

THE  
WILD DUCK  
AND  
OTHER PLAYS  
HENRIK IBSEN



# *The Wild Duck*

AND OTHER PLAYS BY

HENRIK IBSEN

*Pillars of Society*

*The Wild Duck*

*The Lady from the Sea*

*Little Eyolf*

*John Gabriel Borkman*

*When We Dead Awaken*

*Newly translated, and with an introduction, by*

EVA LE GALLIENNE



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# Introduction

BY EVA LE GALLIENNE

IN A LETTER to Frederik Gjertsen, written in 1872, Ibsen has this to say about translating: "To translate well is a difficult matter. It is not simply a question of rendering the meaning, but also, to a certain extent, of remodeling the expression and the metaphors, of accommodating the outward form to the structure and requirements of the language into which one is translating. . . . The foreign effect which it [the foreign metre] produces on the language acts like a disturbing melody coming between the reader and the sense of what he is reading."

In most of the existing English translations of Ibsen's plays, notably those in the standard edition edited by William Archer and largely translated by him, this "foreign effect" continuously gets in the way. Archer's devotion to Ibsen as an artist made him overconscientious: he clung assiduously to the letter, translating many of the Norwegian idioms so literally that they frequently entirely fail to convey Ibsen's thought; they present a series of stumbling blocks to the reader's mind and of tongue-twisters to the actor. Instead of translating the meaning they confuse and occasionally actually falsify it. This "disturbing melody" has undoubtedly had much to do with the prevalent notion that Ibsen's plays are "difficult" and "obscure." Archer himself seems to have been aware of this, for he wrote in *The Critic* of July 1906:

“What would we think of a man who, knowing no French, should sit down to write a critical study of Victor Hugo? Or who, knowing no German, should take upon himself to weigh Goethe in the balance and find him wanting? Yet this is inevitably the position of nineteen out of twenty critics who deal with the works of Ibsen.”

The style of Archer's translations gives very little hint of the clarity, the powerful economy—what Huneker calls the “dramatic stenography”—of the original. Archer's dialogue is reminiscent of Pinero or Jones, of the conventional stage clichés of the nineties. Archer was after all a Victorian litterateur, whereas Ibsen was an innovator and a genius.

Ibsen's ideas—in themselves so startling that they struck the smug, complacent society of the time with the force of a tidal wave, and revolutionized not only plays and players but the pattern of thought of men and women everywhere—emerge, of course, to a very great extent, in spite of the tempering gentility of Archer's prose; but they seem less savagely alive and at the same time less austere. The great Viking ship, with its clean, eliminated, uncompromising lines, has been muffled under Victorian drapery.

It would be wrong to minimize the immense service Archer performed in introducing Ibsen to the English-speaking world, nor should one minimize the tremendous difficulty of the task he undertook so gallantly.

To translate Ibsen's poetic dramas—particularly *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*—is quite impossible; the rhythm, the very *sound* of the language, is inextricably bound up with the thought, the passion, the satire, the mysticism; it is like the blood pulsing through a body; there is no life without it. The prose plays, on the other hand, particularly the so-called “social plays” that started with *Pillars of Society*, should on the face of it seem easier. And yet one despairs of ever being able to convey that deceptively simple, lucid style—a style from which everything extraneous has been whittled away with a craftsmanship so superb as to be unnoticeable—a style that seems to spring inevitably from the thoughts and

emotions of each character, revealing the essence with a minimum of words. And to make things more difficult, this style, so spare, so frugal, is alive with poetry; and so one begins to feel that to translate Ibsen's prose is impossible tool

It was sheer necessity that made me attempt to translate a few of Ibsen's plays; I wanted to produce them and act in them, and I realized that the existing versions were clumsy, old-fashioned and quite frequently misleading. Also they resisted all efforts on the part of the actor to make them come to life on the stage. They loomed like formidable barriers between the actor and the play. I wanted to try to avoid what Shaw described, in speaking of an English performance of *John Gabriel Borkman*, as ". . . a funereally unreal tradition which is likely to end in making Ibsen the most portentous of stage bores." I felt pretty sure that the Archer translation had contributed a great deal to this impression. So I went back to Ibsen himself and tried to evolve a text that would enable us to bring some truth and life into the plays. At that time there was no question of my translations ever being published; if anyone had raised this point I should probably never have had the temerity to undertake them.

Even though it has been fashionable in recent times in certain critical circles to minimize the importance and originality of Ibsen's ideas—a position that may very easily be challenged—there can surely be no question that his influence on dramatic structure, on the whole concept of playwriting—as well as on methods of acting—was revolutionary.

Ibsen's earlier plays were said to be reminiscent of Oehlenschläger, Schiller, and Wergeland and, though Ibsen was always unwilling to acknowledge the influence of others, it is probable that he—in common with most young poets—reflected in his writing much that he had read and admired. His development was slow, and it took him many years to arrive at a style and a way of thinking that were peculiarly and passionately his own.

He was forty by the time he wrote *Peer Gynt*; and he was

in his fiftieth year when he wrote *Pillars of Society*, the first of the "social plays" which were to make him world famous and which, to the English-speaking world, constitute his most important and familiar work. It is on these plays that the great bulk of English criticism and commentary has been focused. Ibsen was hailed as the chief exponent of the "well-built" play—a term flattering at first but, in recent years, tinged with a somewhat patronizing disdain. Much has been written of Ibsen's great debt to Scribe, and the influence of Hebbel, and even of Dumas fils, has been interminably discussed.

Ibsen himself has given no definite clue, not even the smallest hint, that might pin down any of these conjectures. A young woman said of him during his early Grimstad days when he was a boy in his teens, "He went about Grimstad like an enigma secured with seven seals," and the stage manager of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen described him in 1852 as "a small, close-mouthed Norwegian with wide-awake eyes." "A small, shy woodchuck" was another description of him during his Bergen years. Later on, in the nineties, when he had become "the Great Silent One," such flippancies had grown dignified and he was usually referred to as "the Sphinx of the North." But, flippant or dignified, from first to last in his long life the sense of reserve—of almost pathological secrecy—seems to have been a trait in his nature universally recognized.

There is one influence, however, that—particularly to a worker in the theatre—demands no proof, no corroboration from Ibsen or from anyone else, for it is self-evident. For five years, from 1851 until 1856, he was stage manager and official dramatic poet to the theatre in Bergen; and from 1857 to 1862, for another five years, he was director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (Oslo): ten consecutive years of practical theatre work. What better way for a young playwright to learn his craft! With the exception of Shakespeare and Molière, no other playwright of modern times has had a comparable opportunity.

His duties at Bergen—apart from being the theatre poet

and being obligated to write at least one play a year—seem to have been those of stage manager and assistant director. He was given no real authority and was often contemptuous of the plays presented there. He attended all the rehearsals, marking down positions and stage business; he followed the script, and we are told of his insistence on the actors' keeping strictly to the written text—a fact which no doubt added little to his popularity!

I have examined some of his prompt-copies, preserved at the old Bergen theatre, now a museum, and have often held them up as an example to stage managers of my own, who felt it beneath their dignity to keep their scripts in proper order; but it was not beneath the dignity of a genius to do so.

As official poet Ibsen had the opportunity to see five of his early plays produced in Bergen; of these five only *The Feast at Solhaug* was successful; it was Ibsen's first theatrical triumph, and in answer to the applause, he made a speech in which he said: "Your appreciation shall strengthen me in my work toward the aim for which I am striving, and which *I shall attain.*" And we are told he laid peculiar stress upon the final words.

In Christiania, Ibsen was given full authority as director, but only two of his own plays were presented there—*Lady Inger of Östraat* and *The Vikings at Helgeland*. These five years were full of struggle and discouragement. He tried in vain to raise the level of the plays, as well as of the acting and productions; but his attempts ended in failure and in 1862 the theatre was forced to close. Yet in spite of the defeat of Ibsen's program, which filled him with a bitter sense of humiliation, an invaluable groundwork had been laid in these ten years for the work that lay ahead. One can be sure that nothing escaped those "wide-awake" eyes of his.

The art of the theatre must be practiced; no amount of theory or speculation can take the place of actually being a part of the work itself. The constant daily closeness to the actors; the opportunity to watch night after night the reaction of the audiences; the incessant planning of stage busi-



ness and scenic effects—no wonder that Ibsen's craftsmanship became superlative. Even if other influences existed, they could only be incidental compared to this.

The word "realism" is closely connected with Henrik Ibsen. But he was realistic in the sense that a great painter might be called realistic: he did not agree with what he called "photographic art." He resented being classed with such a realist as Zola, for instance, of whom he said: "Zola goes down into the sewer to take a bath; I, in order to cleanse it." Halvdan Koht in his excellent *Life of Ibsen* very rightly says: "He resembled Flaubert more than he did Zola. He was a romanticist who had become realist—a man who thought romantically, but wrote realistically. He did not wish—did not even wish to seem—merely to study society in all the forms and consequences of vice and lust. The thing which filled his mind was the individual man, and he measured the worth of a community according as it helped or hindered a man in being himself. He had an ideal standard which he placed upon the community, and it was from this measuring that his social criticism proceeded."

The most important difference between Ibsen's plays and the theatre-pieces that preceded them was the light they cast on the inner, secret lives of the characters presented in them. The effects he created were not dependent—or very little—on ordinary dramatic action. They were dramas of the mind, of the spirit. Most of the action had already taken place before the rise of the curtain, and the drama lay in the effect of this action, the results of it, the response to it. Ibsen's plays remind one of an iceberg: the greater part of it lies hidden beneath the surface. This is the quality above all others that presents such a challenge to the actor; external virtuosity is not enough; his plays demand a subtler, far more delicate technique. One might almost say that the most important part of the actor's performance lies in what is not said; it can never be a question of mere words and gestures—the inner content is what counts. From start to finish of the play the actor must sustain a consistent, unbroken line

of thought. Ibsen demands of his interpreters the most absolute concentration, and he demands it of his audiences too. He must have agreed with the words embossed in gold letters above the proscenium arch of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen: "*Ej blot til Lyst*"—"Not only for amusement." To him the theatre was a place of truth, of ruthless analysis: a place where the minds and souls of human beings were revealed with an honesty that sometimes seems unbearably harsh, and with a perception that is uncannily clairvoyant. If people find his plays "difficult" and "obscure," the fault lies with them, not with Ibsen. His meaning, even in his later plays with their slant toward mysticism, is never blurred or devious—only one must listen and observe. Then the reward is very great. But one must not expect compromise from Ibsen, and he makes no concessions. As Huneker says: "It is his aloofness that his audiences resent most of all." Ibsen did not write to please.

It is not surprising that most of the Ibsen pioneers have been women; in nearly every country they were the first to introduce his plays. In England it was Janet Achurch and Elizabeth Robins; in America, Modjeska and Mrs. Fiske; in France, Réjane; in Italy, Duse. A great actress once thanked Ibsen for creating such wonderful roles for women, to which he angrily replied: "I have never created roles. I have written of human beings and human destinies." But the fact remains, whether he liked it or not, that to a great actress the Ibsen repertoire is as stimulating and rewarding as the Shakespearian repertoire is to a great actor. The range and variety of his portraits of women are incomparable. His grasp of the intricacies of female psychology is miraculous. Especially in his later plays, when more and more he dealt with the hidden subconscious forces of human beings, he became increasingly absorbed in his studies of the feminine mind. It was perhaps the poet in him that gave him such a sensitive understanding of the mysterious invisible life of these women he portrayed—so mercilessly and yet so delicately. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

once used the expression "we women and poets," and Ibsen might well have used it too. It was indeed as if he had the power to transmute himself, and in his imagination actually to become these women of whom he wrote, so intimate and so accurate in every smallest detail is his knowledge of them.

The women of the Sagas, with their wild, deep natures, had always held a great fascination for him; and something of their sharply individual, fearless spirit—warm and strong at the same time—undoubtedly crept into many of the women in Ibsen's plays; they are a combination of ice and flame. And the woman he married, Susannah Thoresen, was, according to Halvdan Koht, "the embodiment of Saga womanhood."

It is probably this quality of fearless individualism that makes the Ibsen women seem so strange, even distasteful, to many people. Such a monument of hypocrisy, such comfortable fallacies have been built up about women, particularly in plays and novels. In most fiction—especially when Ibsen's plays first made their appearance—women were either blondly good or darkly bad. But to treat a woman as a rounded human being capable at once of courage and cowardice, tenderness and cruelty, honesty and deceit, self-sacrifice and merciless rapacity—in short as a creature whose being was torn by the torments of spiritual as well as of emotional conflict—was startling in the extreme. No wonder these plays have such appeal to women on both sides of the footlights. Here is a man who sees them as they really are; he never spares them, yet he understands them; and by focusing on them the light of uncompromising honesty, he accepts them as man's equal.

Not that Ibsen's plays are exclusively—or even preponderantly—concerned with women; his gallery of men is equally impressive. But, with Ibsen, woman was for the first time allowed to dominate the stage as a full-fledged individual—interesting and complete in herself, quite apart from the men with whom she shared the action; and to the Victorian mind, this must have seemed shocking and unseemly.

One critic described Ibsen's women as ". . . without affection, an unlovable, unlovely and detestable crew"; and another one dismissed them pompously as a lot of "crazed, hysterical geese."

*Pillars of Society* was published in 1877 and met with great popular success. As William Archer says, "The theatrical success of *Pillars of Society* was immediate and striking."

It was the first of the so-called "social" plays. Several years had elapsed between *Emperor and Galilean* (frequently referred to by Ibsen as his most important work) and this first attempt at a "well-made" theatre-piece.

Of all Ibsen's plays *Pillars of Society* seems to us the most old-fashioned. While the plot is ingenious and cleverly worked out, the mechanics are all too obvious. The "happy ending" (rare in Ibsen's plays) is flat and conventional. The sense of "truth will out, right must prevail" is also rare in Ibsen's work. Did he, for once, deliberately try to write a popular hit? If so, he succeeded. Perhaps the play's near-banality contributed to its popular appeal. There was nothing to shock and infuriate; it blazed no new trails; it traveled a familiar road; nothing in it soared above the commonplace. As Ibsen himself expressed it, "The ghost of the excellent Scribe still walked in him."

And yet, in spite of its shortcomings, as Professor Weigand says, "*Pillars of Society* has nevertheless stampeded countless intelligent audiences to wild applause, and even today it can count, whenever well staged, upon an enthusiastic reception."

Of course, when one considers the majority of plays written in the '70's, *Pillars of Society* presents many innovations: there are no "asides," no stilted soliloquies; and the characters, who seem shallow and conventional when compared with those in Ibsen's subsequent plays, are infinitely more alive and human than the lay figures to which the public was then accustomed. And what a boon they must have been to the actors of the period!

Its success is not surprising, for there is something highly engaging about the play. In spite of the virulence of its attack on the shams and hypocrisy of society, it manages to create a good-natured atmosphere. The structure of the play is so blatantly artificial and contrived that one cannot take the violence of this attack too seriously. It is fun to watch the "good" characters triumph in the end. It is fun to laugh at the "virtuous ladies," and to see the ridiculous schoolmaster robbed of his prey. Of all Ibsen's plays this is surely the least "Ibsenesque"!

And yet we see numerous indications of future plays in *Pillars of Society*; and in it we find preliminary sketches of characters to be met with in later works, developed and transformed into fully-rounded complex human beings.

Ibsen's loathing of the smugness and self-righteousness that marked the provincial society of his time—particularly of the greed of officials, and the hypocrisy of "leading citizens"—is expressed in several of his plays. In *An Enemy of the People* he uses it as his main theme, but in almost all his works he contrives to satirize and ridicule these evils, even by means of minor characters, as in the "chamberlains" in the first act of *The Wild Duck*. In *Pillars of Society*, too, this is the main theme of his argument (in fact this play and *An Enemy of the People* have much in common, though the later work is infinitely superior) but he touches on many other themes as well. Ibsen felt that this provincial society was completely dominated by the male ego—was a "society of bachelors," a man-made world in which woman was relegated to a subservient position, robbed of her freedom, and of all opportunity to develop a personality of her own. This thought led directly to *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*—the plays immediately following *Pillars of Society*—in which Nora and Mrs. Alving both rebel against man-made laws and conventions. Ibsen was not a "feminist" in the ordinary sense of the word, and almost certainly did not believe in "votes for women"; but he did believe that women were equal to men in the sense of being human beings, and that they should be free to develop

their own individuality, and become people in their own right.

In *Pillars of Society* Lona Hessel strongly represents this point of view, and Dina Dorf has in her elements of Nora and—though faintly—of Hilde Wangel too. Hilde might well exclaim as Dina does: "How I hate all this respectability! . . . I don't understand all this business about duty—I never could." While Dina's lines to Johan after consenting to become his wife: "But first I must work; make something of myself; become a real person, just as you are," are repeated almost word for word by Nora in her famous last-act scene, when she tells Helmer: "I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as you are—or at least that I should try and become one."

Bernick's insufferable contempt for his wife: "My dear Betty, the situation was far too complex for you to grasp." . . . "It can't possibly interest you, my dear Betty." . . . "And as for our good women—come closer, ladies, this is for your ears . . ." etc., reminds one of Helmer, Hjalmar Ekdal, Kroll, and innumerable other Ibsen men of this same type. The attitude reaches a peak in Borkman's remark in that incomparable later play *John Gabriel Borkman*: "My dear Ella, if the worst comes to the worst, one woman can always take the place of another." In fact there is much in Bernick that anticipates—though in a tentative way—the great "sick wolf" of this play written nearly twenty years later. But where we believe Borkman to be indeed a fallen Titan, a man whose vision and ambitions truly transcended all thought of personal gain ("I dreamed of exploiting all the sources of power throughout the country. I wanted to become master of all the wealth that lay hidden in the earth, in the mountains, the forests and the sea; so that, through me, it might benefit the lives of countless thousands." And again: ". . . spreading friendship and understanding—bringing light and warmth to thousands of homes. That's what I dreamed of doing!"), we see in Bernick only a selfish, grasping opportunist, in spite of the fact that he never stops re-

iterating that his scheme will result in "a permanent asset to the whole community and to the many thousands of workers whose well-being will depend on it." In *Pillars of Society* Ibsen also introduces the theme, developed so poignantly in *John Gabriel Borkman*, of the woman deserted by the man she loves and who supposedly loves her, for the sake of worldly gain. It is interesting to compare the scene between Lona and Bernick in Act II of *Pillars of Society* with the marvelous second-act scene in *John Gabriel Borkman* between Ella and Borkman. In both these scenes the woman accuses the man of having sold her love for money and for power. But what a difference twenty years have made in Ibsen's handling of the situation! The germ of the scene is clearly detected in the earlier play, but, compared with Borkman, Bernick seems hollow and unreal. One cannot conceive of Borkman, for instance, making the incredible *volte-face* that Bernick makes in the last ten minutes of the play. Borkman is too powerfully consistent; he is "John Gabriel Borkman—myself, and not another." Bernick's sudden reformation means nothing to us; we simply do not believe in it. It is just a means to a cozy, happy ending, and we can only hope that all those nice women are not totally taken in by it.

In Lona Hessel—a fine part for an actress (one can see why Mrs. Fiske made such a success in it)—Ibsen gives us the female and beneficent side of the medal of which, in *The Wild Duck*, Gregers Werle is the male and evil side: a fanatic zealot for the truth, a person who has no fear of disrupting someone else's life in order to, as Lona says, "put firm ground under your feet." The victim—in both plays—struggles frantically, but there is no escape. Both Lona and Gregers are inexorably bent on doing good to the soul of the person they profess to and, in fact, do love. Since *Pillars of Society* is a contrived theatre-piece, the well-meaning meddler is successful and Bernick and the other characters intimately involved in his confession are filled with happy gratitude. In *The Wild Duck*, however, Ibsen takes a directly opposite point of view, and shows the meddler Gregers Werle—also well

meaning in his misguided way—as a miserable failure who sows the seeds of destruction in his own and other people's lives, and is the direct cause of little Hedvig's suicide.

*Pillars of Society* is very long, and at times redundant. Karsten's speech to Lona in Act II, for instance, telling her of the critical situation in which he found his mother's business affairs, is almost exactly repeated in Act III—though he is speaking to the same person. In Ibsen's later plays it is almost impossible to make the slightest cut, they are so closely packed, so telling in their strict economy, but many places in *Pillars of Society* can benefit by pruning in performance.

Like many other great artists, Ibsen learned to whittle away everything unnecessary, to strip down to the essential, to the clean, firm line, without ever sacrificing richness of content, or creating a sense of sparseness. The last four plays he wrote, *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*, are all extremely short. Yet the characters are so superbly drawn—so vividly alive—that we know the life history of every one of them, and understand them fully in all their complexity, whereas the people in *Pillars of Society* are more "parts" than human beings; they are puppets used by Ibsen to advance the action, or to provide the "comic relief" in which the play abounds. The "virtuous ladies," the businessmen, the priggish schoolmaster are all "stock" types. We have met them—and will probably continue to meet them—in many a theatre-piece. As Archer rightly says: ". . . even Lona Hessel is an intellectual construction—formed of a blend of new theory with old sentiment—rather than an absolute creation, a living and breathing woman."

Yet how rapidly Ibsen learned to conceal his craftsmanship. We have only to compare the crudeness of exposition in *Pillars of Society*—the old-fashioned device by which the gossiping ladies reveal to the audience the background of the play's principal characters just prior to their appearance—with the subtle way in which in *Ghosts*, written only four years later, Ibsen reveals the events of the past twenty



years that have led so inevitably to the situation with which the play specifically deals.

In spite of its many faults, there is no doubt that *Pillars of Society*, if well acted and produced, could still provide an entertaining evening in the theatre. The ingredients that contributed to its popularity have lost none of their power to please. Had it not been written by Henrik Ibsen we might judge it less harshly.

Between *Pillars of Society* and *The Wild Duck* Ibsen wrote two of his most controversial plays, *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881). They aroused, in public and critics alike, a veritable storm of indignation. Ibsen was accused of trying to undermine "the sacred ties of marriage." As Huneker wrote of Nora, "That slammed door reverberated across the roof of the world." As for *Ghosts*, William Archer tells us it inspired a "frenzy of execration." Clement Scott, one of the leading English critics, described it as "an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, a lazaret-house with all its doors and windows open." These two plays established Ibsen in the Victorian Age as a dangerously immoral writer. The reputation still, surprisingly enough, clings to him in certain circles.

In retaliation against the mass of hypocritical nonsense and abuse that had been showered upon *Ghosts*—even by the so-called "Liberals" from whom Ibsen had expected support—Ibsen wrote his "merry comedy" *An Enemy of the People* (1882), in which he heaped contempt and ridicule on the liberal newspapers through his hilarious caricatures of the editor, reporter, and printer of *The People's Monitor*. In June 1884 Ibsen wrote to his friend Theodor Caspari: "All this winter I've been revolving some new crazy fancies [*Galskaber* in the original, an almost untranslatable expression] in my brain; I went on doing it until they assumed dramatic form; and now I have just completed a play in five acts—that is to say, the rough draft of it; now comes the