



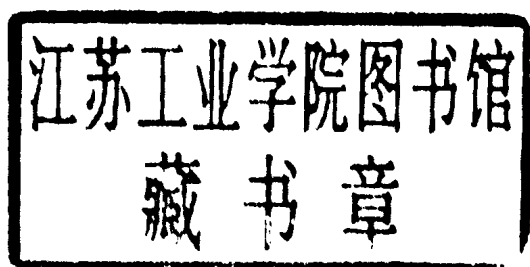
Ibsen's women

Joan Templeton

IBSEN'S WOMEN

JOAN TEMPLETON

Long Island University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1997

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1997
Reprint 1999
First paperback edition 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 11/12 $\frac{1}{2}$ New Baskerville

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data
Templeton, Joan.

Ibsen's women / Joan Templeton.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59039 6 (hardback)

1. Ibsen, Henrik, 1828–1906 – Characters – Women. 2. Women in
literature. 3. Ibsen, Henrik, 1828–1906 – Relations with women. I. Title.

PT8897.w7T46 1997
839.8'226–dc21 96–49141 CIP

ISBN 0 521 59039 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00136 6 paperback

Preface

This book began in a Brooklyn classroom. A better Ibsenite than I, one of my students questioned the standard reading of *Ghosts* as a tragedy that fixes the responsibility on the protagonist's refusal to welcome her husband sexually: "Mrs. Alving didn't love the captain and didn't want to marry him, so . . ." The student could not complete her idea, her voice trailed off, and I was saved by the end of the hour, but the fragmented objection teased at me and sent me back to the text, until, much later, like Helene Alving examining the outworn moral system that ruled her life, I saw that what I had been teaching was ghost ridden. *Ghosts* led me back to *A Doll House*, the play to which it was a sequel; "After Nora," Ibsen wrote, "Mrs. Alving had to come" (*LS* 208). And in the critical commentary on the woman who slammed the door, I found the same ghostly censure as in the commentary on the woman who stayed. Like Mrs. Alving, Nora is to blame. I also found a widespread determination to rescue *A Doll House* from the contamination of feminism. Thinking through the terms and arguments of this claim made me reexamine the relation of *A Doll House* and its author to the feminism of his day and ours, a study that led me to conclude that Ibsen's play is the quintessential feminist work because it does nothing less than destroy the notion of Woman, the female Other of history.

It seemed imperative to know how Ibsen had arrived at this contention, and so I went back further, to Nora's predecessors, and to an examination of another claim: that Ibsen's paradigmatic plot, beginning with his first play *Catiline*, consists of a male protagonist whose internal conflict is dramatized in his relation with two opposing representatives of Woman – one aggressive, masculine, and destructive, and the other passive, womanly, and nurturing – as though Ibsen believed in a species of She that

consisted of two varieties. I concluded that although Ibsen began, as Brandes put it, “waist-deep in the Romantic period” (B 79), as one of the chief creators of modernism, he transformed the forms, ideas, and ideologies of his cultural legacy, one of which was the centuries-old stereotype of Woman as Angel or Devil. And I discovered that Ibsen created patterns of his own, including a female-centered triangular plot as important in his work as the male-centered one.

It is not possible to write intelligently about “Ibsen’s Idea of Women” or “Woman’s Place in Ibsen’s Ideological Landscape.”¹ Long before the post-Freudians, Ibsen questioned the existence of a “female nature,” critically examining the exclusiveness of the categories “masculine” and “feminine” both within people and within systems. Ibsen’s refusal of Woman allowed him to discover the socialization of sexual identity we now call “gender” and to investigate women as full moral beings struggling against the cultural norms that define and limit them. Taken as a whole, his plays constitute a remarkable literary contribution to feminist thought, whose central tenet historian Joan Scott defines as “the refusal of the hierarchical construction of the relationship between male and female in its specific contexts and an attempt to reverse or displace its operations.”²

This book is a reading of the women in Ibsen’s plays, and thus of the plays, from first to last. Ibsen insisted that his work should be read as a continuous, developing whole, and the rightness of this judgment is nowhere better borne out than in a study of his women. The female characters in the early plays prefigure the famous women of the middle and late plays. My major working method is close textual analysis, accompanied, in the case of three of Ibsen’s major plays – *A Doll House*, *Ghosts*, and *Hedda Gabler* – by an argument against the hostility, even condemnation, that characterizes much of the commentary on three of Ibsen’s greatest protagonists. I am convinced that such criticism misunderstands Ibsen’s purposes and violates his texts.

If Ibsen insisted on the unity of his work, he also insisted that it never reflected experiences he had merely “lived out” (*oplevet*), but only those he had “lived through” (*gennemlevet*) (*H* 17:402).³ I have tried to discover what Ibsen “lived through” with women and what he made of the private history. I have tried to fill in shadows, near missing persons like Clara Ebbell, Ibsen’s early love, and the

more substantial, yet still neglected Camilla Collett, the founder of both Norwegian feminism and the Norwegian realist novel, and one of the very few authors whose influence Ibsen acknowledged. With regard to other women – Marichen Altenburg Ibsen, the poet's mother, Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen, the poet's wife, and the young women Ibsen was drawn to in his old age – I have reexamined what has been claimed about their relation to the playwright and his work.

Ibsen was fond of saying that a writer needs models as much as a sculptor, and he drew on both women he knew and on fictional women. I have tried to identify Ibsen's models, literary and living, and to suggest how he used them. As with all artists, of course, Ibsen's models were starting points; "there is a big difference," he said, "between the model and the portrait" (*LS* 91).

Although Ibsen's reticence regarding his work is well known, his letters constitute a rich critical commentary from which I have drawn extensively. I am deeply indebted to two great critical editions of Ibsen's works, the Norwegian "Centenary Edition," the *Hundreårsutgaven*, edited by Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik Arup Seip, and *The Oxford Ibsen*, edited by James McFarlane. I also owe a large debt to Ibsen's Norwegian and English biographers, especially Halvdan Koht and Michael Meyer, although I sometimes disagree with them. Meyer, for example, claims that he has supplied an element missing in Koht's biography, "the truth" about Ibsen's relation with his wife and with the young women of his old age (*M* xvi); I have reached different conclusions from Meyer on these matters as well as on others.

An abbreviated version of parts one and two of chapter five, "The Poetry of Feminism," appeared in *PMLA*, as did an earlier version of chapter six, "Mrs. Alving's Ghosts." An earlier version of part two of chapter seven, "Sense and Sensibility: Women and Men in *The Wild Duck*" appeared in *Scandinavian Studies*. I thank both journals for permission to reprint.

I owe a great debt to Professors Joseph Duchak and the late Jay Redfield of the Long Island University Library. I also thank Hedvig Vincenot, curator of the Bibliothèque Nordique of the Bibliothèque St. Geneviève in Paris, Turid Eriksen and Grete Lund of the University Library, Oslo, and the librarians of the Central Research Library and the Library for the Performing Arts of the New York Public Library. I am very grateful to Astrid

Sæther, director of the Ibsen Center at the University Library, Oslo, for her generous hospitality. And many thanks to Jarle Bjørklund, director of the Ibsen Museum in Grimstad, Tor Gardåsen, director of the Telemark Folk Museum in Skien and Venstøp, and Gerd Rosander, director of the National Henrik Ibsen Museum in Oslo.

This book could not have been written without the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities of the United States. I am also grateful to the American Scandinavian Foundation and to the Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus, Released Time Committee. I thank the Long Island University administrators who have facilitated my work: David Cohen, Dean of Conolly College of Arts and Sciences, Edward Clark, former President of the Brooklyn Center, and Gale Stevens Haynes, Provost.

I owe special thanks to Rolf Fjelde for his support and encouragement over the years. I also thank Leif Sjøberg and Robert Spector for their encouragement and for writing grant recommendations crucial to this project. Ross Shideler's appreciation of my work has meant a great deal to me. Other friends and colleagues whose support I gratefully acknowledge are Asbjørn Aarseth, Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams, Alma Adcock, Nina and Karsten Alnæs, Roger Asselineau, Kenneth Bernard, Pål Bjørby, Marilyn Johns Blackwell, Marvin Carlson, Jan Dietrichson, George Economou, Irene and Fredrik Engelstad, the late Maurice Gravier, Otto Hageberg, Ellen and Terje Hartmann, Bjørn Hemmer, Margaret Higonnet, Annie Hubert, Esther Hyneman, Irene Iversen, Barry Jacobs, Seymour Kleinberg, John Kronik, Maurice Lévy, Jerome Loving, Terence and Kathleen Malley, Sue Montgomery, Mary Kay Norseng, John Northam, Helge Rønning, Sandra Saari, Mark Sandberg, Howard Silverstein, Steven Sondrup, James Yeldell, and Vigdis Ystad. Special thanks go to my colleague Cynthia Dantzig for the idea for the book-jacket design. My deepest gratitude goes to my good friend and fellow Ibsen enthusiast Thomas Van Laan, who read the manuscript, made valuable suggestions, and saved me from errors. Any that remain are mine. My most essential debt is the one I owe my physicians, Drs. S. Huh, Benjamin Payson, and Bernard Weiss. *Et, finalement, bien que tu ne sois plus là, mon cher Jean-Claude, je te remercie de tout mon cœur.*

Abbreviations

References to works in the Select Bibliography are cited by author or short title in parenthesis. For other works, I give the full citation in a note, and in subsequent references, the name of the author or a short title; in the few cases of widely spaced references, I repeat the full citation. Following is a list of abbreviations for references I employ frequently.

- A Ibsen, Henrik. *The Works of Henrik Ibsen*. Ed. and trans. William Archer. New York: Scribner's, 1917. 13 vols. References to the monographs on Ibsen by Edward Dowden, Edmund Gosse, and James Huneker are to volume 13 of this edition.
- B Brandes, Georg. *Henrik Ibsen and Bjornstjerne Bjørnson*. Trans. Jesse Muir, rev. William Archer. London: Heinemann, 1899.
- BI Ibsen, Bergliot. *The Three Ibsens*. Trans. Gerik Schjelderup. London: Hutchinson, 1951.
- F Fjelde, Rolf. "Introductions." *Ibsen, The Complete Major Prose Plays*. Trans. Fjelde. New York: New American Library, 1978.
- H *Hundreårsutgave. Henrik Ibsens Samlede Verker [Centenary Edition. Henrik Ibsen's Collected Works]*. Ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik Arup Seip. 21 vols. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1928–57.
- K Koht, Halvdan. *Life of Ibsen*. Trans. Einar Haugen and A.E. Santaniello. New York: Blom, 1971.
- LS Ibsen, Henrik. *Letters and Speeches*. Ed. and trans. Evert Sprinchorn. New York: Hill, 1964.
- M Meyer, Michael. *Ibsen*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1971.

- N Northam, John. *Ibsen: A Critical Study*. Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- OI *The Oxford Ibsen*. Ed. James Walter McFarlane and Graham Orton. Trans. McFarlane et. al. 8 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1960–77.
- P Paulsen, John. *Samliv med Ibsen* [*Living with Ibsen*]. 2 vols. Christiania: Gyldendal, 1906, 1913.
- Z Zucker, A.E. *Ibsen the Master Builder*. 1929. New York: Farrar, 1973.

Note on translations

References to Ibsen's plays and prefaces from *Catiline* through *Emperor and Galilean*, except for *Peer Gynt*, are to the first four volumes of *The Oxford Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane and Graham Orton, trans. McFarlane et. al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960–70). The Oxford translations render the frequent dashes in Ibsen's early manuscripts as spaced dots; to avoid confusion, I have regularized the punctuation. References to *Peer Gynt* are to Rolf Fjelde's translation, second edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980). References to Ibsen's plays from *Pillars of Society* through *When We Dead Awaken* are to Fjelde's *Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays* (New York: New American Library, 1978), except for *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*, for which I have used my own translations; references to these two plays are to the original texts in the "Centenary Edition," the *Hundreårsutgave*, ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik Arup Seip, 21 vols. (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1928–57). Unless otherwise noted, translations of Ibsen's poems are mine and references are to the *Hundreårsutgave*.

Translations from Camilla Collett's works are mine; references are to the *Samlede Verker. Mindeudgave* [*Complete Works. Commemorative Edition*]. 3 vols. Christiania: Gyldendal, 1913.

When available, I have used reliable English versions of biographical and critical material; otherwise, all translations are mine.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page	xiii
<i>Preface</i>		xv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>		xix
<i>Note on translations</i>		xxi
1 Roots		1
2 The seminal women of the early career		23
Revising the fatal woman: <i>Catiline's</i> "worser spirit"		23
Moving on: new ingénues, a troll temptress, a woman-centered triangle, and gender		29
3 Love and marriage		40
The Queen of Iceland and her step-mother		40
Love's tragedy: <i>The Vikings at Helgeland</i>		53
<i>Love's Comedy</i> : feminist satire		58
4 Love and the kingdom		74
The feminization of history: <i>The Pretenders</i>		74
Marrying heaven and earth: the his-and-her deities of <i>Brand</i>		80
Troll sex and pure love: Peer Gynt's Manichean theory of woman		90
Julian's "pure woman": a note on <i>Emperor and Galilean</i>		108
5 The poetry of feminism		110
The <i>Doll House</i> backlash		110
Nora's predecessors in art and life		128
The death of chivalry: masculine and feminine in <i>A Doll House</i>		137
6 Mrs. Alving's ghosts		146
7 A new woman and three housewives		163
The doctor's disciples: <i>An Enemy of the People</i>		163
Sense and sensibility: women and men in <i>The Wild Duck</i>		166

8	Taming wild women	181
	The beatification of Rebecca West: <i>Rosmersholm</i>	181
	The acclimatization of Ellida and Bolette Wangel: <i>The Lady from the Sea</i>	194
9	The deviant woman as hero: <i>Hedda Gabler</i>	204
	The unreal woman in the realistic play: Hedda as anomaly	204
	The defective woman: Hedda as type	206
	The author's right to a subject: Hedda's reality	210
	The <i>agents-provocateurs</i>	218
	The closing and the springing of the trap	225
	Hedda's difference	229
10	The glories and dangers of the rejuvenating feminine	233
	May loves of a September life	233
	Beloved nemesis: <i>The Master Builder</i>	263
11	Women who live for love	278
	Rita Allmers' law of change: <i>Little Eyolf</i>	278
	Down among the dead women: <i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>	291
12	The revolt of the muse: <i>When We Dead Awaken</i>	302
	In Conclusion: Ibsen's women and Ibsen's modernism	323
	<i>Notes</i>	336
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	373
	<i>Index</i>	380

Illustrations

1	Marichen Ibsen. Reproduced by kind permission of the Telemark Folk Museum, Venstøp Farmhouse	page 2
2	Water-color by Marichen Ibsen. Reproduced by kind permission of the Telemark Folk Museum, Venstøp Farmhouse	3
3	Hedvig Ibsen. Reproduced by kind permission of the Telemark Folk Museum, Venstøp Farmhouse	6
4	Clara Ebbell. Reproduced by kind permission of the Ibsen House and Grimstad City Museum, Grimstad	19
5	Magdalene Thoresen. Photography Collection, Royal Library, Copenhagen	42
6	Henrik Ibsen at the age of thirty-five. Gyldendal Collection, University Library, Oslo	49
7	Suzannah Ibsen at the age of forty. Gyldendal Collection, University Library, Oslo	50
8	Ragna Wettergreen as Hjørdis of <i>The Vikings at Helgeland</i> . Courtesy of the Theatre Museum, Oslo	56
9	Camilla Collett on the Norwegian 100-kroner note	69
10	Linn Stokke as Solveig of <i>Peer Gynt</i> . Photograph by Frits Solvang. Collection of the National Theatre, Oslo	99
11	Asta Hansteen. Photography Collection, University Library, Oslo	130
12	Liv Ulmann as Nora of <i>A Doll House</i> . Photograph by Friedman-Abeles, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations	144
13	Mrs. Fiske as Mrs. Alving in <i>Ghosts</i> . Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations	153

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 14 | Blanche Yurka as Gina and Helen Chandler as Hedvig in <i>The Wild Duck</i> . Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations | 174 |
| 15 | Eva Le Gallienne as Hedda in <i>Hedda Gabler</i> . Photograph by Chidnoff, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations | 215 |
| 16 | Emilie Bardach. Gyldendal Collection, University Library, Oslo | 258 |
| 17 | Hildur Andersen. Gyldendal Collection, University Library, Oslo | 259 |
| 18 | Henrik Ibsen at the age of fifty-nine. Gyldendal Collection, University Library, Oslo | 260 |
| 19 | Margaret Barker as Aline and Joan Tetzl as Hilda in <i>The Master Builder</i> . Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations | 272 |
| 20 | Katja Medbøe as Rita in <i>Little Eyolf</i> . Photograph by Frits Solvang. Collection of the National Theatre, Oslo | 288 |
| 21 | Wenche Foss as Ella and Ingerid Vardund as Gunhild in <i>John Gabriel Borkman</i> . Photograph by Siggen Stinessen. Collection of the National Theatre, Oslo | 293 |
| 22 | Lise Fjeldstad as Irene in <i>When We Dead Awaken</i> . Photograph by Leif Gabrielsen. Collection of the National Theatre, Oslo | 311 |

CHAPTER 1

Roots

Some turn to brandy, others to lies,
And we – well, we took to fairy tales
Of princes and trolls and strange animals.

Peer Gynt 2:2 (43)

On the wall at Venstøp farmhouse, near the town of Skien, in Norway's Telemark region, hang two water-color landscapes. The artist is identified as "Henrik Ibsen's mother." Marichen Cornelia Martine Altenburg was an avid painter; more important for literary posterity, she was in love with the theatre. She worried her upright parents by attending every performance of the travelling Danish troupes, and by continuing to play with her childhood dolls when she was grown. More outrageous was her ambition to go on the stage. Accompanying herself on the piano, she loved to sing the old Telemark folk songs, performing them so well that people suspected her of a hidden connection with theatre people, a rumor she did nothing to discourage. Marichen Altenburg was small, brunette, and dark-complexioned, and the only existing likeness of her, a silhouette, bears out the tradition that she was beautiful.¹

On December 1, 1825, when she was twenty-six, and he twenty-eight, Marichen Altenburg married Knud Ibsen. There is a strong tradition in Telemark that Marichen loved a man called Tormod Knudsen, but that her family had destined her for Knud Ibsen. Whether this is true or not, the marriage was an excellent family arrangement. Marichen's mother and Knud's step-father were sister and brother, and the bride and groom, who had grown up together, were practically regarded as sister and brother themselves. Marichen Altenburg was a fine catch, the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants in the prosperous lumber town of Skien, where the enterprising Knud Ibsen ran a general store.



1. Silhouette of Marichen Altenburg Ibsen (1799–1869), Ibsen's mother, as a young woman. Artist unknown.



2. One of two surviving water-colors by Marichen Ibsen.

Ten months after her marriage, Marichen Ibsen gave birth to her first child, a boy, and eight months later was pregnant again. Henrik Ibsen's birth, on March 20, 1828, was followed three and a half weeks later by the death of his older brother. During the next seven years, Marichen Ibsen would on the average bear a child every other year, and Henrik would grow up the oldest of five children.

The young Ibsen couple lived very well in "Stockmann House" in the center of Skien, and when Henrik was three years old, they moved up the street to Marichen Ibsen's family home, "Altenburg Manor," where they lived even better. The two-storied house of ten rooms was flanked by outbuildings, including a stable that housed Marichen's and Knud's saddle horses. Knud Ibsen was socially as well as financially ambitious, and to this end "enjoyed dispensing reckless hospitality," as his famous son would later comment to Georg Brandes (*LS* 212). Altenburg Manor was known for its sumptuous dinners and holiday festivities that lasted for days. Knud Ibsen also entertained lavishly with drinking par-