

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF  
HENRIK IBSEN

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VOLUME IX  
ROSMERSHOLM  
THE LADY FROM THE  
SEA

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY  
WILLIAM ARCHER



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**VOLUME IX**

**ROSMERSHOLM**

**THE LADY FROM THE SEA**

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## ROSMERSHOLM

### INTRODUCTION

No one who ever saw Henrik Ibsen, in his later years at any rate, could doubt that he was a born aristocrat. It is said that a change came over his appearance and manner after the publication of *Brand*—that he then put off the Bohemian and put on the reserved, correct, punctilious man-of-the-world. When I first saw him in 1881, he had the air of a polished statesman or diplomatist. Distinction was the note of his personality. So early as 1872, he had written to George Brandes, who was then involved in one of his many controversies, "Be dignified! Dignity is the only weapon against such assaults." His actual words, *Vær Fornem!* mean, literally translated, "Be distinguished!" No democratic movement which implied a levelling down, could ever command Ibsen's sympathy. He was a leveller up, or nothing.

This deep-rooted trait in his character found its supreme expression in *Rosmersholm*.

One of his first remarks (to Brandes, January 3, 1882) after the storm had broken out over *Ghosts* was: "I feel most painfully affected by the crudity, the

plebeian element in all our public discussion. The very praiseworthy attempt to make of our people a democratic community has inadvertently gone a good way towards making us a plebeian community. Distinction of soul seems to be on the decline at home." The same trend of thought makes itself felt again and again in Dr. Stockmann's great speech in the fourth act of *An Enemy of the People*; but it appears only incidentally in that play, and not at all in *The Wild Duck*. It was a visit which he paid to Norway in the summer of 1885 that brought the need for "ennoblement" of character into the foreground of his thought, and inspired him with the idea of *Rosmersholm*. "Since he had last been home," writes Henrik Jæger, "the great political battle had been fought out, and had left behind it a fanaticism and bitterness of spirit which astounded him. He was struck by the brutality of the prevailing tone; he felt himself painfully affected by the rancorous and vulgar personalities which drowned all rational discussion of the principles at stake; and he observed with sorrow the many enmities to which the contest had given rise. . . . On the whole, he received the impression—as he remarked in conversation—that Norway was inhabited, not by two million human beings, but by two million cats and dogs. This impression has recorded itself in the picture of party divisions presented in *Rosmersholm*. The bitterness of the vanquished is admirably embodied in Rector Kroll; while the victors' craven reluctance to speak out their whole hearts is excellently characterised in the freethinker and opportunist, Mortensgård."

What was this "great political battle," the echoes of which reverberate through *Rosmersholm*? Though a knowledge of its details is in no way essential to

the comprehension of the play, the following account<sup>1</sup> of it may not be out of place.

The Norwegian constitution of 1814 gave the King of Norway and Sweden a suspensive veto on the enactments of the Norwegian Storting or Parliament, but provided that a bill passed by three successive triennial Storthings should become law without the Royal assent. This arrangement worked well enough until about 1870, when the Liberal party became alive to a flaw in the Constitution. The whole legislative and financial power was vested in the Storting; but the Ministers had no seats in it and acknowledged no responsibility save to the King. Thus the overwhelming Liberal majority in the Storting found itself balked at every turn by a Conservative ministry, over which it had no effective control. In 1872, a Bill enacting that Ministers should sit in the Storting was passed by 80 votes to 24, and was vetoed by the King. It was passed again and again by successive Storthings, the last time by 93 votes to 20; but now King Oscar came forward with a declaration that *on matters affecting the Constitution* his veto was not suspensive, but absolute, and once more vetoed the Bill. This measure was met by the Storting with a resolution (June 9, 1880) that the Act had become law in spite of the veto. The King ignored the resolution, and, by the advice of his Ministers, claimed an absolute veto, not only on constitutional questions, but on measures of supply. Then the Storting adopted the last resource provided by the Constitution: it impeached the Ministers before the Supreme Court of the kingdom. Political rancour ran incredibly high, and there was a great final tussle

<sup>1</sup> Condensed from an article in the *Fortnightly Review*, September 1885.

over the composition of the Supreme Court ; but the Liberals were masters of the situation, and carried all before them. One by one the Ministers were dismissed from office and fined. The King ostentatiously testified his sympathy with them, and selected a new Ministry from the Extreme Right. They failed to carry on the government of the country, and matters were at a deadlock. At last, however, King Oscar gave way. On June 26, 1884, he sent for Johan Sverdrup, the statesman who for a quarter of a century had guided the counsels of the Liberal party. Sverdrup consented to form a Ministry, and the battle ended in a Liberal victory along the whole line.

Ten years elapsed between Ibsen's hegira of 1864 and his first brief return to his native land. Before his second visit eleven more years intervened ; and during the summer of 1885, which he spent for the most part at Molde, he found the air still quivering with the rancours begotten of the great struggle. In a speech which he addressed to a meeting of workmen at Trondhjem (June 14, 1885) he said that the years of his absence had brought "immense progress in most directions," but that he was disappointed to observe that "the most indispensable individual rights were far less secured than he had hoped and expected to find them under the new order of things." He found neither freedom of thought nor freedom of speech beyond a limit arbitrarily fixed by the dominant majority. "There remains much to be done," he continued, "before we can be said to have attained real liberty. But I fear that our present democracy will not be equal to the task. An element of nobility must be introduced into our national life, into our

Parliament, and into our Press. Of course it is not nobility of birth that I am thinking of, nor of money, nor yet of knowledge, nor even of ability and talent: I am thinking of nobility of character, of will, of soul."

When he spoke these words he had been little more than a week in Norway; but it is clear that *Rosmersholm* was already germinating in his mind.

On his return to Munich he began to think out the play, and on February 14, 1886, he wrote to Carl Snoilsky, the Swedish poet; "I am much taken up with a new play, which I have long had in mind, and for which I made careful studies during my visit to Norway." It may be mentioned that Ibsen had met Snoilsky at Melde during the previous summer, and that they had seen a good deal of each other. The manuscript of *Rosmersholm* was sent to the printers at the end of September 1886, and a letter to Hegel accompanied it in which Ibsen said: "So far as I can see, the play is not likely to call forth attacks from any quarter; but I hope it will lead to lively discussion. I look for this especially in Sweden." Why in Sweden? Perhaps because, as we shall see presently, the story was partly suggested by a recent episode in Swedish social history. Before proceeding to the question of origins, however, I may quote the only other reference to the play, of any importance, which occurs in Ibsen's letters. The chairman of a debating-club in Christiania had addressed to the poet a letter on behalf of the club, which apparently contained some question or suggestion as to the fundamental idea of the play. Ibsen's answer was dated Munich, February 13, 1887. "The call to work," he said, "is certainly distinguishable through-



out *Rosmersholm*. But the play also deals with the struggle with himself which every serious-minded man must face in order to bring his life into harmony with his convictions. For the different spiritual functions do not develop evenly and side by side in any given human being. The acquisitive instinct hastens on from conquest to conquest. The moral consciousness, the 'conscience,' on the other hand, is very conservative. It has deep roots in tradition and the past generally. Hence arises the conflict in the individual. But first and foremost, of course, the play is a creative work, dealing with human beings and human destinies."

Dr. George Brandes is our authority for associating *Rosmersholm* with the social episode above alluded to—an episode which came within Ibsen's ken just while the play was in process of gestation. A Swedish nobleman, personally known to Ibsen, and remarkable for that amenity and distinction of manner which he attributes to Rosmer, had been unhappily married to a lady who shared none of his interests, and was intellectually quite unsympathetic to him. Much more sympathetic was a female relative of his wife's. The relation between them attracted attention, and (as in *Rosmersholm*) was the subject of venomous paragraphs in the local Press. Count Blank left his home and went abroad, was joined by the sympathetic cousin, resigned the high office which he held in his native country, and returned to his wife the fortune she had brought him. Shortly afterwards the Countess died of consumption, which was, of course, supposed to have been accelerated by her husband's misconduct. The use that Ibsen made of this unhappy story affords a perfect example of the working-up of raw material in the factory of genius. Not one of the traits that

constitute the originality and greatness of the play is to be found in the actual circumstances. He remodelled the whole episode; it was plastic as a sculptor's clay in his hands; but doubtless it did give him something to seize upon and re-create. For the character of Rebecca, it is believed (on rather inadequate grounds, it seems to me) that Ibsen borrowed some traits from Charlotte Stieglitz, who committed suicide in 1834, in the vain hope of stimulating the intellectual activity of her husband, a minor poet.<sup>1</sup> For Ulric Brendel, Dr. Brahm relates that Ibsen found a model in an eccentric "dream-genius" known to him in Italy, who created only in his mind, and despised writing. But Brendel is so clearly a piece of the poet's own "devilment" as he used to call it, that it is rather idle to look for his "original." The scene of the play is said to have been suggested to Ibsen by an old family seat near Molde. Be this as it may, Dr. Brandes is certainly mistaken in declaring that there is no such "castle" as Rosmersholm in Norway, and thence arguing that Ibsen had begun to write for a cosmopolitan rather than a Norwegian audience. Rosmersholm is not a "castle" at all; and old houses such as Ibsen describes are far from uncommon.

Published on November 23, 1886, *Rosmersholm* was first acted in Bergen in January 1887, in Gothenburg in March, in Christiania and Stockholm not till April. Copenhagen did not see it until November 1887, when it was acted by a Swedish travelling company. Its first production in Germany took place at Augsburg in April 1887, the poet himself being present. It was

<sup>1</sup> See note (in the Norwegian and German editions) to Ibsen's *Letters*, No. 146. As to Charlotte Stieglitz, see Brandes' *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, vol. vi. p. 296 (London, Heinemann, 1905).

produced in Berlin in May 1887, in Vienna not till May 1893. There are few of the leading German theatres where it has not been acted, and has not taken a more or less prominent place in the repertory. In Germany indeed (though not elsewhere) it seems to rank among Ibsen's most popular works. In London *Rosmersholm* was first acted at the Vaudeville Theatre on February 23, 1891, Mr. F. R. Benson playing Rosmer, and Miss Florence Farr, Rebecca. Four performances of it were given at the Opera Comique in 1893, with Mr. Lewis Waller as Rosmer, and Miss Elizabeth Robins as Rebecca. In 1892, a writer who adopted the pseudonym of "Austin Fryers" produced, at the Globe Theatre, a play called *Beata*, which purported to be a "prologue" to *Rosmersholm*—the drama which Ibsen (perversely in Mr. Fryers' judgment) chose to narrate instead of exhibiting it in action. Not until 1893 was *Rosmersholm* produced in Paris, by the company entitled "L'Œuvre," under the direction of M. Lugné Poé. This company afterwards acted it in London and in many other cities—among the rest in Christiania. In Italy, Eleonora Duse has recently added the play to her repertory, with scenery designed by Mr. Gordon Craig. I have no record of any American production.

With *Rosmersholm* we reach the end of the series of social dramas which began seventeen years earlier with *The League of Youth*. In all these plays the individual is treated, more or less explicitly, as a social unit, a member of a class, an example of some collective characteristic, or a victim of some collective superstition, injustice or stupidity. The plays which follow, on the other hand, beginning with *The Lady from the Sea*, are plays of pure psychology. There are, no doubt many women like Ellida Wangel or

Hedda Gabler ; but it is as individuals, not as members of a class, that they interest us ; nor is their fate conditioned, like that of Nora or Mrs. Alving, by any social prejudice or pressure. But in *Rosmersholm* man is still considered as a "political animal." The play, as we have seen, actually took its rise as a protest against a morbid condition of the Norwegian public mind, as observed by the poet at a particular point of time. George Brandes, indeed, has very justly contended that it ought to rank with *An Enemy of the People* and *The Wild Duck* as a direct outcome of that momentous incident in Ibsen's career, the fierce attack upon *Ghosts*. "Rosmer," says Dr. Brandes, "begins where Stockmann left off. He wants to do from the very first what the doctor only wanted to do at the end of *An Enemy of the People*—to make proud, free, noble beings of his countrymen. At the beginning of the play, Rosmer is believed to be a decided Conservative (which the Norwegian considered Ibsen to be for many years after *The League of Youth*), and as long as this view is generally held, he is esteemed and admired, while everything that concerns him is interpreted in the most favourable manner. As soon, however, as his complete intellectual emancipation is discovered, and especially when it appears that he himself does not attempt to conceal the change in his views, public opinion turns against him. . . . Ibsen had been almost as much exposed as Rosmer to every sort of attack for some time after the publication of *Ghosts*, which (from the Conservative point of view) marked his conversion to Radicalism." The analogy between Ibsen's experience and Rosmer's is far too striking not to have been present to the poet's mind.

But, though the play distinctly belongs to the social

series, it no less distinctly foreshadows the transition to the psychological series. Rosmer and Rebecca (or I am greatly mistaken) stand out from the social background much more clearly than their predecessors. They seem to grow away from it. At first they are concerned about political duties and social ideals; but, as the action proceeds, all these considerations drop away from them, or recur but as remembered dreams, and they are alone with their tortured souls. Then we cannot but note the intrusion of pure poetry—imagination scarcely deigning to allege a realistic pretext—in the personage of Ulric Brendel. He is of the same kindred as the Stranger in *The Lady from the Sea*, and the Rat-Wife in *Little Eyolf*. He marks Ibsen's final rebellion against the prosaic restrictions which, from *Pillars of Society* onwards, he had striven to impose upon his genius.

He was yet to write plays more fascinating than *Rosmersholm*, but none greater in point of technical mastery. It surpasses *The Wild Duck* in the simplicity of its material, and in that concentration which renders its effect on the stage, perhaps, a little monotonous, and so detracts from its popularity. In construction it is a very marvel of cunning complexity. It is the consummate example in modern times of the retrospective method of which, in ancient times, the consummate example was the *Edipus Rex*. This method has been blamed by many critics; but the first great critic of English drama commended it in the practice of the ancient poets. "They set the audience, as it were," says Dryden, "at the post where the race is to be concluded." "In unskilful hands," I have said elsewhere, "the method might doubtless become very tedious; but when, as in *Rosmersholm*, every phase of the retrospect has a definite reaction upon the

drama—the psychological process—actually passing on the stage, the effect attained is surely one of peculiar richness and depth. The drama of the past and the drama of the present are interwoven in such a complex yet clear and stately harmony as Ibsen himself has not often rivalled."

## THE LADY FROM THE SEA

### INTRODUCTION

IBSEN's birth-place, Skien, is not on the sea, but at the head of a long and very narrow fiord. At Grimstad, however, and again at Bergen, he had for years lived close to the skerry-bound coast. After he left Bergen, he seldom came in touch with the open sea. The upper part of Christiania Fiord is a mere salt-water lake; and in Germany he never saw the sea, in Italy only on brief visits to Ischia, Sorrento, Amalfi. We find him, in 1880,<sup>1</sup> writing to Hegel from Munich: "Of all that I miss down here, I miss the sea most. That is the deprivation to which I can least reconcile myself." Again, in 1885, before the visit which he paid that year to Norway, he writes from Rome to the same correspondent, that he has visions of buying a country-house by the sea, in the neighbourhood of Christiania. "The sight of the sea," he says, "is what I most miss in these regions; and this feeling grows year by year." During the weeks he spent at Molde that year, there

<sup>1</sup> The date is July 16. On March 5 of the same year he had (as we shall see later) written down the first outline of what was afterwards to become *The Lady from the Sea*.

can be no doubt that he was gathering not only the political impressions which he used in *Rosmersholm*, but the impressions of ocean and fiord, and of the tide of European life flowing past, but not mingling with, the "carp-pond" existence of a small Norwegian town, which he was afterwards to embody in *The Lady from the Sea*. That invaluable bibliographer, Halvorsen, is almost certainly wrong in suggesting that Veblungsnes, at the head of the Romsdalfjord, is the scene of the play. The "local situation" is much more like that of Molde itself. There Ibsen must frequently have seen the great English tourist steamer gliding noiselessly to its moorings, before proceeding up the fiord to Veblungsnes, and then, on the following day, slipping out to sea again.

Two years later, in 1887, Ibsen spent the summer at Frederikshavn and at Sæby in the north of Jutland, not far from the Skaw. At Sæby I visited him; and from a letter written at the time I make the following extract: "He said that Fru Ibsen and he had first come to Frederikshavn, which he himself liked very much—he could knock about all day among the shipping, talking to the sailors, and so forth. Besides, he found the neighbourhood of the sea favourable to contemplation and constructive thought. Here, at Sæby, the sea was not so easily accessible. But Fru Ibsen didn't like Frederikshavn because of the absence of pleasant walks about it; so Sæby was a sort of compromise between him and her." I remember that he enlarged to me at great length on the fascination which the sea exercised over him. He was then, he said, "preparing some tomfoolery for next year." On his return to Munich, he put his ideas into shape, and *The Lady from the Sea* was published in November 1888.



Ibsen wrote few letters while the play was in process of preparation, and none of them contains any noteworthy reference to it. On the other hand, we possess a very curious first draft of the story<sup>1</sup> (dated March 5, 1880), which shows in a most interesting fashion how an idea grew in his mind. Abbreviating freely, I will try to indicate the main points of difference between the sketch and the finished play.

The scene of the action was originally conceived as a much smaller town than it ultimately became, shut in and overshadowed by high, abrupt rocks. (Note that when he wrote the sketch Ibsen had not yet visited Molde.) There was to be an hotel and a sanatorium, and a good deal of summer gaiety in the place; but the people were to long in an impotent, will-less fashion for release from their imprisonment in the "shadow-life" of this remote corner of the world. Through the short summer, they were always to have the long winter impending over them; and this was to be a type of life: "A bright summer day with the great darkness behind it—that is all." This motive, though traces of it remain, is much less emphasized than was at first intended.

The characters were to fall into three groups: inhabitants of the town, summer visitors, and passing tourists. The tourists were simply to "come and go, and enter episodically into the action"; but the other two groups are more or less individualised.

The first group is thus described: "The lawyer married a second time, to the woman from the open sea outside. Has two young but grown-up daughters by his first marriage. Elegant, distinguished, bitter. His

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Die neue Rundschau*, December 1906. The same magazine contains a first draft of *A Doll's House*. It appeared too late to be noticed in the Introduction to that play.