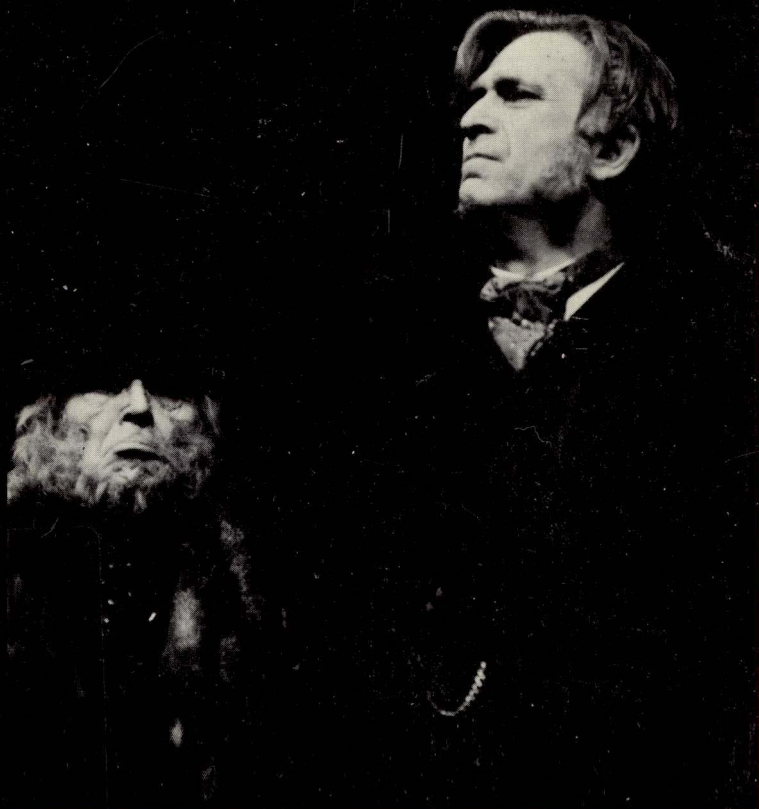


Henrik Ibsen

**An Enemy of
the People**

Translated by Michael Meyer



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George Steiner in *The New Statesman*

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Although Ibsen usually allowed eighteen months to elapse between finishing one play and beginning another, he completed *An Enemy of the People* in June 1882, less than six months after writing *Ghosts*. While he had been brooding on the new play for some time, his immediate inspiration was outrage. Incensed by the savage reception accorded to *Ghosts*, he retaliated by creating a play on the theme that 'the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone.' *An Enemy of the People*, because of its independent outlook and caustic comments on politicians, caused much controversy when it appeared, and has remained a very popular work because, as Michael Meyer says in his Introduction, 'The truths it expresses have not dated, and are not likely to as long as there are town councils and politicians.' Dr Stockmann was Stanislavsky's favourite part.

Michael Meyer's translation was simultaneously commissioned by the Nottingham Theatre Trust and the Meadow Players, Oxford. It was first produced at the Playhouse, Nottingham, in 1962.

The photograph on the front cover shows Norman Wooland as Dr Stockmann and Basil Clark as Morten K  l in a scene from the Oxford Playhouse Company's 1969 production of An Enemy of the People and is reproduced by courtesy of Studio Edmark. The photograph of Ibsen on the back cover is reproduced by courtesy of the Mansell Collection.

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Henrik Ibsen

AN ENEMY OF
THE PEOPLE

Translated from the Norwegian by
MICHAEL MEYER



EYRE METHUEN
LONDON

*First published in Great Britain by
Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd in 1963
Copyright © 1963 by Michael Meyer
First published in this paperback
edition in 1974 by Eyre Methuen Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Fakenham, Norfolk*

ISBN 0 413 29470 6

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Henrik Johan Ibsen

- 1828 Born at Skien in south-east Norway on 20 March, the second child of Knud Ibsen, a merchant, and his wife Marichen, *née* Altenburg.
- 1834-5 Father becomes ruined. The family moves to Venstoepp, a few miles outside Skien.
- 1844 Ibsen (aged fifteen) becomes assistant to an apothecary at Grimstad, a tiny seaport further down the coast. Stays there for six years in great poverty.
- 1846 Has an illegitimate son with a servant-girl, Else Sofie Jensdatter.
- 1849 Writes his first play, *Catiline* (in verse).
- 1850 Leaves Grimstad to become a student in Christiania (now Oslo). Writes second play, *The Warrior's Barrow*.
- 1851 Is invited to join Ole Bull's newly formed National Theatre at Bergen. Does so, and stays six years, writing, directing, designing costumes and keeping the accounts.
- 1852 Visits Copenhagen and Dresden to learn about the theatre. Writes *St John's Eve*, a romantic comedy in verse and prose.
- 1853 *St John's Eve* acted at Bergen. Failure.
- 1854 Writes *Lady Inger of Oestraat*, an historical tragedy in prose.
- 1855 *Lady Inger of Oestraat* acted at Bergen. Failure. Writes *The Feast at Solhaug*, another romantic verse-and-prose comedy.
- 1856 *The Feast at Solhaug* acted at Bergen. Small success. Meets Suzannah Thoresen. Writes *Olaf Liljekrans*, a third verse-and-prose comedy.
- 1857 *Olaf Liljekrans* acted at Bergen. Failure. Leaves Bergen to become artistic manager of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre. Writes *The Vikings at Helgeland*, an historical prose tragedy.
- 1858 Marries Suzannah Thoresen. *The Vikings at Helgeland* staged. Small success.
- 1859 His only child, Sigurd, born.
- 1860-1 Years of poverty and despair. Unable to write.
- 1862 Writes *Love's Comedy*, a modern verse satire, his first play

- for five years. It is rejected by his own theatre, which goes bankrupt.
- 1863 Ibsen gets part-time job as literary adviser to the Danish-controlled Christiania Theatre. Extremely poor. Applies unsuccessfully to Government for financial support. Resorts to moneylenders. Writes *The Pretenders*, another historical prose tragedy. Is granted a travel stipend by the Government; this is augmented by a collection raised by Bjoernson and other friends.
- 1864 *The Pretenders* staged in Christiania. A success. He leaves Norway and settles in Rome. Remains resident abroad for the next twenty-seven years. Begins *Emperor and Galilean*.
- 1865 Writes *Brand*, in verse (as a play for reading, not acting), in Rome and Ariccia.
- 1866 *Brand* published. Immense success; Ibsen becomes famous throughout Scandinavia (but it is not acted for nineteen years).
- 1867 Writes *Peer Gynt*, in verse (also to be read, not acted), in Rome, Ischia and Sorrento. It, too, is a great success; but is not staged for seven years.
- 1868 Moves from Rome and settles in Dresden.
- 1869 Attends opening of Suez Canal as Norwegian delegate. Completes *The League of Youth*, a modern prose comedy.
- 1871 Revises his shorter poems and issues them in a volume. His farewell to verse; for the rest of his life he publishes exclusively in prose.
- 1873 Completes (after nine years) *Emperor and Galilean*, his last historical play. Begins to be known in Germany and England.
- 1874 Returns briefly to Norway for first time in ten years. The students hold a torchlight procession in his honour.
- 1875 Leaves Dresden after seven years and settles in Munich. Begins *The Pillars of Society*, the first of his twelve great modern prose dramas.
- 1876 *Peer Gynt* staged for first time. *The Vikings at Helgeland* is performed in Munich, the first of his plays to be staged outside Scandinavia.
- 1877 Completes *The Pillars of Society*. This makes him famous in Germany, where it is widely acted.
- 1878 Returns to Italy for a year.
- 1879 Writes *A Doll's House* in Rome and Amalfi. It causes an immediate sensation, though a decade elapses before it

- makes Ibsen internationally famous. Returns for a year to Munich.
- 1880 Resettles in Italy for a further five years. First performance of an Ibsen play in England (*The Pillars of Society* for a single matinée in London).
- 1881 Writes *Ghosts* in Rome and Sorrento. Violently attacked; all theatres reject it, and bookshops return it to the publisher.
- 1882 Writes *An Enemy of the People* in Rome. Cordially received. *Ghosts* receives its first performance (in Chicago).
- 1884 Writes *The Wild Duck* in Rome and Gossensass. It, and all his subsequent plays, were regarded as obscure and were greeted with varying degrees of bewilderment.
- 1885 Revisits Norway again, for the first time since 1874. Leaves Rome and resettles in Munich.
- 1886 Writes *Rosmersholm* in Munich.
- 1888 Writes *The Lady from the Sea* in Munich.
- 1889 Meets and becomes infatuated with the eighteen-year-old Emilie Bardach in Gossensass. Does not see her again, but the experience shadows the remainder of his writing. Janet Achurch acts Nora in London, the first major English-speaking production of Ibsen.
- 1890 Writes *Hedda Gabler* in Munich.
- 1891 Returns to settle permanently in Norway.
- 1892 Writes *The Master Builder* in Christiania.
- 1894 Writes *Little Eyolf* in Christiania.
- 1896 Writes *John Gabriel Borkman* in Christiania.
- 1899 Writes *When We Dead Awaken* in Christiania.
- 1901 First stroke. Partly paralysed.
- 1903 Second stroke. Left largely helpless.
- 1906 Dies in Christiania on 23 May, aged seventy-eight.

Introduction

Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People* in Rome between March and June 1882, less than six months after completing *Ghosts*. It is probable that he had begun to plan it as early as 1880, for on 26 November of that year he wrote to Edmund Gosse that he was 'busy pondering a new play which I hope to complete during the summer', and both Lorentz Dietrichson and Kristofer Janson report conversations that they had with Ibsen around this time in which he expressed many of the opinions which he was later to put into Dr Stockmann's mouth. But he had put this project aside in order to write *Ghosts*, 'a theme' (he wrote to his publisher, Hegel of Gylden-dal) 'which has long occupied my thoughts and which at length forced itself upon me so insistently that I could no longer ignore it.'

The extremely hostile reception which *Ghosts* had received in Scandinavia on its appearance in December 1881 drove Ibsen into a fury. 'What is one to say of the attitude taken by the so-called liberal press?' he wrote to Georg Brandes on 3 January 1882. 'These leaders who talk and write of freedom and progressiveness and at the same time allow themselves to be the slaves of the supposed opinions of their subscribers! I become more and more convinced that there is something demoralising about involving oneself in politics and attaching oneself to a party. Under no circumstances will I ever link myself with any party that has the majority behind it. Bjørnson says: "The majority is always right." As a practising politician I suppose he has to say that. But I say: "The minority is always right." I am of course not thinking of the minority of reactionaries who have been left astern by the big central party which we call liberal; I mean the minority which forges ahead in territory which the majority has not yet reached. I believe that he is right who is most closely attuned to the future . . . For me liberty is the first condition of life, and the highest. At home people don't bother much about liberty but only about liberties - a few more or a few less, according to the party standpoint. I feel most painfully affected by this vulgarity, this plebeianism in our public discussion. In the course of their undeniably worthy efforts to turn our country into a democratic community, people have unwittingly gone a good way towards turning us into a mob

community. The aristocracy of the intellect seems to be in short supply in Norway.'

Later the same month (24 January 1882) he wrote to Olaf Skavlan: 'I myself am responsible for what I write, and I alone. I cannot possibly embarrass any party, for I belong to none. I want to act as a lone *franc-tireur* in the outposts and operate on my own . . . Is it only in the political field that men are to be allowed to work for freedom in Norway? Is it not first and foremost man's spirit that needs to be set free? Such spiritual slaves as we are cannot even use the freedoms we already have. Norway is a free country inhabited by serfs.'

Normally, Ibsen allowed eighteen months to elapse between completing one play and beginning another;¹ but on 16 March he surprised Hegel by writing: 'I am able to tell you that I am now fully occupied with preparations for my new play. This time it will be a peaceful work which can be read by cabinet ministers and wholesale merchants and their ladies, and from which the theatres will not need to shrink. I should have no difficulty in polishing it off, and I will try to have it ready quite early in the autumn.' For once he found himself ahead of schedule, for on 21 June he was able to write to Hegel, still from Rome: 'Yesterday I completed my new play. It is entitled *An Enemy of the People*, and is in five acts. I am still a little uncertain whether to call it a comedy or simply a play; it has much of the character of a comedy, but there is also a serious basic theme . . . In a few days I shall start on the fair copy, which should be ready at the latest by the end of July. I will send you the manuscript in stages, as usual.'

Unfortunately no working notes or preliminary draft of *An Enemy of the People* have survived, so that we do not know, as we do with most of his other plays, exactly how long he took to write each act and what alterations he made from his original conception.

At the beginning of August he left Rome for Gossensass in the Tyrol, and from there, on 28 August, he sent Hegel the fair copy of the first four acts. 'The fifth,' he explained, 'will follow in a few days, as I have already done half of it. The reason the manuscript

¹ Between 1877, when he finished *The Pillars of Society*, and 1896, when he wrote *John Gabriel Borkman*, *An Enemy of the People* provides the only exception to this rule. *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen's last play, came three years after *John Gabriel Borkman*, but this was largely because 1898 was much taken up with preparations for the celebration of Ibsen's seventieth birthday.

is arriving somewhat later than I implied in my previous letter is that I have fair-copied the whole play twice to achieve the maximum perfection in the dialogue.' On 9 September he posted the final act. 'It has been fun', he wrote, 'working on this play, and I feel a sense of deprivation and emptiness at being parted from it. Dr Stockmann and I got on most excellently; we agree about so many things; but the Doctor has a more muddled head on his shoulders than I have, and he has besides certain characteristics which will permit people to tolerate various things from his lips which they might not accept so readily if they had issued from mine. If you have begun to read the manuscript, I think you will share this opinion.'

An Enemy of the People was published by Gyldendal of Copenhagen on 28 November 1882, in an edition (despite the calamitous sales of *Ghosts*) of 10,000 copies. Its reception was mixed; not surprisingly, Dr Stockmann's hard remarks about political parties offended all the reviewers who belonged to either. Liberal circles were particularly cool; Strindberg dismissed it as 'insufferably aesthetic' (the modern word would be 'uncommitted'). The theatres, however, seized eagerly on the play. The Christiania Theatre and the Royal Theatres of Copenhagen and Stockholm, all of which had rejected *Ghosts* as unfit for public presentation, immediately acquired the production rights of *An Enemy of the People*, apparently insensitive to the fact that the theme of the latter play was the unworthiness of those who 'do not dare,' and its conclusion: 'The strongest man is he who stands most alone.' It was performed at the Christiania Theatre on 13 January 1883; at Bergen on 24 January; at Gothenburg in February, and in Stockholm and Copenhagen in March. In all three countries it was cordially, but not over-enthusiastically received. Strangely, in view of the popularity of *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House*, and the sensation caused by the publication of *Ghosts*, it was not performed in Germany until 1887.

In 1892, *An Enemy of the People* was acted in New York, in German;¹ and the following year Lugné-Poe staged it in Paris at the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre. 'On the first night,' writes Archer, 'it was preceded by a lecture by M. Laurent Tailhade, which consisted not so much of an exposition of the play, as of a violent attack upon all the "leading men" in French literature and politics.

¹ Several of the first American performances of Ibsen were in a language other than English, owing to the high proportion, in those days, of first-generation European immigrants. The world première of *Ghosts* took place in Chicago in Norwegian (or in a mixture of Norwegian and Danish).

Beside it, Dr Stockmann's harangue in the fourth act seems moderate and almost mealy-mouthed . . . The audience listened, not without protest, to M. Tailhade's diatribe, until he thought fit to describe the recent Franco-Russian fêtes as an act of collective insanity. At this point a storm of indignation burst forth, which lasted without pause for a quarter of an hour, and was not allayed by an attempt at intervention on the part of M. Lugné-Poe. The lecture closed amid wild confusion, and altogether the preliminary scene in the auditorium was like a spirited rehearsal of the meeting at Captain Horster's.'

In 1893 *An Enemy of the People* was produced in England by Herbert Beerbohm Tree at the Haymarket Theatre – the first Ibsen play to attract the attention of a fashionable actor-manager and receive the full West End treatment. Archer found the text 'monstrously mutilated' and the production 'distinctly below the level of the so-called "scratch" performances to which we have been accustomed'. Bernard Shaw thought that Tree's own performance 'though humorous and entertaining in its way, was, as a character creation, the polar opposite of Ibsen's Stockmann'. But the production was a success; Tree revived it several times, and in 1895 took it to America, where its success was repeated. Yet, for reasons which will be discussed later, apart from a single matinée in 1928 to celebrate the centenary of Ibsen's birth Central London has seen only one production of *An Enemy of the People* since Tree's, in 1939, when Tyrone Guthrie directed it at the Old Vic with Roger Livesey as Stockmann and Edward Chapman as the Mayor. Joan Littlewood staged it at Stratford East in 1954, with Howard Goorney as Stockmann and Harry Corbett as the Mayor, setting the action in Lancashire; but, as T. C. Worsley commented, the Theatre Workshop company was 'less happy in the naturalistic mode than in some others'.

In 1905 *An Enemy of the People* was the instance of a demonstration even more remarkable than that which it had caused in Paris. The venue was the Moscow Arts Theatre, and Konstantin Stanislavsky, who was playing Dr Stockmann, has described the occasion vividly in his autobiography, *My Life and Art*:

'In that time of political unrest – it was but a little while before the first revolution – the feeling of protest was very strong in all spheres of society. They waited for the hero who could tell the truth strongly and bravely in the very teeth of the government. It is not to be wondered at that the image of Dr Stockmann became popular at once in Moscow, and especially so in Petrograd. *An Enemy of the*

People became the favourite play of the revolutionists, notwithstanding the fact that Stockmann himself despised the solid majority and believed in individuals to whom he would entrust the conduct of life. But Stockmann protested, Stockmann told the truth, and that was considered enough.

'On the day of the well-known massacre in Kazansky Square, *An Enemy of the People* was on the boards of our theatre. The average run of spectators that night was from the intelligentsia, the professors and learned men of Petrograd. I remember that the orchestra was filled almost entirely with grey heads. Thanks to the sad events of the day, the auditorium was very excited and answered even the slightest hints about liberty in every word of Stockmann's protest. In the most unexpected places in the play the thunder of applause would break in on the performance. . . . The atmosphere in the theatre was such that we expected arrests at any minute and a stop to the performance. Censors, who sat at all the performances of *An Enemy of the People* and saw to it that I, who played Dr Stockmann, should use only the censored text, and raised trouble over every syllable that was not admitted by the censorship, were on this evening even more watchful than on other occasions. I had to be doubly careful. When the text of a role is cut and re-cut many times it is not hard to make a mistake and say too much or too little. In the last act of the play, Dr Stockmann, putting into order his room which has been stoned by the crowd, finds in the general chaos his black coat,¹ in which he appeared at the meeting the day before. Seeing a rent in the cloth, Stockmann says to his wife: "One must never put on a new coat when one goes to fight for freedom and truth."

"The spectators in the theatre connected this sentence with the massacre in Kazansky Square, where more than one new coat must have been torn in the name of freedom and truth. Unexpectedly, my words aroused such a pandemonium that it was necessary to stop the performance, into which a real mob scene was interpolated by impromptu. There had taken place the unification of the actor and the spectators, who took on themselves the role of chief actor in the theatre, that same mob action of which so much is said by the theoreticians of art. The entire audience rose from its seats and threw itself towards the footlights. Thanks to the fact that the stage was very low and there was no orchestra before it, I saw hundreds of hands stretched towards me, all of which I was forced to shake. The younger people in the audience jumped on to the stage and

¹ More accurately, his trousers.

embraced Dr Stockmann. It was not easy to establish order and to continue with the play. That evening I found out through my own experience what power the theatre could exercise'.¹

Although the public reception of *Ghosts* was the immediate inspiration of *An Enemy of the People*, the opinions to which Ibsen gave expression in the latter play were not new to him; we find them continually cropping up in his earlier correspondence, especially in his letters to the Danish critic Georg Brandes. As early as 1871, eleven years before he began *An Enemy of the People*, he had declared to Brandes: 'I shall never be able to regard liberty as synonymous with political liberty. What you call liberty I call liberties, and what I call the fight for freedom is nothing but the eternal and living quest for the idea of freedom. He who possesses freedom otherwise than as an object to be sought possesses something dead and soulless. For the quintessence of freedom is the fact that, as one acquires it, it grows, so that if anyone stops during the battle and says: "Now I have it!" he reveals, by this very statement, that he has lost it.'

On 21 March 1872, he asserted to Fredrik Gjertsen his 'fundamental principle, in every context and situation, namely, that the minority is always right.' And the following month he wrote to Brandes: 'My dear friend, the liberals are the worst enemies of freedom. Spiritual and intellectual freedom flourish best under absolutism; that has been proved in France, and later in Germany, and it is now being proved in Russia . . . As regards this agitation which is being worked up against you, with its lies and back-biting and so forth, let me give you a piece of advice which from my own experience I know to be sovereign. Be an aristocrat [*fornem*]! Aristocracy is the only weapon against this kind of thing. Appear indifferent; never write a word of reply in the newspapers; if you polemise in your writings, never direct your polemic against this or that specific attack; never write a single word which could make it seem that your enemies have found their mark; in short, act as though you had no idea that anyone was opposed to you.'

¹ Similarly, on the occasion of the Paris premiere, which occurred at the time of the Dreyfus affair, everyone, according to Lugné-Poe, identified Stockmann with Emile Zola. The play was deliberately chosen for the first Ibsen production in Spain (in Barcelona on 14 April 1893) to help organized opposition to the established order in government and industry, and for the first Japanese production (in Tokyo in 1898) as a protest against dangerous effusion from a chemical factory.

On 19 December 1879, a fortnight after the publication of *A Doll's House*, he wrote to Lorentz Dietrichson: 'It seems to me doubtful whether it is practicable to obtain better artistic conditions in our country before the intellectual soil has been thoroughly turned up, and cleansed and drained of all its swamp-like filth.' This was a metaphor to which he was to return in *An Enemy of the People*. And Kristofer Janson, the writer who was a part-original of Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*, reports a conversation he had with Ibsen on New Year's Eve, 1880, when Ibsen is thought to have been making his first plans for *An Enemy of the People*. 'Ibsen flared up. "The majority? What is the majority? The ignorant mass! The intelligence is always in the minority. How many of the majority do you think are qualified to hold an opinion? Most of them are just sheepdogs!"'¹

'When my new play reaches you,' Ibsen wrote to Brandes on 21 September 1882, shortly after he had finished *An Enemy of the People*, 'you will perhaps be able to understand what interest and, I may add, fun it has given me to recall the many scattered and casual remarks I have made in my letters to you.' Nine months later, to the same correspondent, he added a provocative postscript to the play. 'An intellectual pioneer', he declared, 'can never gather a majority about him. In ten years the majority may have reached the point where Dr Stockmann stood when the people held their meeting. But during those ten years the Doctor has not remained stationary; he is still at least ten years ahead of the others. The majority, the masses, the mob, will never catch him up; he can never rally them behind him. I myself feel a similarly unrelenting compulsion to keep pressing forward. A crowd now stands where I stood when I wrote my earlier books. But I myself am there no longer. I am somewhere else – far ahead of them – or so I hope. At present I am struggling with the draft of a new play in four acts . . .' This new play, the successor to *An Enemy of the People*, was to be *The Wild Duck*.

The plot of *An Enemy of the People* had its origin in two actual incidents to which Ibsen's attention had been drawn. Alfred

¹ He also once remarked to Janson: 'The only people with whom I really have any sympathy are the nihilists and the socialists. They want something wholeheartedly, and they are consistent.' Ibsen did not object when, in 1890, Bernard Shaw identified 'Ibsenism' with socialism – indeed, he protested when some newspapers asserted that he had nothing to do with socialism.

Meissner, a young German poet whom he knew in Munich, told him how, when his father had been medical officer at the spa of Teplitz in the eighteen-thirties, there had occurred an outbreak of cholera which the latter felt it his duty to make public. As a result, the season was ruined, and the citizens of Teplitz became so enraged that they stoned the Doctor's house and forced him to flee the town.

Then there had been the case in Norway of a chemist named Harald Thaulow. For nearly ten years Thaulow had furiously attacked the Christiania Steam Kitchens for neglecting their duty towards the city's poor. He had delivered a violent speech on the subject in 1874, when Ibsen was revisiting Norway; and on 23 February 1881, only a fortnight before he died, Thaulow had attempted to read a prepared speech at the annual general meeting of the Steam Kitchens. The chairman of the meeting tried to prevent him from speaking, and eventually the audience forced him, amid commotion, to remain silent. Ibsen read a report of this meeting in *Aftenposten* just at the time when his indignation at the reception of *Ghosts* was reaching its climax, and he must have recognized in the eccentric old chemist a spirit very kindred to his own. The newspaper account is worth quoting:

THAULOW. I will not stop, you have no right to stop me, Mr Chairman.

(*Continues*). Point number ten –

CONSUL HEFTYE. Mr Thaulow must be stopped!

THAULOW *continues*. Several of the public show their displeasure by walking about the hall. THE CHAIRMAN asks the meeting whether they recognize his right to bar MR THAULOW from the floor. Unanimous 'Ayes'. THE CHAIRMAN again asks MR THAULOW to stop reading.

THAULOW. I will not be silenced.

THE CHAIRMAN. In that case, I shall –

THAULOW. I'll keep it quite short. (*Reads on.*)

CONSUL HEFTYE. Is he to be allowed to continue?

THAULOW (*continues reading*). The glorious achievements of the Christiania Steam Kitchens – I'll soon be through –

CONSUL HEFTYE. If this goes on the meeting can't continue.

CHAIRMAN. I regret that I must interrupt Mr Thaulow. You have not the floor –

THAULOW *reads on*.

CONSUL HEFTYE. Be quiet, or you'll be thrown out.