will to follow through with it; the problem is that he simply fails

to recognize it as a viable course of action, he has taken the party line and understood the sovereign's desire to be right in any case (Macbett's comment, "I must explain to Banco" presumes his friend will understand and concur with his rationale, when the audience already knows he will not). One might say his stupidity stems from being too stupefied, too oblivious, to think beyond this particular logic of sovereignty.

It is precisely this missed step in the thought process, a missed opportunity to think - to judge something to be good, right, and valuable outside of pragmatic, politically expedient considerations - that I am suggesting Ionesco is interested in highlighting as particularly pernicious. For what Ionesco shows is not a mistake, error, or confusion on the part of Macbett - which would set him up in classical terms as a tragic figure - but rather, as Derrida discusses in *The Beast and The Sovereign*, "an aptitude for wrong judgment, a defect in judgment, an inability to judge."²¹⁸ Attuned to the nuances of what it means for the thinking being to do something stupid, Derrida considers the French usage of the term *bêtise*: "I did a *bêtise*, I did something stupid, does not mean that I am *bête* but on the contrary: just when I am supposed not to be *bête*, I let myself go."²¹⁹ In other words, if Macbett were an animal-beast, lacking reason, there would be no moral hazard for an animal cannot be stupid or foolish. But as a thinking being, the stakes are high indeed for failing to exercise the faculty of reason.

Abiding by the logic of "might makes right," on the face of it, may seem sensible enough, especially if "everyone else" is similarly deferring to it. Ionesco, as we have seen, feels strongly to the contrary. As we have also seen, this is not only because being

²¹⁸ Derrida, *The Beast and The Sovereign*, 148.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 149.

"like everyone else" renders individuals indistinct, but crucially because it leaves unutilized the very faculty - the mind or soul - that conditions originality and uniqueness.

Ionesco, like Hannah Arendt, is concerned with the banal path that leads to evil tyrannical political leaders, but he is also just as concerned with the way the same banal path forecloses the possibility of sovereign-selves. While her report on Eichmann's trial was published in 1963, Arendt gave a lecture called "Thinking and Moral Consideration" in 1971 - just when Ionesco was writing *Macbett* - addressing precisely the moral hazard resulting from "clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct."²²⁰ As Arendt puts it in "Thinking and Moral Consideration," there is a "claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence."²²¹ In other words, history makes a claim on thinking beings, one cannot assume that history is right simply because it has come to pass. Still troubled by the way wickedness and evil do not necessarily require base motives, she poses the pressing questions of her lecture in this way: "Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evil-doing?"²²²

LIMITED MIND, LIMITED VISION

²²⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Consideration," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971), 417. I make no claims here regarding influence. As far as I have been able to establish, Ionesco does not intentionally nor explicitly engage with Arendt's ideas, but for someone as politically concerned with the question of evil and its source, it is by no means far-fetched to imagine that he was familiar with her publication on the Eichmann trial. It is less likely that he would have known her 1971 lecture, but the overlap of themes and concerns in *Macbett* are fascinating to note, especially considering the proximity of their publications.

²²¹ Ibid., 418.

²²² Ibid., 418.

A brief look at the "transformation" scene in which the witches secure Macbett's willingness to murder Duncan will demonstrate Ionesco's subtle and sophisticated insistence on Macbett's failure to adequately exercise his mind. The witches tempt Macbett with the idea not only of being the political sovereign, but more interestingly, with the idea of being a sovereign individual - "Be your own master," the witches gibe, "instead of taking someone else's orders."²²³ Ironically, although Macbett is drawn toward and ostensibly agrees to both forms of empowerment, what quite blatantly takes place is seduction and submission. When the witches are fully revealed as the beautiful Lady Duncan and her lady-in-waiting, Macbett's actions and terms of address are all in a sovereign register, but the sovereignty is not his. Macbett maintains his role as subject, and indeed, lowers himself even further. "Oh your Majesty!" he exclaims, falling to his knees. "Let me be your slave," he pleads, and, in a moment of inspired confusion he sputters, "Madam, sire, or rather siren..."²²⁴ While this scene obviously trades on the hilarity of hyperbolized sexuality, there is more to it than the comic predictability of Macbett's reaction, and still more to it besides the implied bondage of his character precisely when he would be sovereign.

As I have been arguing, Ionesco has gone beyond parody in his exploration of sovereignty. The Latin phrases throughout this scene reveal Ionesco's careful attention to matters of far more serious import than the way sex and power are enmeshed, and rulers are enslaved. "*Alter ego surge*," the witches intone, calling forth not only their "other selves" as noblewomen but the "other self" of Macbett, the self that aspires to be the sovereign rather than a subject. Their lists of Latin adverbs and prepositions, arranged

²²³ Ionesco, *Macbett*, 50.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

alliteratively for the most part, and peppered here and there with a line taken from Genesis and Virgil, give the impression of random, silly hocus-pocus. Yet the first and only line that Macbett repeats back to the witches - "*Video meliora, deteriora sequor*" - and is chanted a total of seven times as the climactic finale of the spell, could hardly be arbitrary. The line translates, "I see the better [course], follow the worse." Ionesco has made a slight change to the original phrase, taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book Seven, where the line is said by Medea and has one additional word: "*Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*." On my reading, the left out term, *proboque*, holds a key to Ionesco's sense of what is crucially missing in the battle against the logic of sovereignty that takes might for right. *Proboque* means "approve" or "esteem"; it is a term that designates value and judgment. The original phrase, "I see *and approve* the better course, but follow the worse," registers the acknowledgment of consideration, appraisal, and discernment. Without it, as it stands in the witches' curse, "seeing the better," is done with blank, uncomprehending eyes: stupid, unthinking, *bête* eyes.

Macbett's vision is explicitly called into question in the banquet scene, where, just as in Shakespeare's version, he unravels in front of his guests. When Macbett mistakes his portrait for that of Duncan's, accusing his subjects of disloyalty, they wonder among themselves "if myopia is brought on by power?" and conclude "it happens quite frequently."²²⁵ Myopia, here, goes beyond literal near-sightedness to reflect small-mindedness and a lack of those things that are "proper to the human being," sovereign or no: insight and imagination. Again, while Ionesco is manifestly criticizing those in power, he is also, and more interestingly in my assessment, criticizing those who unthinkingly enable and support those who have risen to power. The banquet scene in

²²⁵ Ibid., 89.

Macbett celebrates Macbett's coronation as well as his demise. As soon as Macol kills Macbett and is seated on the throne, the same guests who had gathered to honor Macbett shout "Long live Macol, our beloved sovereign!" and others arrive holding placards that read, "Macol is always right."²²⁶ Not only the sovereign suffers from myopia; but also those who blankly accept the sovereign as right.

ABSURD YESTERDAYS AND TOMORROWS

Tracing the lineage much further back than Jarry's work at the turn of the twentieth century, Ionesco was fond of naming Shakespeare "the forefather of the theatre of the absurd."²²⁷ Indeed, the lines he quotes to demonstrate Shakespeare's affinity come from Macbeth's description of life: "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing." The lines are taken from the famous "Tomorrow" speech, in which Macbeth responds to the news of his wife's death:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. [5.5.17-28]

The passage intimates the absurd with interwoven themes and images of history and human roles: the wary hope that events might transpire to create a time for mourning; the slipperiness and pettiness of our days accumulating into a history with which we feel at

²²⁶ Ibid., 101 (in English in the original).

²²⁷ Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugène Ionesco*, 49.

odds; the smallness and brevity of our individual significance; and, of course, the very theatricality of life. Ionesco converts these concerns into farce, but does not relinquish their tragic potential.

In considering the ambition for sovereignty in his *Macbett*, Ionesco highlights the *bêtes* lurking around the throne: the obvious *bête* of tyranny and absolutist power, and the almost imperceptible - and therefore more dangerous - *bête* of stupidity and relying on conventional thought. Both of these *bêtes*, moreover, have troubled Ionesco over the course of his life and artistic career. *Macbett* is not a turn to the political, then, but yet another exploration of the role ordinary individuals can play as their own masters, with political reverberations. In his own distinctive idiom, Ionesco has brought to the modern stage the perils of, in Shakespeare's terms, living like "a walking shadow" or "a poor player." For Ionesco, this translates into uncritically accepting history and its victors as right and not distinguishing oneself as a thinking being and sovereign-self. In this way, Ionesco's *Macbett* has "lighted fools / The way to dusty death."

IV: COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN THE THEATER

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a tale of ambition gone awry. Jarry and Ionesco sidestep the traditional tragic tone, but their formal moves to farce only scratch the surface of the significant departures each playwright makes from Shakespeare's drama. *Ubu roi* and *Macbett* follow the trajectory of revolution and usurpation outlined in the Renaissance drama, and although each play similarly presents a single king replacing another, both Ubu and Macbett epitomize characteristics of the crowd, fundamentally changing

Shakespeare's story of revolution to a modern story of *the* revolution: the shift from absolute sovereignty to popular sovereignty.

In their responses to the revolution, both Jarry and Ionesco express anxieties about the crowd, revealing an important way theater "avoids the revolution." Within the logic of absolute sovereignty, the crowd watches, defers to, acknowledges and therefore corroborates the sovereign's authority. Within the logic of popular sovereignty, the crowd rules -- in so far as it must at all times be taken into account, asserting its authority by virtue of size and number. Jarry seeks to minimize the crowd's mass on stage, and extends a critique of the base desires and appetites that fuel the crowd and nurse its power. Ionesco hints at the crowd with doubling of characters, and explores the repercussions on political life of the individual's failure to think and judge *as an individual*.

The transition to democratic popular sovereignty created the challenge of how to visualize and represent the People and its will.²²⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the modern theater, on the whole, does not stage popular will as such, in part because of the difficulty of effectively representing the crowd on stage.²²⁹ Yet as Jarry and Ionesco demonstrate with their critiques of popular sovereignty, physical practicalities present only the most literal obstruction. Individual and personal sovereignty turn out to be the paramount concerns.

If theater "avoids the revolution" in the overt historical terms specified by Badiou, and "avoids the revolution" as well by failing to celebrate the crowd, it is not the case that

²²⁸ See Jason Frank, "The Living Image of the People" in *Scaffolding Sovereignty: Global Perspectives on the History and Aesthetics of a Concept*. (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

²²⁹ Groundbreaking and influential modern directors such as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, André Antoine, and Konstantin Stanislavsky - all with realist commitments - took up the challenge of staging the crowd, but their successes are noteworthy as much for their rarity as for their realist achievement.

theater ignores the revolution, as evidenced by the subsequent use of common individuals as protagonists rather than those from noble ranks. The belief in the equality of human beings that entitles popular will to its sovereignty also provides the common person the same access to the modern stage as that enjoyed by the sovereign figures of ancient and baroque drama. In this way, we can begin to understand the turn to sovereign figuration in the modern theater. Drama, perhaps owing to its reciprocal relationship with sovereignty, demonstrates a clear investment in the individual human being. Put succinctly, theater focuses on the ordinary *person*, not one or another version of the People.

PART III

MODERN LEARS

**PIRANDELLO'S *HENRY IV*, BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*,
& IONESCO'S *EXIT THE KING***

I. AVANT-GARDE THEATER: FORWARD OR BACKWARD?

Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco irrefutably stand at the forefront of modernist avant-garde theater: Beckett and Ionesco are counted as Theater of the Absurd's most notable practitioners and Pirandello as an esteemed forerunner. Yet I would like to suggest there is something "backward" about these illustrious innovators. Backward, to begin with, because of their participation in the counter-intuitive recourse to sovereign figures in certain of their plays, namely, Pirandello's *Henry IV* (1922), Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), and Ionesco's *Exit the King* (1962). That the theatrical past finds expression in the sovereign figures portrayed in these plays, recalling the long history of relations between sovereignty and drama, carries with it both a potential irony as well as a potential risk in the context of avant-garde theater. Linguistically rooted in military terminology, the avant-garde is conceptually associated with revolutionary forward movement in the arts; the tactic of using royal figuration could be construed as retrograde.

As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, however, I understand modern drama to have a vested interest in recalibrating rather than eschewing its relationship to sovereignty. But within this curious "regression" to a previous dramatic form an even more precise retreat becomes discernible in these works by Pirandello, Beckett, and Ionesco. The three sovereigns reigning in their plays are remarkable not

only for being sovereigns in modern plays, created by artists with a full range of characters available to their imaginations, but also for the kind of sovereigns they are, and for the manner in which their sovereignty is manifested, challenged, maintained, and - crucially - surrendered. Put plainly, a backward movement of withdrawal, demonstrating an under-acknowledged function of sovereignty, is shown in these plays to be a complementary gesture to that of ambition. Indeed, beyond their general participation in (or creation of) Absurdist theater, certain shared features of these plays bring out the particular problematic of abdication within the larger framework of why and how sovereignty persists on the modern stage.

A brief introduction of the sovereigns and a cursory tour of their domains will begin to establish the traits that suggest their family resemblance. Though its title gives the impression of a history play, Pirandello's *Henry IV*, much like *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (written just one year previously), meta-theatrically takes up modern questions of authority and authenticity, in this case manifested in the character and circumstances of a twentieth-century man who believes he is the eleventh-century Emperor Henry IV. Those around "Henry" elaborately corroborate his performance as sovereign - recreating his throne room, appearing before him as historical figures, removing all traces of contemporary life and technology - adding a further twist and supplying the dramatic engine to this strange, anachronistic situation. Beckett's *Endgame* focuses on a similarly confined, claustrophobic, and theatrical world, in which it is recognized: "Outside of here it's death."²³⁰ Hamm, though never explicitly named as a sovereign, is presented as one, albeit with more commonplace accoutrements indicating his regal status: his centrally located wheelchair throne, his toque for a crown, his gaff

²³⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 9.

for a scepter -- to say nothing of his high-handed demeanor. Beckett himself referred to Hamm as "a king in this chess game lost from the start," a description that perfectly captures both the sovereign's displaced control (a player moves the king) as well as the live possibility of forfeiture and defeat.²³¹ Ionesco's King Bérenger likewise finds himself in an endgame. *Le roi se meurt* is more accurately translated "The King is Dying"; strikingly, among the four plays for which Ionesco utilizes his Bérenger character, *Exit the King* is the only one in which this semi-autobiographical figure is given a royal title.²³² In other words, Ionesco has crowned his Everyman precisely when he must confront the inevitability of death.²³³ King Bérenger has resisted death for centuries, but now his first wife, Marguerite, tells him unambiguously: "You're going to die in an hour and a half, you're going to die at the end of the show."²³⁴

Three more-or-less obvious sovereign figures, routinely recognized as such. Less transparent, and so far unexamined beyond perfunctory identification, is why it *matters* they are sovereign figures. Matters to the dramas in which they play a role, and matters to the modern theater for which they have been created.

MODERN LEARS

None of these kings is a Macbeth: there is no ambition, no plotting for a throne, no regicide, no usurpation of power in an effort to secure or preserve rule over a politically recognized state or territory. Nor do these kings stand in as embodiments of

²³¹ Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 152.

²³² The other Ionesco plays in which Bérenger is a character are *The Killer* (1958), *Rhinocéros* (1959), and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963).

²³³ King Bérenger's confrontation with the inevitability of death is in contrast to Bérenger's encounter with the serial killer terrorizing the Radiant City in *The Killer*, where the deaths are premature, and presumably unjust.

²³⁴ Ionesco, *Exit the King*, in *Exit the King, The Killer, and Macbett*, trans. Charles Marowitz and David Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 24.

popular sovereignty and the threat of an unthinking majority driven by base appetites and clichés as we have seen in the modern Macbeths put forward in *Ubu roi* and *Macbett*. But nor are these bourgeois sovereigns in the stamp of Ibsen's Solness or Borkman, working out their sovereignty while having commerce with the world. So what kind of sovereigns are they? I am categorizing these kings as Modern Lears, but in no way am I suggesting adaptations of any kind, but rather the reworking of Shakespeare's themes in distinctly modern ways. Themes, I will add, bound to sovereignty, and as such, "Lear" turns out to be shorthand for a variety of Shakespearean sovereigns who similarly relinquish their crowns (especially, but not only, Richard II).

Coupling Shakespeare's *Lear* with modern drama does not originate with me; *Endgame* in particular has been called out repeatedly as an heir to the tragedy, the genealogy traced along distinct lines to a sovereign figure and, more often, to a world on the verge of collapse. Roger Blin, to whom *Endgame* is dedicated, and who played Hamm in the first production in London in 1957, made perhaps the earliest connection: "I saw in *Fin de Partie* the theme of the death of kings," he said. "Perhaps unduly but nevertheless deliberately I slanted Hamm toward King Lear...Whatever was regal in the text, imperious in the character, was taken as Shakespearean. Beckett was not opposed to it."²³⁵

In his influential 1964 book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott entitled his chapter on this play "*King Lear* or *Endgame*," stressing a different kind of association than Blin by finding in both plays "a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human

²³⁵ Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld. *Beckett in the Theatre: The Author as Practical Playwright and Director* (London and New York: J. Calder, 1988), 171.

experience."²³⁶ For Kott, Lear's howl against the bleak, unfeeling, inhospitable world resounds in *Endgame*, and in the twentieth-century human condition more generally. "The exposition of *King Lear* shows a world that is to be destroyed," Kott specifies, capturing a further aspect of the plays I am categorizing as Modern Lears. Beyond the post-apocalyptic world suggested by *Endgame*, Henry's constructed world of eleventh-century pageantry is threatened by the arrival of contemporary people who hope to cure him, and Bérenger's kingdom is in fact tied to his existence, so it fades and crumbles away as he dies. The kingdom in *Exit the King* turns out to be the world itself, and the Doctor's report on the king's condition includes the details that Mars and Venus have collided, and the sun has lost between 50 and 75 percent of its strength. Later, when Bérenger's heart is beating so frantically the walls crack, the Doctor is nonplussed: "We know every phase of the disease. It's always like this when a universe snuffs out."²³⁷

One more link made between *King Lear* and *Endgame* needs to be mentioned. In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, discussing how the concept of modernism "developed" for him since he began writing in the 1960s, Stanley Cavell asks "What...were readings of Beckett's *Endgame* and of *King Lear* doing so prominently in my first book, *Must We Mean What We Say*?"²³⁸ It is a very good question, as it asks to account not only for the parallels between Hamm and Lear and their respective worlds,

²³⁶ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Bolesław Taborski (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 105. R.A. Foakes, in a more recent essay, surmises that Beckett systematically subverts with irony and farce the redemptive Christian echoes present in *King Lear* ("*King Lear* and *Endgame*" in *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 55, King Lear and Its Afterlife*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 158.

²³⁷ Ionesco, *Exit the King*, 81.

²³⁸ Stanley Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?" in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 141. "Ending the Waiting Game" and "The Avoidance of Love" are the only two essays in his early collection to focus on literary works, and while they have each proven influential for both philosophers and literary scholars, Cavell's predilection for taking drama and theater philosophically seriously (evident in his body of work on Shakespeare, opera, and film) has yet to be adequately explored.

but to the perceived relevance of these plays in a volume concerned with mapping the topography of a particular area of modernist philosophy. For Cavell, more questions, unsurprisingly, proceed from the first: "What happens to the idea of the ordinary in Beckett's play, where the composition is rigorous and complex but the scene defies the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary; or to the distinction between reason and emptiness in *King Lear*, where simulacra of love and legitimacy promise no end?"²³⁹

Cavell's meticulous readings of these plays reveal philosophical stakes extending far beyond the stage. "Are these portraits of a mad world to which reason has no response, or are they ones in which skepticism is itself, as such, accommodated to, in feats of mania or indifference?" he asks. "And how different are these worlds from our own?" In other words, these plays reveal the razor's edge one walks between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between reason and emptiness and other tenuous lines of demarcation Cavell traces out "between reason and sophistry, between conversation and chatter, between the serious and the idle, between the achievement of art, in however unheard-of a form, and its withdrawal."²⁴⁰ The sovereign figures of *Henry IV*, *Endgame*, and *Exit the King* worry, each in his own manner, about which side of the line he stands, about whether, for example, prattle, gossip, and flattery have poisoned meaningful conversation and relationships, or whether creative efforts and intentions are futile in an uncomprehending world. Recognizing the significance of the vulnerability of such boundaries, the dramas I am referring to in this chapter as Modern Lears are avant-garde indeed, for each play takes up precisely these concerns as if heeding a modernist version of the call "Once more unto the breach!"

²³⁹ Ibid., 141.

²⁴⁰ Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?," 141.

HANGING BETWEEN

Invoking the famous battle cry from *Henry V*, I may seem to be confusing my Shakespearean sovereigns. Before attempting to justify this reference, a point of distinction is in order about the kinds of connections I have just indexed, and why Cavell's readings have the stronger purchase on my own analyses of not only *Endgame*, but also *Henry IV* and *Exit the King*. Blin's association of Hamm with Lear bears primarily, and indispensably, on staging - on props and the actor's comportment. For Kott, however, Hamm is not "regal" as in Blin's description, but "a degraded and powerless tyrant," which might begin to describe Henry and Bérenger as well, but this assessment fails to take the full measure of any of these sovereigns.²⁴¹ The modern figures, like Lear, struggle spectacularly against their impotence; they are not Duncans, slain in their sleep by a Macbeth.

The familiarity Kott's reading trades on in presenting Shakespeare as "our contemporary" emphasizes the cruel, grotesque, and decaying aspects of Lear's world, a world presumed to have been emptied of meaning. The concerns that preoccupy the so-called "Theater of the Absurd" are often characterized in just these grim terms - action is futile, language is senseless. Cavell's reading of *Endgame* has long stood out for exploring a world all the more disturbing for still having significance -- and this despite deliberate and calculating efforts to void any trace of significance. "Only Beckett sees," according to Cavell, "how infinitely difficult this escape will be. Positivism said that

²⁴¹ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 157.

statements about God are meaningless; Beckett shows that they mean too damned much."²⁴²

Cavell pinpoints the urgency of Hamm's question, "We're not beginning to...to...mean something?" as *poised between hope and despair*.²⁴³ The terms derive from Beckett's recapitulation of an Augustinian formulation he admired for "the shape of the idea": "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned."²⁴⁴ For Cavell, "the implication is that the correct attitude is hung between; between the despair and the presumption of salvation, absorbing both."²⁴⁵ Hauntingly, his essay concludes: "We hang between."²⁴⁶

Cavell's intuition captures - rightly, I think - that it is this tension of "hanging between" that interests Beckett as opposed to outright defeat. (Here, too, is the tension Kierkegaard describes in calling despair "the sickness *unto* death," stressing that in despair one longs for death, but the torture is precisely that one does not die from despair). Kott's appraisal - "a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience" - is on the mark, save for the word frail. The criticism of the absolute, on Cavell's reading, is in the name of not-frail-enough human experience. Too much is asked of human strength, just because it is strong. Too much is asked of meaning, just because there is meaning.²⁴⁷ The game may be "lost from the start," but the pieces are

²⁴² Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 120.

²⁴³ Beckett, *Endgame*, 32.

²⁴⁴ Quoted in Harold Hobson, "Samuel Beckett - Dramatist of the Year," *International Theatre Annual* 1 (London: John Calder, 1956), 153.

²⁴⁵ Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 150.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁴⁷ The formulation comes from a line in a 1964 story by Clarice Lispector. "Too much was being asked of my courage just because I was courageous, too much was being asked of my strength just because I was

still on the chessboard, looking forward to the end. As Clov says to begin the play, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished."²⁴⁸ But beyond - or indeed, as a part of - the accuracy of the existential diagnosis this image offers of a painful meantime, "hanging between" also turns out to create a space for the king to emerge on this modern stage.

Perhaps more precisely: this modern scaffold. Henry, Hamm, and Béranger hang between being king and not being king. It is in so far that Lear represents *abdication* rather than ambition that I am classifying these modern sovereigns as Lears. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is explicitly political, beginning with the division of a kingdom by its monarch, but more broadly, it is a study of dispossession: of title and property, to be sure, but also of self, status, and mind. Above all, the kings put forward by Pirandello, Beckett, and Ionesco echo Lear's plaintive question, "Who is it who can tell me who I am?" - in this way, pursuing questions surrounding the legitimacy of the sovereign and its dependence on theatricality.

But abdication is the key term here, and goes some distance in giving a more robust understanding to the "retreat" staged by these modern plays. Retreat takes different forms, yet I want to signal that it is not simply resignation in the face of the absurd found in these dramas - the somewhat standard interpretation - but rather something more precise that takes into account the fact the protagonists are figured as sovereigns. Each king stages a kind of abdication -- an abdication, because one must be sovereign in order to abdicate. These plays, then, point to a paradox of sovereignty: the desire to be sovereign contains within it the desire to relinquish that role.

strong." "The Misfortunes of Sofia," in *The Foreign Legion: Stories and Chronicles*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: New Directions, 1992), 23.

²⁴⁸ Beckett, *Endgame*, 1.

MODERN RICHARDS, PROSPEROS, AND HENRYS

In what follows, I will trace the terms and stakes of the modern retreats staged within *Henry IV* and *Exit the King* before concluding my discussion with *Endgame*. In terms of abdication, these modern sovereigns have other Shakespearean predecessors alongside Lear who will help to articulate their concerns. For example, although Hamm "above all resembles Lear," critics have had no trouble identifying the direct tributes within the play to Richard III - "My kingdom for a nightman" - as well as to Prospero - "Our revels now are ended."²⁴⁹ Beckett's dexterity with Shakespeare proves salient both in terms of the sentiments implied - desperation and cessation - as well as for the sovereign figures to whom he alludes, and in particular to their waning status at the time of their utterances.

Blin's reference, cited earlier, to "the death of kings" calls to mind another of Shakespeare's plays, namely, *Richard II*, undoubtedly the most referenced work in discussions of sovereignty and Renaissance drama (especially since Kantorowicz devoted an early chapter to it in his groundbreaking and unparalleled study, *The King's Two Bodies*). "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings," Richard proclaims - providing, with dreadful accuracy, a description of the scene of *Endgame*. But in Richard's shock at discovering his mortality, he is also a fitting analogue to Bérenger in *Exit the King*, and I will turn to him in that capacity as well.

Historically, Richard II surrenders his crown to Henry IV. Pirandello's play opens with a scene of confusion over just which Henry IV is in residence, and needless to say it is not Henry IV of England, and absolutely not Henry IV of France, for whose court the

²⁴⁹ Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 155; Beckett, *Endgame*, 23; 56.

hapless new "counsellor" has mistakenly prepared to join. I will have more to say about the historical German Emperor Henry IV in the course of my examination of Pirandello's drama, but Shakespeare's Henry IV is nevertheless germane in a theatrically roundabout fashion.

Above, I characterized *Henry IV*, *Endgame*, and *Exit the King* as alert to the rallying cry "Once more unto the breach!" Henry V reaches the height of his kingship with this call to arms, having transformed himself from being a dissolute prince, and having gained the trust of his soldiers with "a little touch of Harry in the night." By way of transitioning to my analysis of Pirandello's *Henry IV* and the other modern plays, I want to linger on Prince Hal. Hal famously pretends to be king for a moment, trying on his father's crown as the king lies dying. More importantly for the connections I want to establish with Pirandello's twentieth-century "Henry," Hal plays at being Henry IV much earlier, in a far less solemn venue. He is not mad, like Pirandello's character, but drunk: in a pub with the rest of their cohort, Hal and Falstaff take turns acting the role of Henry IV dressing down, so to speak, his profligate son.

PRINCE HAL: Dost thou speak like a king? Do thou stand for me, and I'll play my father.

FALSTAFF: Depose me? If thou dost it half so gravely, so majestically, both in word and matter, hang me up by the heels for a rabbit-sucker, or a poulter's hare.

PRINCE HAL: Well, here I am set.

FALSTAFF: And here I stand. Judge, my masters.

(*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.427-33)

In this memorable scene, intertwining themes of theater and sovereignty, Hal and Falstaff work out an important distinction between deposition and abdication. Competing in their portrayals of a king, it is play, in the double sense of theater and "excellent sport" as the

Hostess declares. But there is weight in what Falstaff identifies as criteria for removing a king. He demands gravity and majesty “both in word and matter.” This accomplished, the deposition renders the former king either a rabbit-sucker – an infant – or a poulter’s hare – raised for food. In both instances, deposition results in a vulnerable, harmless animal, by all accounts, passive and negligible. But Falstaff’s “If” looms large for me - “*If* though dost it half so gravely, so majestically” - revealing the loophole Richard II so gorgeously discovers: only the king can rightfully undo the king. No one else has the status or authority. One can be forcibly deposed, but it remains to the king to abdicate, to actively give over what is only his to give, that is, his legitimate, authentic sovereignty. “Judge, my masters,” Falstaff commands with the implied qualification: if you are in fact my masters.

Treading a finer line between tragedy and comedy, Pirandello's Henry IV extends Falstaff's “if” to his visitors: “Depose me?” Only if you are serious and magnificent, meaning what you say and being earnest and passionate in what you do. They have come to observe him, scorn him, pity him, shock him, and ostensibly *cure* him of what they see as madness, his acting out of a wild stage play. For Henry, his sovereignty is at stake, not just his costume, and he is tired of asking pardon for being sovereign. “Here I stand,” he seems to say with his rages, “Judge, my masters.”

II. PIRANDELLO'S *HENRY IV*

SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF A SOVEREIGN

In Pirandello's unprecedented 1921 drama *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, six "fictional" characters, members of a troubled family whose author has abandoned their story after writing only two acts, show up at a theater, pleading with the living actors they find there to play them, to take them seriously by taking on their roles, and thereby giving the characters life as a work of art, completing their drama. The play consists of this confrontation and the ensuing dress-rehearsal. Questions of authority and authenticity -- of what it might mean to author a life, of what it might mean to be authentic, and of what it might mean to be taken seriously in both endeavors -- come to the fore when the actors run into the impossibility of representation and the fictional characters turn out to be, as the Father puts it, "living beings more alive than those who breathe and wear clothes: being less real perhaps, but truer!"

Pirandello engages similar questions of authority and authenticity - and reveals further paradoxes - in *Henry IV*, his equally meta-theatrical, though certainly more nuanced, play written just one year later. Among the aesthetic choices made by Pirandello, one that is not often taken seriously by critics is that he has titled his drama after a sovereign, and not just any sovereign, but one caught up rather spectacularly in medieval debates surrounding sovereignty.

What might this adjustment from "fake" characters to a "fake" sovereign signify? What does the shift in inflection from the search for authority to the search for sovereignty offer? Is this an explicit turn to the political? Authority and sovereignty share the space of politics, yet my reading is more concerned with the space of the

overlap - that is, the theater - than with politics, per se. Political readings of Pirandello tend to focus on his membership in the fascist party and Mussolini's support of his theater, endeavoring to understand whether the playwright's art is of a piece with his politics, or whether his political commitments are feigned or exaggerated in order to derive artistic support and benefits. I certainly do not take Pirandello to be apolitical in his art, but adjudicating his political position is not my immediate concern in reading *Henry IV*. (The play premiered in February 1922; Mussolini's March on Rome was not until October of that year, putting the Duce's rise to power outside the scope of this drama's concerns). As with Ionesco's *Macbett*, Pirandello's *Henry IV* resists a merely topical reading of contemporary politics. If Pirandello is extending a denunciation of fascism and the cult of the leader - a staged madness to which all participants contribute though they all know (including Henry) that it is fraudulent - such a critique is *avant la lettre*. If Pirandello is deriding the Italian monarchy as an outdated, ineffectual mode of government (a more likely possibility), his institutional critique is buried beneath enormous attention to highly personal, individualized concerns.

The uncertain political mood unquestionably bears on the play, however. In her excellent study, *The Search for Modern Tragedy: Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France*, Mary Anne Frese Witt explores the complex aesthetics of fascism, and carefully situates Pirandello as an intellectual and artist responding more generally to the priority given to theater and theatricality within the fascist movement, but specifically to fascism's keen interest in reviving ancient tragedy and creating modern tragedy.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Mary Anne Frese Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy: Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Pirandello was in the vanguard of the movement to rethink tragedy, not least because he was one of the first (modernists) to erase the line between tragedy and comedy, understanding both modes to be crucially implicated in the other. As it happens, Pirandello captures this blend of tragedy and comedy - his version of hanging between - in an explicit appeal to the figure of Lear in an 1893 essay, "Arte e coscienza d'oggi" ("Art and Consciousness Today"):

What has become of this microcosm, this king of the universe? Ah, poor king! Don't you see leaping in front of you King Lear armed with a broom in all of his tragic comicality? With what madness? Once upon a time there was a superb castle, a marvelous castle built on a red cloud, a cloud that seemed to be made of flames. That castle was his kingdom, and the wind blew it away. The sun set, and the cloud changed: it became livid and then slowly black; finally it dissolved into water and its drops seemed to be tears.²⁵¹

These lines detailing a once wonderful castle built on a cloud but now blown away, offer an astonishing picture of the modernist sense of a foundationless world. The humor comes in the sad futility of King Lear, in this picture no longer raging, but equipped with only a broom to deal with the wreckage of his world. I hear him saying, presaging Clov: "I'm doing my best to create a little order."

Surveying Pirandello's approaches to modern tragedy, Witt asks, in a footnote, "Why did Pirandello specifically choose Henry IV as the subject of his one drama concerning a "historical" figure? I have not been able to find a satisfactory answer to this question."²⁵² It is exactly the role of this particular personage I would like to understand in the context of this play and its working out of new relations between sovereignty and

²⁵¹ As quoted in Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy*, 92. ["Arte e coscienza d'oggi," in *La Nazione letteraria*, Florence, September 1893].

²⁵² Ibid., 99.

drama. As *Henry IV* demonstrates, modern drama plays with representations of power: Henry is a make-believe sovereign, a pretender in the theatrical sense, allowing for an exploration of sovereignty as it is manifested in the arenas of psychology, love, and existential crisis. The stakes of authority and authenticity turn out to be crucially connected to sovereignty within these registers in *Henry IV*, and in particular to the aim of personal sovereignty: the desire to take oneself seriously and attempt to be taken seriously by others.

Despite its title, Pirandello's *Henry IV* bears little resemblance to works in the tradition of historical drama. Any effort to relate historical events within the play is self-conscious of its reenactment. What is going on? Pirandello's Henry IV is a twentieth-century man who dressed up as the eleventh-century German Emperor Henry IV for an extravagant costume party and cavalcade twenty years before the time of the play. He has chosen his role in an effort to be close to Matilda, the woman he loves unrequitedly.

Before turning to the historical Henry IV and Pirandello's choice of this figure, a brief review of some of the salient background features of the play. During the cavalcade, the twentieth-century man - who is never named - fell from his horse, hit his head on a rock, and woke up believing himself to be, in fact, Henry IV. His sister has seen to it that he is supported in this eccentric medieval role, and has outfitted his home to resemble and function as Henry's court, replete with throne room and special attendants and advisors. All who come before him must assume the role of someone from Henry IV's historical life. After twelve years, unbeknownst to anyone, the man regains his sanity, but chooses – in a rejection of the world that is always in flux and uncertain, a world that has passed him by - to maintain his fixed life as Emperor Henry. As he explains towards

the end of the play, “I preferred to remain crazy, having found everything here ready and willing for this new delight of sorts. Live it I would, with the most lucid consciousness, this insanity of mine, and in so doing take vengeance on the brutality of a rock that had bruised my head!”²⁵³

This initial retreat, consciously made some eight years before the time of the play, is reinforced by the play's end. Although the calculation that his role-playing is preferable to re-entry into the world might rather simplistically be considered a case of sovereignty defined by the one who decides the exception, and the final act of the play, in which he stabs his long-time rival Belcredi, as a straightforward act of sovereign punishment or vengeance (more satisfying than the one taken against the rock), both the play itself, as well as the historical Emperor Henry, complicate such a reading.

Indeed, the picture here is one rife with intersecting paradoxes. The basic paradox of power is clearly on display: the sovereign is enslaved -- imprisoned physically, situationally, and temporally. Above all, the sovereign is imprisoned theatrically, for the sovereign is bound to a role, bound to performance. Concomitant with this, sovereignty is not merely asserted by an actor, it is corroborated by a complicit audience. Following another tangled thread, within medieval understandings of sovereignty, the sovereign is an ideal figure, modeled on God, whose will is constrained only by love and reason. In Pirandello's play, the sovereign is presumed mad, and his love rejected. Henry's visitors seek to “cure” him of his madness, bringing along a doctor who oddly decides upon a remedy that relies on the patient's rational ability to recognize a discrepancy (seeing both Matilda and her daughter identically dressed as the

²⁵³ Luigi Pirandello, *Henry IV*, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*, trans. Mark Musa (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 133.

eleventh-century Countess, Henry is meant to recognize the impossibility of the duplication and be jolted back to the present). Choosing to be Emperor Henry is choosing to be mad. Analyses of the play tend to celebrate this contradiction of a rational act of irrationality, but the paradox extends further still: the ambition to be sovereign contains within it the desire to abdicate and relinquish that role. Rather than an unalloyed aesthetics of power, of imposing a sovereign will, an aesthetics of retreat is put into oscillation.

Pirandello draws upon Emperor Henry's famous three days of kneeling, barefoot, in the snow, as a penitent before his arch-enemy Pope Gregory who has excommunicated him. This takes place at Canossa, in the Italian Alps, where the Pope is the guest of Matilda of Tuscany. The play freely admits its deviation from the historical narrative in so far as the Emperor is never recorded to have loved Matilda, and critics tend to take this departure as their cue to leave the historical account out of their interpretations of the play. While it is certainly the case that the love triangle between the main characters holds a crucial key to understanding the drama, it seems to me that regarding the twentieth-century man, whom I will refer to as Henry, as almost arbitrarily caught wearing "a penitent's sack" "over his regal garb" bypasses an important feature not only of this man's "madness" but also, perhaps, his recovery.

The historical Henry was a figure deeply invested – I use this term consciously – in defining the scope and origin of sovereignty, and the dramatic act of self-abasement at Canossa is an installment in the long "Investiture Controversy" – a politico-theological fight over who could appoint bishops – kings, emperors, or popes. This in turn was embedded in a fight over whether the Pope bequeathed rulership upon the king as a favor,

or whether the “divine right” was just that: a gift straight from God requiring no intermediary. This investment in defining sovereignty manifests itself in Pirandello’s drama, though the terms and stakes have shifted.

In Act II of the play, Henry reveals, somewhat obliquely, the source of his madness: "How awful it is to have to flounder, the way I have, in the thought of this terrible thing which drives one truly mad: that if you are next to someone and looking into his eyes – the way I looked one day into a certain person’s eyes – then you can imagine what it is like to be a beggar in front of a door through which you shall never be able to enter."²⁵⁴ Here, madness is not an expression of unbridled tyrannical power, contrary to the usual association of madness and sovereignty. Instead, madness is begging entry where you will not be admitted, and in particular begging entry as a lover, into the world of the beloved. Henry goes on to bemoan the impossibility of the situation, not only on the grounds of being refused entry, but because of the way people encounter one another – always as other both to others and to themselves. This is the crisis of sovereignty in the personal sphere, the same limits Ibsen's Emperor Julian encounters: one is not able to insert oneself by fiat into the internal world of another, the world of affection. One cannot *make* oneself be taken seriously in the sphere of love.

The audience is already familiar with the moment to which Henry alludes, since Matilda has recounted it in Act I to both Belcredi, her lover, and the Doctor they have brought to examine Henry. As she describes it:

One of the many misfortunes that happen to us *women*, my dear Doctor, is to find ourselves now and again before two eyes that look at us with a contained and intense promise of everlasting devotion! [*She breaks out in high-pitched laughter.*] There is nothing more

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 122.

ridiculous. If men could only see themselves with that everlasting devoted look of theirs. I have always laughed about it – then more than ever! But I must confess: I can do so now after twenty years. When I laughed at him this way, it was also out of fear, because one could, perhaps, have believed in a promise like that from those eyes. But it would have been very dangerous.²⁵⁵

Matilda's obvious discomfort with her own behavior and cynicism, betrayed in her laugh, gives way to a confession, pointing to what precisely has gone wrong. Admitting her fear and recognizing the extreme danger of love as the vulnerability of fidelity, Matilda reveals that it is precisely a lack of faith of which she is guilty. "One could, perhaps, have believed in a promise like that from those eyes," confesses a failure to believe, to take seriously, the love that Henry offered. By mis-casting Henry in a common comedic role, she has created the conditions for his tragic madness. In a play in which the superficiality of theater and its masks is shown to pervade life both within Henry's manufactured eleventh-century world, as well as without it in the so-called "real world," the possibility of authenticity is both resented and longed for. Matilda has failed to take the leap of faith necessary to realize not only her own authenticity but that of Henry's. The Italian makes her choice clear: "one could have believed" – "si poteva credere." Instead of believing (*credere*) in an authentic love, she has opted for *Belcredi* – whose name translates as beautiful beliefs, beliefs that may look appealing and charming, but as the play makes evident, *Belcredi* is a snide and vicious man.

The historical Henry was brought to his knees at Canossa because the Pope had excommunicated him. Why? Because Henry had tried to assert his sovereignty over that of the Pope's. Henry's understanding of the Divine Right of kings gave him his legitimate right to rule regardless of the Pope's sanction. Denouncing the Pope and his

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

authority, Henry's call for the Pope to step down made clear his position: "Henry, King not by usurpation, but by the pious ordination of God, to Hildebrand, now not Pope, but false monk." He further proclaims, that as King, he can be "judged by God alone" and can not "be deposed for any crime unless – may it never happen – [he] should deviate from the faith."²⁵⁶ The Pope's subsequent excommunication of him proved a strong penalty and under political pressure Henry begged, theatrically, for forgiveness. But a few years later the tables were turned and Henry was in a position to demand the Pope's deposition. One could argue that this renders Henry's previous penitence false. But lurking within this story is Henry fighting for his legitimacy as a sovereign, a legitimacy that Pirandello's Henry also seeks.

Pirandello's Henry chose to dress up as Emperor Henry because Matilda decided to dress up as her namesake, and he wanted to be on his knees before her at Canossa. On my reading, in the course of the play, among the many gestures and acts that are accused of being false, Henry recognizes the *self-betrayal* in his posture of penitence before Matilda. Just as the character he is playing stood by his legitimacy as sovereign, Henry decides to stand by his legitimacy as lover. He offers an authentic love, and to repent for this must be a false gesture. His aim is seriousness, to be taken seriously. Driven to wielding a sword against his rival, the mocking Belcredi, Pirandello's stage directions describe Henry as "*terrified by the life of his own fiction which in a single moment has forced him into committing this crime.*"²⁵⁷ The crime poses the question of Henry's madness to the other characters, but for Henry it is an act of sovereignty. In this way, his violence toward Belcredi, which will fix him to his role as Emperor and force a

²⁵⁶ As cited in *Readings in Medieval History: The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Patrick J. Geary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 572-73.

²⁵⁷ Pirandello, *Henry IV*, 136.

permanent retreat from the present-day world, could be understood not simply as vengeance against his competitor, but also as a reaffirmation of his own legitimacy, attained by means of repenting for a previous repentance. This may look to others like suicidal madness, but the abdication grants him legitimacy.

III. IONESCO'S *EXIT THE KING*

THE KING IS DYING, THE WORLD IS ENDING

My reading of Ionesco's *Macbett*, a play routinely understood as a cynical and fatalistic statement on political sovereignty, emphasized instead Ionesco's subtler concerns related to the individual's ability to think and judge for himself. Recuperating Ionesco as a humanist is a more straightforward task when considering *Exit the King*, and the challenge shifts to making a case for the relevance of its central sovereign figure qua sovereign figure. Why does it matter that it is a king dying? What kind of king is he? As mentioned, Ionesco wrote four plays featuring Bérenger, but in none of the other plays does he have royal stature. What is it about death that makes Ionesco reach for a king?

As a meditation on death, Ionesco's account lines up rather neatly with what Martin Heidegger outlines in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927). In Heidegger's terms, because "No one can take the Other's dying away from him...death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being."²⁵⁸ In other words, because no one can stand in for another's death, the very structure of the event forces the individual to recognize itself as a singular individual. To be clear, it is not that only in death do we become individuals, but in understanding that we must die our own deaths, we are able to see that the

²⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 231.

possibility exists to live our own lives, to claim them as our own. As I have noted in Part One, this is what Robert Pippin describes as being called upon "'to be a subject,' lead a life, take up the reins." Heidegger names this "authentic existence." One of the difficulties we confront, according to Heidegger, is that those around us - the "they" - do their best to keep us from thinking about death. The "temptation" to a "tranquilized" state in which we "evade" and "flee" from death in fact brings about our self-estrangement.²⁵⁹

The plot of *Exit the King* could easily be described in these terms. Béranger must acknowledge his impending death, and he does so, finally, under protest. For the duration of the play, Béranger "hangs between" his two wives. His first wife, no-nonsense Marguerite, insists that he accept and "own" his death; his second wife, frivolous Marie, works as his accomplice in resisting the very thought of death. Naturally, Ionesco plays this love triangle for laughs, but the tension embodied by the women goes far beyond a contest for Béranger's affections.

At the beginning of the play, Marie is against even so much as telling the King he is going to die, feeling it would be better for him to simply fade away without noticing, since "he's not prepared." Marguerite accuses the young wife of being derelict in her duties for failing to help prepare him: "He ought always to have been prepared for it. He ought to have thought about it every day. The time he's wasted! ...We haven't the time to take our time. This is the end of your happy days, your high jinks, your beanfeasts and your strip tease. It's all over. You've let things slide to the very last minute and now we've not a minute to lose. Obviously. It's the last."²⁶⁰ Marie threatens to hold him back, but Marguerite's protest outlines the stakes: "It's all got to take place decently. Let

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 244.

²⁶⁰ Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King*, in *Exit the King, The Killer, and Macbett: Three Plays by Eugène Ionesco*, translated by Charles Marowitz and Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 13-14.

it be a success, a triumph. It's a long time since he had one. His palace is crumbling. His fields lie fallow. His mountains are sinking. The sea has broken the dikes and flooded the country. He's let it all go to rack and ruin. You've driven every thought from his mind with your perfumed embrace. Such bad taste!"²⁶¹

Although describing *Exit the King* in Heideggerian terms would not be inaccurate, to simply point to Heidegger and be done would be a travesty. Needless to say, Ionesco would deplore such a reduction. Referring admiringly to the continuing value of Pirandello's theater and his dramatic technique, Ionesco asserts that "drama founded on ideology or philosophy, exclusively inspired by them, is built on sand and crumbles away."²⁶² For Ionesco, theater is not doing its job if it restricts itself "to the task of duplicating philosophy or theology or politics or pedagogy."²⁶³ He asks - anticipating Cavell's comment that each of the arts "(like nations)" must "establish its own existence" - whether theater can, "like painting or music, find its own autonomous existence?"²⁶⁴

For Ionesco, "discursive reasoning can be only one ingredient" of drama.²⁶⁵ "The essence of theatre," he explains, "lay in magnifying its effects...underlined and stressed to the maximum." According to Ionesco, this is what it would take "to restore [drama] to its own domain, to its natural frontiers."²⁶⁶ Addressing the specific topic of avant-garde theater, Ionesco provocatively contends that "the avant-garde does not exist; or rather, it is quite different from what it is thought to be. As the avant-garde is, we all agree,

²⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

²⁶² Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 23.

²⁶³ Ibid., 24.

²⁶⁴ Stanley Cavell, "Foreword," *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxxiii; Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 25.

²⁶⁵ Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 25.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

revolutionary, it has always been and still is, like most revolutionary movements, a turning back, a reappraisal. The change is only apparent.²⁶⁷ Elsewhere he proclaims, "What is called 'avant-garde' is interesting only if it is a return to sources, if it rejoins a living tradition."²⁶⁸

How does *Exit the King* magnify the effects of theater? How does it go beyond the discursive reasoning of Heidegger? How does it restore drama to its own domain and natural frontiers? How is it a reappraisal of theater? How does it return to sources? My answer will come as no surprise. As the play makes clear, it is *because Bérenger is a king* that he must acknowledge and accept his death. Heart attacks are for businessmen and double pneumonia is for the poor. The king must decide to die - if, as Marguerite indicates, it is to be "done decently...be a success, a triumph." Bérenger stubbornly stands his ground - "I could decide not to die" - but in a wonderful moment in which sovereignty is parsed, Marguerite and the Doctor recognize that in order to support the king, they "owe him *disobedience*."²⁶⁹ Death threatens to forcibly depose the king - turning him into Falstaff's "rabbit-sucker, or poulter's hare" - but his decision to accept death would count as an abdication: unkinging himself would amount to authentically being himself, authentically manifesting his sovereignty at the very moment he relinquishes it.

In an interview on *Macbeth*, Ionesco contrasts "the desire to dominate others, always criminal and paranoid," to a second kind of sovereign ambition, that of the artist,

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 156.

²⁶⁹ Ionesco, *Exit the King*, 72.

or the desire for "self-expression."²⁷⁰ Crucially, it is precisely when Bérenger recognizes that he must author his death that the full scope of his majesty is proclaimed: the Guard declares it was Bérenger:

who invented gunpowder and stole fire from the gods. He nearly blew the whole place up. But he caught the pieces and tied them together again with string. I helped him, but it wasn't so easy. *He* wasn't so easy either. He was the one who fitted up the first forges on earth. He discovered the way to make steel. He used to work eighteen hours a day. And he made us work even harder. He was our chief engineer. As an engineer he made the first balloon, and then the zeppelin. And finally, with his own hands, he built the first airplane. At the start it wasn't a success. The first test pilots, Icarus and the rest, all fell into the sea. Till eventually he piloted the plane himself. I was his mechanic. Long before that, when he was only a little prince, he'd invented the wheelbarrow. I used to play with him. Then rails and railways and automobiles. He drew up the plans for the Eiffel Tower, not to mention his designs for the sickle and the plough, the harvesters and the tractors.²⁷¹

As if these accomplishments were not enough, the Guard continues the inventory, naming, among other things like building cities, that Bérenger "created revolutions, counter-revolutions, religion, reform and counter-reform;" "he wrote tragedies and comedies under the name of Shakespeare;" and "Not so long ago he managed to split the atom."²⁷² Clearly, Ionesco seeks to highlight the creative capacity of humankind in *Exit the King*, giving expression to his belief that "it is art and thought which are constitutive of man, *royally defining him* at the highest level."²⁷³ The hilarity and incongruity of the range of skills and cunning aside, what Ionesco is registering are prodigious feats of

²⁷⁰ Eugène Ionesco, "Tous dans le même sac!" (*Le Monde*, 3 février 1972), reprinted in *Antidotes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 139, translation mine.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷³ Eugène Ionesco, "Culture et politique," *Un homme en question: Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 52, translation and emphasis mine.

inventiveness, originality, and vision. This is what the king - the royally defined human being - brought to the world.

Indeed, in *Exit the King*, Bérenger seems to be responsible for all but creating the world. In any event, the world will disappear with him. This, too, could find articulation in Heidegger's notion of "worlding," but even so, Ionesco's commitment to theater and its "return to sources" are stronger motivations for casting Bérenger as a sovereign who represents and embodies the world of his concerns. In a discussion dealing with "the essence of the theatre, with theatrical archetypes, with theatrical idiom," Ionesco elaborates at length on none other than Shakespeare's Richard II. "In the theatre," he observes, "when the fallen Richard II is a prisoner in his cell, abandoned and alone, it is not Richard II I see there, but all the fallen kings of this world; and not only all fallen kings, but also our beliefs and values, our unsanctified, corrupt and worn-out truths, the crumbling of civilizations, the march of destiny." Continuing, Ionesco reveals a more personal link to the imprisoned Richard. "It is really the death of all I hold most dear that I am watching," he admits. "It is *I* who die with Richard II. Richard II makes me sharply conscious of the eternal truth that we forget in all these stories, the truth we fail to think about, though it is simple and absolutely commonplace: I die, he dies, you die." Ionesco muses further, "Perhaps Shakespeare *wanted* to tell the story of Richard II: if that was all he had told us, *the story of someone else*, he would not move me. But Richard II's prison is a truth that has not been swept away with history: its invisible walls still stand."²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, 31-32.

IV. BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

LOST FROM THE START

Richard's invisible prison walls still stand, and they close in on the spare decay of *Endgame*. Two windows, high up, require a ladder to see out of them. The sole door in the space leads to where things such as the ladder, a stuffed dog, sheets, biscuits, painkillers, and an alarm clock are stored -- that is, until they fall apart, run out, or stop working. A picture faces the wall. The only furniture in the room consists of two ashbins and an armchair on castors, all of which are covered with old sheets at the start of the play, suggesting an uninhabited, or abandoned place.

The mood of confinement in this world of *Endgame* becomes unambiguous when the sheets are lifted to reveal trashcans in which an elderly man and woman, Nagg and Nell, are “bottled,” which might imply preservation, but in this instance has additional connotations of repression and concealment. According to their dialogue, they have lost their legs in a bicycle accident. It is never explained in the play why Hamm needs a wheelchair, nor how he came to be blind, nor where his bleeding wound is, exactly. But evidently he is as unable to leave as are his crippled parents. All three of them are trapped and dependent on Clov, whose own disability staggers his stride and prevents him from sitting. Hamm refers to this place as “the shelter” but, again, a candid explanation for “shelter from what?” is not offered. The impression of asylum – space of physical protection or for the mentally or emotionally damaged - leaves its mark. Whatever its deficiencies, it constitutes itself as a world. “Right round the world!” Hamm exclaims when Clov pushes him in his chair, hugging the perimeter of the space.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ Beckett, *Endgame*, 25.

Hamm and Clov are conscious of the inevitability of their world's destruction, both the physical outside world where all is already "corpsed," as well as the world of their personal relations.²⁷⁶ Their assignment is different than Béranger's, for they begin not only with knowledge of impending death, but longing for it. Clov's first lines, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished," expresses a foregone conclusion that is, paradoxically, hoped for, so in fact *not* finalized. Pirandello's Henry IV yearned to fix himself in a historical moment, but the clock cannot tick quickly enough for Hamm and Clov. They have had enough. The world into which they did not ask to be born is on the verge of extermination. They are surviving, yet this appears to them as a counterfeit life, a cheat, a life waiting for "the life to come." As Hamm says, "Mine was always that."²⁷⁷

Cavell's sense of *Endgame* as a play whose meaning pivots on the presence of a curse that extends in unexpected directions, and the attempted reversal of the curse, begins to locate the pressure of sovereignty within Beckett's drama. Cavell stresses the overtones of the Noah story, in which Hamm is one of Noah's sons and therefore saved on the ark when God decides to destroy the world he has created. Hamm, having seen God naked, (as Cavell describes it, invoking the continuation of the Noah story in which Hamm is the son who "sees him naked"), can no longer muster up the hope necessary to praise God, and instead works on undoing God's curse which set him – Hamm – apart, presumably for salvation.

Cavell notes that "there are two Kings of the world of *Endgame*, Hamm and the old King, the King of Kings," and he establishes Hamm's sovereignty by way of

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 49.

Shakespearean allusions.²⁷⁸ But just as relevant to my mind is what Cavell names explicitly as Hamm's problem: he has been "singled out" for rescue, and this has made him sovereign, with the special burden of being in a position to potentially rescue others. Hamm could be jumping up and down shouting hosannas in response to his good fortune, but praise is impossible, unthinkable, precisely because of the curse that makes it possible (the destruction of all others). Hamm is like Solness in this regard, resentful of the covenant he has made with God in exchange for the death of his children. In order to save the world, Hamm must live, not die. But God has gone too far, killing all else but one. Hamm wants desperately to bring the injustice to an end and bring about the destruction of the world – but even this flawed world resists its own destruction.

"ME - (*YAWN*) - TO PLAY."

So what to do while waiting for God to bring the world to an end? Hamm's first lines capture both the theatrical role playing as well as story telling with which the residents of the shelter manage to live in their world: "Me – (*yawn*) – to play." The yawn is indicative of the un-originality of the situation. It is the same old story.

In the theater, the same old stories revolve around sovereigns. Indeed, Hamm seems to be preparing to "play" Shakespeare's Richard II in his prison cell following his abdication. Richard is having a difficult time reconciling himself to his present circumstances not simply because he is humiliated, but precisely because he has no company. He is deprived of audience, entertainment, and fellow actors. So he must face death, and the meantime before death, on his own. He wants to avoid extinction, so he "people[s] this little world" with his thoughts:

²⁷⁸ Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 155.

Thus play I in one person many people
 And none contented. Sometimes am I king
 Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
 And so I am. Then crushing penury
 Persuades me I was better when a king;
 Then am I king'd again, and by and by
 Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
 And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
 Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
 With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
 With being nothing. (*Richard II* 5.5.31-41)

Of course, there are "none contented" because no one is nothing. This is Hamm's frustration as he tries to bring about "solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence" in vain.²⁷⁹ I imagine French theorist and playwright Hélène Cixous has a scene like the above in mind when she writes, "If Shakespeare has crossed the centuries, it's because he did not make a rupture in the truth of our states. He always made what happens to us in reality appear: that in the most extreme tragedy, in the most extreme pain, we can feel ridiculous and be ridiculous. This is moreover what we dread. Because we are in the multiple register all the time."²⁸⁰ She continues,

When someone is prey to an atrocious despair, he has a handkerchief problem. All of a sudden, no handkerchief; and you remember that you are not an actor in a tragedy but a human person... And then, in the most cruel moments of existence, basically we will be inclined to search out the noble form: perhaps by a sort of need to aid ourselves narcissistically. That is to say, to see ourselves from a point of view that raises us up at the moment we are debased. Perhaps, also, because it *is* noble; because suffering is a nobility of the human being. So we are ill-at-ease because everyday life, which is not at all noble, irrupts onto our high stage: and we do not quite know what costume we are wearing, or with what handkerchief we blow our nose. If it is a kleenex or if we will look for a fine cloth.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 156.

²⁸⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 19-20.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Cixous' elegant description applies as much to modern drama as to Shakespeare, inferring potential reasons for the persistence of sovereign figures on the modern stage: when we are brought low we - hope - we are in fact noble. We would like to see ourselves that way, at any rate. The unsettling nature of grief and suffering gives way to observing oneself at a remove, as if on a stage. We re-play events, attempting to make sense of them, re-live or invent encounters, giving ourselves new or better lines to say, perhaps a different costume, or a cloth handkerchief.

This is what Hamm does, certainly, day after day, though his cloth handkerchief is blood-stained. Within the world of *Endgame*, the theater is assumed throughout – they are never in denial that they play off one another, like actors. When Clov asks Hamm about his story, for example, he is feigning his interest, and Hamm knows it. This is how they go about “getting on” as Hamm puts it several times. They pretend to have a cordial, engaged conversation – replete with false surprise, false modesty, and false admiration. Yet at different moments within this exchange each says to the other “Keep going, can’t you, keep going!” which serves as a meta-theatrical break in their façade.²⁸² It also belies whatever indifference they try to maintain about the private world, however malformed, they have created together. “No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we,” Clov says sadly. “We do what we can,” Hamm replies.²⁸³

Story telling is invoked three times explicitly, first, in the scene between Nagg and Nell, second, between Hamm and Nagg, and third, between Hamm and Clov. Each time, the listener must be coerced or bribed to be the audience, and the implication is that the sole beneficiary of storytelling is the raconteur. Or perhaps that is part of the act.

²⁸² Beckett, *Endgame*, 59; 61.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

Throughout the play, the repartee between Hamm and Clov is an attempt both to “stump” the other, as well as to force a response, as though they are performing a catechism. “What is happening? What is happening?” Hamm inquires with anguish. “Something is taking its course,” is Clov’s simple answer.²⁸⁴ But there is a desire for theater in this world, a need to recount what has taken its course, to tell the same old stories, and to work at telling them well. “Nicely put, that,” Hamm congratulates himself from time to time.²⁸⁵

In the final minutes of the play Hamm is on stage, whistling to Clov who does not answer, calling to his father without response. Hamm says – I imagine, to God – when he thinks no one else is left, “Well, there we are, there I am, that’s enough.”²⁸⁶ That’s enough. He has thrown away the gaff, his dog, his whistle. He has put on his toque, wiped his glasses. There are no more actions by which or during which he must continue to hold together the world. Hamm wants “to speak no more about it...speak no more.”²⁸⁷ He is undoing the curse, like Prospero, uncreating what has been created. Or is he?

While Hamm seems to be convinced that it is indeed the end, Clov stands in the doorway with the implication for a potential return to the very beginning of the play. But this does not undo the undoing in the same way, or to the same effect, as what Hamm says at the end. In this final scene that he has spent all his days rehearsing, Hamm does not say, "Let there be light" but "You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness." He seeks to undo the creation of the world, and yet with every assurance that someone is gone or dead, the items of his world sufficiently useless or spent, Hamm pronounces each

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 13; 32.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 51; 83.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 84.

of these accomplishments "Good." And for all the world, one might think he was biblically creating a world, rather than destroying one. The same old story.

In other words, I see in this incantation of "Goods" an attempted reversal of the originary scene of divine sovereignty, but Hamm's reliance on the "same old story," the same narrative structure, undermines his negative creation. He is a frustrated sovereign in the manner of Julian, thwarted by God. Covering his face with his handkerchief to close the play, Hamm is the image of retreat. Yet this is accomplished with lines that on my reading are not an announcement, but rather a command: "Old Stancher...You remain."

Old Stancher remains, just as sovereign figures remain a part of modern drama, dirty and damaged, but lending nobility to suffering. The retreat demonstrated by modern Lears, then, does not reflect a defeat or surrender, but rather a strategic vision of modernist theater that is concerned with acknowledgment, incorporation, and transformation of its aesthetic past as opposed to rejection and rebellion.

THE KING: FIGURE OF MODERN THEATER

In this dissertation I have claimed that modern drama, rather than halting the relationship between sovereignty and drama, recalibrates and extends that relationship, not only defying political and aesthetic expectations, but also contributing importantly to the definitions and associations of the modern politico-theological concept of sovereignty. At the end of the general introduction, I suggested that the king be understood as a figure of the modern theater, since both are haunted by oppositions along the lines of original versus imitation and genuine versus fake. I have characterized the Modern Lears as fighting in the breaches that have been torn open between what is authentic and counterfeit, serious and ridiculous, meaningful and pointless, precisely to emphasize the stakes of modern sovereignty -- as modern drama understands it.

In drawing to a close, I would like to hang on to the literal title of Ionesco's play: *The King is Dying*. I would like to hang on to Pirandello's Henry IV retreating to an eleventh-century stage set, just out of reach of the present day. I would like to hang on to the butterfly hunter in *Macbeth*. I would like to hang on to John Gabriel Borkman pacing "like a sick wolf" in his upstairs apartment. I would like to hang on to the counterpoised statements in reaction to Solness' fall from the tower. I would like to hang on to Julian's sense of foiled sovereignty. I would like to hang on to Skule's despair over himself. I would like to hang on to Hofmannsthal's keen insight that the people in Ibsen's drama "hold their life in their hands, they finger it anxiously and want to give it meaning and style; they would like to submerge themselves in life, they would like something to come and carry them forcefully away and make them forget themselves." I would like to hang

on to Steiner's sense that Ibsen has written dramas of afterlife and purgatory. I would like to hang on to Hamm waiting endlessly. I would like to hang on to Richard II in his prison cell. I would like to hang on to Cixous' handkerchief problem. Above all, I would like to hang on to the idea of "hanging between" whose shape Beckett admired.

"The shape of the idea" to which Beckett responds has imposing proportions. In the scene Augustine cites, the *literal* "shape" hanging between is, of course, Jesus on the cross. The duration of "hanging between" is not salvation, but the desire for and work of salvation, along with an equally compelling desire to bring the agony to an end, to utter "It is finished." The *figural* "shape" hanging between is the figure of a king.

Louis Marin's ingenious work on the representation and effects of sovereignty prove illuminating at this juncture.²⁸⁸ "Is the King figure? And if he is figure, of what, of whom is he the figure?" Marin asks. "Figure here understood as a process of meaning, interpretation and exegesis. If the King is figure...toward what meaning and toward what truth does this figure lead, providing one has eyes to see and ears to hear?"²⁸⁹ Biblical undertones usher Marin's sequence of questions along in their aim to understand the intangible workings of the concept of sovereignty in seventeenth-century French art and thought. It should come as no surprise that his careful study of the Jansenists at Port Royal culminates in the following uncertainty: "Can one ever follow to its end the

²⁸⁸ Within Marin's distinguished and sizeable body of work, sovereignty emerges as a core subject, and to my mind his analyses are among the most subtle and interesting in the field and referenced all too seldom. The brilliant essays that comprise *Le Portrait du roi* and *La parole mangée et autres essais théologico-politiques*, for example, provocatively make visible the contours and shading of sovereignty as it is given expression in portrait painting, caricature, fables, physician's reports, and Port Royal thought.

²⁸⁹ Louis Marin, "The-Body-of-Power and Incarnation at Port Royal and in Pascal, or, Of the Figurability of the Political Absolute" in *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part 1, ed. Michel Feher with R. Naddaff and N. Tazi (New York: Urzone, 1989), 423.

process of this last figure where meaning shows itself by withdrawing, exhibits itself by hiding?"²⁹⁰

Marin's query acquires its poignancy by transferring the disquiet of the Jansenist *deus absconditus* sensibility to the figure of the sovereign. What happens when the king retreats? When the signs of power are concealed or even conceded? How are we to recognize a sovereign at such a moment? "The secret of the political," Marin discloses, "is that the King, the body-of-power, is a portrait, but a portrait in which the true convert will discern in the King, in the exposition of his majesty, the dying Christ hung on the Cross...The secret meaning of the political...is the divine body in his mortal and redemptive humiliation."²⁹¹

The secret is a dirty secret. Majesty expresses humiliation. Marin's conclusion is in keeping with a christological political theology stressing the king's "two bodies": the mystical, immortal body politic and the physical, mortal body natural. But the dissonance of the juxtaposition Marin points to is nevertheless pronounced. To perceive in the king "the *dying* Christ hung on the cross" - the present continuous tense - specifies an ongoing term of suffering. At stake is not merely, "The king is dead; long live the king!"; but worse: the king is suffering sustained degradation; degradation and suffering sustains the king *as king*.

But what exactly does the king have to do with the cross? And what has any of this to do with sovereignty and modern drama?

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 423.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 443.

Keeping in mind Augustine's scene of the two thieves with Jesus on Calvary, and Cavell's suggestion that the shape, or posture, Beckett admired and represented in *Endgame* is that of hanging between the hope of the one who was saved, and the despair of the one who was damned, I want to return to the scene of the crime, so to speak. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus provide a record of the links whose shadows fall across the modern stage. Indeed, before discounting this ancient theological scene as irrelevant to a discussion of the persistence of kings on the modern, post-revolutionary stage, it is worth revisiting the dramatic actions that lead up to the crucifixion, and how they parallel the modern political revolution. The political charge against Jesus is, after all, that he claims to be King of the Jews, and is therefore guilty of sedition against the emperor. Pontius Pilate, in order to avoid a riot, allows *the crowd* to decide not only which prisoner to release from custody but also what punishment Jesus will receive, theatrically washing his hands of any responsibility. Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

The king is condemned and put to death. End of story? Of course not. But I am not thinking here of resurrection. There is an in-between period, a meantime, even before the torture of hanging on the cross:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.²⁹²

²⁹² Matthew 27:26-31, New Revised Standard Version.

I want to be very clear: I am not casting modern drama in redemptive terms; quite the opposite. I am suggesting that the scene of sovereignty modern drama makes its own is this scene *between* sentencing and execution, *between* life and death, *between* hope and despair -- when there is no surety of salvation, but derision. Cavell has proffered that "The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul."²⁹³ Yet theater extends a form of acknowledgement. The sovereigns of modern drama may be dying, but they are not dead. They hang between.

The figure of modern theater, then, is the absurd king, between comedy and tragedy. It is the king betrayed, mocked, disparaged, feared, and scorned for claiming to be a king, for being a pretender to the throne.

²⁹³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 430.

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