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IBSEN

HEDDA GABLER
THE PILLARS OF THE
COMMUNITY
THE WILD DUCK



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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HENRIK IBSEN was born at Skien, Norway, in 1828. His family went bankrupt when he was a child, and he struggled with poverty for many years. His first ambition was medicine, but he abandoned this to write and to work in the theatre. Of his early verse plays, *The Vikings at Helgeland* is now best remembered. In the year of its publication (1858) he married Susannah Thoresen, a pastor's daughter.

A scholarship enabled Ibsen to travel to Rome in 1864. In Italy he wrote *Brand* (1866), which earned him a state pension, and *Peer Gynt* (1867), for which Grieg later wrote the incidental music. These plays established his reputation. Apart from two short visits to Norway, he lived in Italy and Germany until 1891.

From *The League of Youth* (1869) onwards, Ibsen renounced poetry and wrote prose drama. Though a timid man, he supported in his plays many crucial causes of his day, such as the emancipation of women. Plays like *Ghosts* (1881) and *A Doll's House* (1879) caused critical uproar. Other plays included *The Pillars of the Community*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Lady From the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkmann* and *When We Dead Wake*.

Towards the end of his life Ibsen, one of the world's greatest dramatists, suffered strokes which destroyed his memory for words and even the alphabet. He died in 1906 in Kristiania (now Oslo).

UNA ELLIS-FERMOR was Professor of English at Bedford College, University of London until her death in 1958. She also translated *The Master Builder*, *Rosmerholm*, *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, which are published together in another volume of the Penguin Classics.

Henrik Ibsen

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HEDDA GABLER
AND OTHER PLAYS

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THE PILLARS OF THE
COMMUNITY

THE WILD DUCK

HEDDA GABLER

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TRANSLATED BY
UNA ELLIS-FERMOR

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INTRODUCTION



THIS is an attempt to translate into the English of today three plays written in Norwegian at the end of the nineteenth century. The original itself is no longer the speech that would be used by a contemporary dramatist such as Helge Krog or Nordahl Grieg; some words have slightly different associations and overtones and there are turns of phrase here and there that represent the conversation of that period rather than of the present day. Moreover, the Norwegian language has changed rather more in the last half-century than has English in the corresponding period. Yet, because Ibsen is a great dramatist, the presence of these faint but subtle differences does not date the dialogue as it would that of a man who was wholly of his age. His language (like his thought and his technique) has less in it that is old-fashioned to modern Norwegian ears than has Henry Arthur Jones's to modern Englishmen. Nevertheless, it poses some pretty problems for the translator, who must try to render that dialogue in an English which sounds natural to the modern reader and, without so using the ephemeral as to put the translation itself out of date in ten years, nevertheless avoid that safe and colourless neutrality which would do an even graver injustice to the original. I am all too keenly aware that I have not achieved this; only Ibsen, writing in English, could. I can only plead that this is what I believe should be done.

This is primarily a reader's translation. But it has been my intention throughout to write dialogue which could be spoken by the actor, the cadences and the word-order such as can be put across from the stage without undue effort.

This is more difficult in translation than in original writing; and the superb ease and power with which Ibsen does it in his own language is at once a stimulus and a responsibility. Nevertheless, this is not a 'stage version' or a free translation. No one who has lived for twenty years in close association with Ibsen's mind and thought would dare to tamper deliberately with the close-wrought and precise expression to which he gave the care and labour of constant revision. To the question of particular problems in the language of these three plays I shall return later.

Ibsen was the first Norwegian of modern times to lead the world in any of the arts; he is one of the five greatest dramatists of history. He inherited the stern moral tradition of a race accustomed to hardship and in love with liberty, a race of fine integrity and of a strenuous intellectual habit. His cultural heritage derived from the ancient and the modern world alike and, more immediately, from that of nineteenth-century Europe. But though the great age of Norwegian literature lay in the far past, its spirit was still potent; and in the Renaissance which he dominated he had Wergeland before him and Björnson beside him. The effect of Ibsen upon the European theatre and drama, and through them on European thought, is hard to calculate. He found the drama, in every literature but Germany's, moribund or fixed in its traditions; he left it vital and fertile. Apart from a few dramatists in Scandinavia and France, there was less attempt to imitate him than is sometimes supposed. Like Shakespeare, he affected his contemporaries by the stimulus and inspiration of his example, not by the conventions which found schools. There are no fixed traditions in Ibsen's work, though certain ideals persist from the beginning to the end. He left the world his integrity as a thinker and as an artist. And that can only be 'imitated' in the noblest, the Aristotelian sense.

The plays by which Ibsen is best known in this country are still the naturalistic studies of contemporary life, the work of his middle and late years, and three of those are presented here. But it is impossible to value Ibsen aright, even the Ibsen of the social problem plays, without an understanding of the poet who, like his contemporary Björnson, began with romantic historical verse plays and only gradually took upon himself the task of exposing the makeshift morality of his contemporaries in private and public life. To think of him solely as the great (though never undramatic) moralist of those middle plays is to forget the poet of *Peer Gynt* and its predecessors and of the late plays after *The Master Builder*, to lose sight of the slow and complex evolution of poet into moralist and of the moralist again into the individualist of the final years. Ibsen was no Shakespeare; he was never wholly an artist and never wholly a dramatist. But he was as much of both as was the great dramatic moralist, Aeschylus, before him. He was never, after the early years, content to contemplate the world as it is with the strange Shakespearian balance of eager affection, sympathy and non-critical detachment. His sympathies threw him headlong into criticism. He was a fighter, a prophet, an accuser of souls, and between this mood and the mood of the poet-dramatist there is perpetual conflict. But because of his power and integrity as an artist, he again and again subdued this conflict, so that only the clear runnings, the decantation of his thought, enter the plays; and it takes a knowledge of the whole of his work to see, beneath the flawless form, the volcanic forces that have moulded it. The poems give us the clues. And we are further helped by the letters, the posthumous papers and the passages in *Peer Gynt*, *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* where the problems of the artist become themselves the matter of his art.

The three plays chosen for this volume, *The Pillars of the Community*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler*, cover the whole of the period during which Ibsen was preoccupied with the problems of personal and social morality in the world immediately about him. *The Pillars of the Community* initiates, almost with enthusiasm, the group of five which concentrate upon this theme; *The Wild Duck* ends the group in seeming disillusionment, and *Hedda Gabler* is a partial return to that world at a later period.

The Pillars of the Community, when it was finished in 1877, had cost Ibsen two years of unremitting labour and several re-writings.* The result is a play whose thought is so profound and clear, whose craftsmanship is so natural and easy, that it puts to shame alike the emptiness of the contemporary *pièce bien faite* in France and the turgidity of the serious British drama of the next two decades. His concern here is with the function of truth in life. This is, in fact, his concern throughout his life, and it links the early *Vikings at Helgoland* with the last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. But in the group of five upon which he now entered, *The Pillars of the Community*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People* and *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen brings to the test of his ideal the society of his own times, observing it pitilessly, exactly and at close range, studying the immediate and the particular in terms of the universal and the continuing. He exposes in these five plays the effect of lies, shams and evasions, showing the tragedy and the degradation that accompany the forfeiting of integrity. In *The Pillars of the Community* he examines the lie in public life, the tragic struggle of Karsten Bernick to hide his sin and preserve his reputation at the expense of another man's good name. The lie in the soul so works upon him that,

* The rejected passages and variants occupy some seventy pages in the *Efterladte Skrifter* (vols. II, pp. 261-329 and III, pp. 449-56).

like Macbeth in a more primitive world, he is drawn step by step into actual crime and plans (and all but carries through) what is virtually a murder. Ibsen allows his Karsten Bernick to redeem himself by confession and to save his soul at the cost of his long-guarded reputation. But this is the first play of the series and it is, for Ibsen, optimistic. Lona Hessel's life-long love for Karsten saves him, as does Solveig's for Peer Gynt, by preserving the image of the man he should have been. In *A Doll's House* and in *Ghosts* the subject is the lie in domestic life; the first shows the destruction of a marriage by an unreal and insincere relationship between husband and wife, and the second the destruction of the lives and souls of the characters by the oppressive tyranny of convention. There is a ray of hope still in *A Doll's House*; in *Ghosts* there is no consolation but the integrity of mind to which Mrs Alving has won her way through the wreckage of her life. In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen returns to the lie in public life; but here the odds are against the honest man, solitary, outmanoeuvred and overpowered by the corrupt community. The plays had stirred and shocked his contemporaries, and Ibsen had become more famous but less popular; it is his voice that speaks when Stockmann exclaims at the end of the play, 'The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone'.

The Wild Duck ends this group and yet, at the same time, begins the next. The apprehension of truth, which had for Karsten Bernick been a relatively simple psychological process, is now something more difficult, more doubtful and more dangerous. Gone is Lona Hessel who, with her robust affection and good sense, lets in the fresh air from the American prairies, and in her place is Gregers Werle, whose conception of truth is like an icy, fanatical wind from the frozen fjelds. Under his ministration the unfortunate Hjalmar Ekdal, a weakling with none of Bernick's fighting

pluck, makes shipwreck of his life and of those of his wife and child. It takes two to tell the truth: one to speak and one to hear. It is obvious from the first that Hjalmar is incapable of hearing it, and before the play is out we realize that Gregers is in fact incapable of speaking it. His self-imposed mission has nothing to do with the truth which is an attitude of mind, and his harsh presentation of destructive fact bankrupts the lives he touches. Ibsen has not lost his faith in truth. He has only seen that it sometimes demands a subtler service than the first two plays of the series had supposed.

These three plays, and the two that fall between them, are sometimes called realistic, fourth-wall dramas. This is true if we give a liberal connotation to the word 'realism', but not if we identify it with photography. In fact, as a study of his craftsmanship will make clear, Ibsen does anything but photograph. Even his material is seldom wholly naturalistic. In all five plays, and most clearly in our two, a part at least is used (and we must suppose introduced) for its symbolic value as well as for its contribution to the action. The coffin-ships in *The Pillars of the Community* offer us one of the most artistically exquisite pieces of functional symbolism in modern drama. They are simultaneously an important factor of the action, a clear representative instance of the corruption and greed of the shipowners and, finally – but only in addition to these two strictly dramatic functions – a symbol of the rottenness of society. The wild duck is not quite so finely subordinated, but it plays the same three parts in its play: the symbolism, though more insistent than that of *The Pillars of the Community*, has not broken faith with dramatic form, as it was to do in *The Master Builder* and some later plays.

Hedda Gabler, finished in 1890, six years after *The Wild Duck*, is separated from it by two plays, *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea*, which form a natural sequence with

the last four, *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*. These six are all concerned with the problems of the individual, not as a member of society, but as a spiritual being. Society, the world outside the mind, enters indeed into all of them, and in *Rosmersholm* it is the man's public life that is the chief issue of the outward action and of the inner debate. But the emphases have changed. Ibsen is no longer concerned, as in the five earlier plays that we have just considered, with the moral responsibility of a man to the society around him, but with the potency of the inner life of thought. Public life, his contact with the surrounding society and even with his family, are significant now because of their effect upon that world of thought, imagination or spiritual development. In the last two plays of all, the impact of that world is itself a thing of the past, and the mind's reading of its experience and discovery of itself make up the action of the play.

Now, in this sequence *Hedda Gabler* was a little out of place, for it is not, as all of these are in one way or another, the study of the progress of a soul. The sharp, distinct detail in the picture of the two societies, bourgeois and aristocratic, whose conflict forms the background of the play, appears to link it with the sequence from *The Pillars of the Community* to *The Wild Duck*. But in fact it is not entirely at home in this group either, for the action is initiated by the central character, and not until the end does the control pass out of her hands into those of the other characters. The play is a member of both groups and of neither. The figure of Hedda dominates the play as do those of the great individualists of the later group, and her society is important only in so far as it affects her mind and determines her thought and action. But it is not, as they are, a study of a mind's progress into self-discovery, because Hedda's mind remains the same at the end as at the beginning; it has merely gone

round and round the cage she has built for herself, looking for a way of escape. And yet it offers the same kind of negative comment on the dominant thought of the later plays as parts of *The Wild Duck* do on the main theme of its four predecessors. For Hedda refuses to discover herself, and her conflict and her tragedy are the result of this refusal. Longing for life and yet afraid of it, she refuses to admit this fear and convert the energy of the conflict into action, and so, at the centre of the play, is a mind turning upon itself in a kind of vacuum. The other plays of this group are studies of spiritual explorations, *Hedda Gabler* of a refusal to embark.

No less interesting than the relations of material and thought in these three plays are their relations as works of art. We pass from the clear, firm, almost diagrammatic structure of *The Pillars of the Community*, with its superb articulation of theme and subject, to the complex organization of *The Wild Duck*, in which Ibsen reached the height of his power as a structural artist, handling several themes and the destinies of different characters with an almost Shakespearian balance. From this we come, in *Hedda Gabler*, to the bare, economical plotting characteristic of the late plays despite their great variety of form. In the binding together of the structure, irony and humour play an increasingly subtle part. The light-hearted comedy of Lona Hessel's arrival, with the slight but regrettable confusion as to the identity of the Fallen Sisters, the neat theatrical effects of entrances that give an ironical twist to the last speaker's words, all these characteristics of the first play give place, in *The Wild Duck*, to the graver irony that dares to introduce, in the flood of Hjalmar's false and sentimental emotion, the first reference to the pistol which is to be the instrument of pathos if not of tragedy, and faintly to foreshadow the catastrophe itself. Even the unfortunate rabbits run in and out of the dialogue like a brief comic motif on

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the wood-wind in the final and increasingly tragic movement of a symphony.

Nor are the modifications of Ibsen's technique in the drawing of character less remarkable. It is no longer, in any of the plays, a question of skill: Ibsen is a master-craftsman before he writes *The Pillars of the Community*. But the technique varies with the nature and purpose of the play: from the deliberately clear outlining of most of the characters in the first, so that the detailed drawing of Karsten stands out from the background; to the full and profound revelation of rounded personality in *The Wild Duck*, with its subtle implication and cross-bearing; to the limpid but, at first glance, colourless technique of *Hedda Gabler*, which deliberately focuses the attention of the reader upon the inner movements of the minds.

So close and economical is the relation of theme to subject in *The Pillars of the Community* that the play appears at times almost schematic, and even the chief character, Karsten Bernick, has something of this in him. He seems perhaps, at first reading, to explain himself too much and too clearly, to border upon an analysis of a character rather than the dramatic semblance of a living man. But as we look closer we see that, though this is in some sense a necessity of the play, of a play that must convey a moral problem and elucidate it, it is at the same time psychologically sound. Ibsen has not failed as an artist; for Karsten's habit of explaining his own motives, of explaining what kind of man he is, is at once a subtle piece of self-deception and the resultant of a life-long habit of arguing with his subdued but not yet silenced conscience. He must justify himself to himself, and so he continually calls for help in that continual effort; his admiring fellow-citizens and his adoring wife repeat faithfully what he dictates to them. The more dishonest his action, the nobler are the sentiments and motives he defines,

until, at the moment of his conversion in the fifth act, he speaks for the first time soberly and plainly, humbly destroying the illusion he had so strenuously created. This is a special type of character-drawing, but it is not shallow or, in the end, undramatic.

Utterly unlike this treatment is that given to the people of *The Wild Duck*. Here each in turn calls out our sympathy and each is created for us as much by what is said of him and by the characters of those who say it as by his own words. There are the masterly background studies of Werle senior and of Mrs Sörby, of whom no one speaks well and who yet win upon us and command our respect because the cross-fire of bitter and vindictive comment subtly reveals them as better than their critics. So it is with other minor figures in the play, while in the foreground is the figure of Gina, as enigmatic in her silences as Jean Jacques Bernard's Martine. Is it impercipience, a slightly coarse-grained placidity, that gives her her tolerant patience with Hjalmar's selfish egotism, or is it an almost divine, inarticulate wisdom and charity? We do not know, and she herself is the last person to tell us. But Ibsen builds this characteristic into the grouping with a delicate sense of intricate balance. Her tolerance or obtuseness seems now a factor in the destruction and disintegration of the lives about her, now a binding and redemptive power. Sometimes, as in the discussion in Act III about Werle senior, we are persuaded that she has driven Hjalmar to escape into irresponsible, falsely heroic gestures. Sometimes, when she bears with equanimity his insults and injustice, we see how this very quality helps her to hold her little society together without rebellion and without thought of her own rights. Such is the balance of character with character and of both with action throughout the play.

Different again is the function of character in *Hedda Gabler*. But how subtle is not only the final effect, but