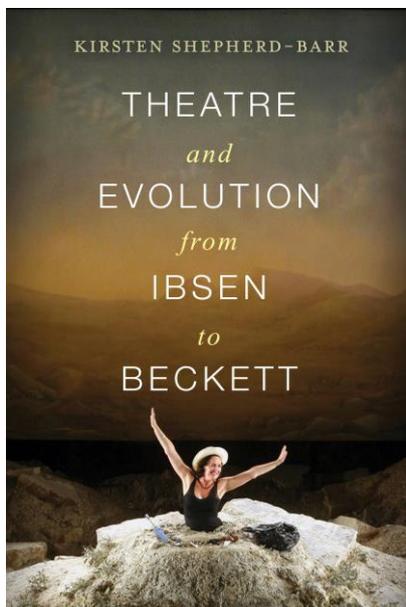


## BOOK REVIEW

*Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett*, by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr  
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). 400 pp. Hardback, £44.

Reviewed by Katharina Herold  
(Pembroke College, University of Oxford)



Building on Jane Goodall's *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (2002) and her own *Science on Stage* (2006), Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's study *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* is a stellar example of interdisciplinary research, bringing together in interesting ways evolutionary theory and theatre. It chronologically maps one hundred and fifty years of interplay and mutual influence between evolutionary thought and Anglophone European and American theatre in all its forms. Far from merely absorbing scientific ideas into the dramatic canon,

Shepherd-Barr argues, playwrights and theatrical performance often enough also challenged and transformed evolutionary theory at its core. In her words, '[t]heatre is no mere handmaiden to science' (pp. 4-6). Shepherd-Barr's strategy is 'not only to catalogue theatrical allusions to evolution', but also to 'show the more indirect, oblique engagement with the ideas themselves' (p. 3). This is realised in the monograph's structure, opening with an introduction that outlines the relevant scientific and philosophical currents informing Darwin's theory, such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's teleological concept of the 'inheritance of acquired characters', Robert Chambers's hypothesis of the close evolutionary link between humans and animals, Herbert Spencer's '*survival of the fittest*'

development model, and Hugo de Vries's principles on pangenetic heredity. All these concepts are explained eloquently, allowing a non-specialist audience to situate the plays subsequently discussed within their scientific and social context.

Paying tribute to the dramatic as well as theatrical text, the study's eight chapters explore the ways in which playwrights from Ibsen to Beckett tested, or indeed reacted against, these 'scientific ideas in broader cultural contexts' (p. 3). Often this resulted in neglecting scientific accuracy in favour of new artistic experimentation. Shepherd-Barr's focus on eminent authors such as Ibsen, Shaw, James A. Herne – 'America's Ibsen' (p. 8) – and Beckett is complemented by her examination of a range of less-canonical writers, in particular the women writers Elizabeth Robins, Florence Bell, and Susan Glaspell. The book's strength thereby lies in its attention to the variety and breadth of the exchange between theatre and science throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first two chapters set the scene for this sweeping survey, shining a spotlight on science as Victorian theatrical spectacle. The public sphere in Britain in the 1890s was saturated with the performance of natural history and biology staged in human exhibits, public scientific lectures, zoos and freak shows, even farcical operettas 'with an "evolutionary argument"' such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Princess Ida* (1884). On the other side of the pond, evolution stepped into the limelight in Herne's plays, 'steeped in Charles Darwin and Hebert Spencer' (p. 39). Notably, the chapters present original research on the censorship concerning the Spencerian controversy in Henry Arthur Jones's *The Dancing Girl* (1891).

With the arrival of naturalism on stage, the focus of the book shifts to the performer's body as 'an evolutionary text' and the influence of Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) on acting theory (p. 54). In an interesting analogy, Shepherd-Barr identifies the processes of cooperation and altruism, two major strategies of survival, with the art of acting. Mimicry, a further strategy to that end, was perfected by actress Eleonora Duse, whose 'natural acting' allowed

her to mimic emotions through ‘neurological trickery’ (p. 59). As modern research discovered after Darwin, with the help of *mirror neurons* the brain can be artificially stimulated to, for example, mechanically produce a blush at will in front of an audience.

The core of this book – and clear home territory for Shepherd-Barr – is chapter three on Ibsen’s evolutionary vitalism. Shepherd-Barr teases out the contradictions in Ibsen’s unprecedented portrayal of women in connection with topics such as marriage, motherhood, eugenics, and heredity. While Ibsen is hailed as the liberator of women, Shepherd-Barr rightly points to Ibsen’s ‘temporary embrace of eugenics as part of his response to the intellectual package of evolution as it was then understood’ (p. 89). Focusing on Ibsen’s ‘evolutionary’ impact on drama, the role of women in evolution takes centre stage in the following three chapters. Chapters three to six are exclusively concerned with the role of women, sidelining issues of homosexuality and questions of male reproduction (for example, impotence). The book by no means claims to be an exhaustive study; to the contrary, it specialises in narrating woman’s position in evolution and theatre. This is one of the distinct merits of the work, which perhaps deserves to be reflected its title.

Chapter four assesses ‘gender essentialism’ as a consequence of evolutionary thought discussed in plays around the turn of the century, for example the questioning of the innate nature of motherly instincts, such as breast-feeding, in Herne’s *Margaret Fleming* (1890). Shepherd-Barr highlights this play to show how ‘[e]volutionary discourse focused particular attention on the burden that biology placed on women’ (p. 92).

Relating this emphasis on the role of women on stage and in evolution to a wider ecological scale, the book presents itself as a timely contribution to both theatre and (Neo-)Victorian studies. It engages with current social debates including breastfeeding, global warming, and genetic technology replacing the human sphere, which still very much resonate with anxieties surrounding evolution today. While Shepherd-Barr takes a historicising perspective, she also succinctly explores these contemporary issues, notably the dramatic interpretation of heredity and eugenics addressed in chapter five. Bernard Shaw famously emphasised

‘the role of the will in human evolution’ and propagated a return ‘to the pre-Darwinians while insisting on his own innovation’ (pp. 134, 140). Hubert Henry Davies’s plays explored genetics as a field ‘with rich dramatic metaphors’ (p. 145), accessible to the Anglophone public through William Bateson’s translations of Gregor Mendel’s theory on heredity in 1902. Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Freaks* (1918) subsequently picked up on the Victorian interest in ‘freakery’, linked to concerns about mutation that were being raised by the increasing numbers of wounded soldiers returning from WWI (a “sudden leap” in human evolution’, p. 220), disability, and the inversion of gender roles ascribed to the New Woman, made painfully visible on the stage.

Shepherd-Barr’s book explores how the ideas of social mutation and mutilation challenged women’s biological determinism, for example by the separation of motherhood and marriage, through the increasingly radical performance of the female body on stage (p. 172). Sexual selection, in itself a performative process as many plays illustrated, was presented as a legitimate reason to transcend class boundaries and to justify marital break-ups, contraception, abortion, addiction, and infanticide. Women writers such as Robins and Bell (*Alan’s Wife*, 1893) presented this theatrical emphasis on women’s experience in their plays, destabilising the term ‘New Woman’ and the ‘implicit link between female activism and childlessness’ (p. 197). Theatrical portrayals of failed child-parent relationships mirrored ‘the changing discourse on evolution’ (p. 175).

The book closes by opening up perspectives on the tensions between Ecocentricity and the Anthropocene. Chapter seven is devoted to the innovative and distinctly American treatments of evolution in the plays by Glaspell, Thornton Wilder, and Eugene O’Neill in the first half of the twentieth century: theatre ‘profoundly shaped by war’ that ‘evinces a strong environmentalist streak’ (p. 221, 204). Foregrounding botany, hybridity, and adaptation of life forms, theatre thus became a laboratory for research and experimentation. For example, in Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth* (premiered in 1942), a journey through ‘various milestones in human evolution’, the audience becomes part of the scenario as the fish in an imaginary pre-historic ocean (p. 223). Shepherd-Barr concludes that ‘it

is striking that, in 1955, the most prominent American theatrical engagement with evolution was a historical one', albeit with a progressive, optimistic outlook (p. 236).

In contrast, chapter eight investigates evolution's 'profound relevance' for Beckett, who 'dramatizes the process of ecocide' (pp. 239-40). Drawing on Beckett's personal notes, Shepherd-Barr demonstrates through a series of fine close readings the fact that both Darwin and Beckett 'seem taken with the concept of "earth afloat"' and 'ape-human proximity' (p. 247, 259). Beckett 'returns the theatre to thinking about humans as a species' and its chances of survival (p. 254). As with Ibsen, Beckett's impact on theatre compares to Darwin's on science.

Overall, this study shines in its effortless balancing of two disciplines and its vivacity of style. Shepherd-Barr provides intricate close readings of cornerstones of modern theatre, whilst also usefully introducing lesser-known dramatic texts and authors. She impressively uncovers the ways in which theories of natural science have influenced theatrical theory and vice versa, linked by their 'shared status as sign systems' (p. 53). The strength and merit of this book lies in its wealth of materials and its sheer overwhelming diversity of examples, which testify to the richness of research presented. This breadth, however, could also be problematic since the focus jumps between authors and texts, continents and periods, with a tendency to divert the reader's attention. The survey's necessity to make extensive use of quotations, often referring to other critics' work, at times leaves the reader wanting to hear more of Shepherd-Barr's own excellent observations and insights. This minor concern, however, merely reflects the overall excellence of what is a fundamental contribution to interdisciplinary studies in theatre and science. *Theatre and Evolution* opens up new avenues of enquiry concerning the power of technology versus the abilities of human brain-power on and off stage, as well as into how theatre shapes the public discussion of contemporary scientific innovations today.

## **Bibliography**

Goodall, Jane, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin: Out of the Natural Order* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Shepherd-Barr, Kirsten, *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).