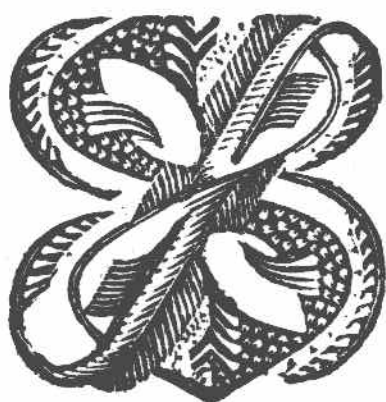


A DOLL'S HOUSE:
AND TWO OTHER PLAYS



HENRIK IBSEN

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THE DRAMA

A DOLL'S HOUSE & OTHER PLAYS
BY HENRIK IBSEN · TRANSLATED BY
R. FARQUHARSON SHARP & ELEANOR
MARX-AVELING

HENRIK IBSEN, born at Skien, Norway, on 20th March 1828. Obtained work in connection with theatres in Bergen and Christiania. Left Norway in 1864 and lived abroad—mostly in Germany—returning to Norway in 1901. Died at Christiania on 23rd May 1906.

INTRODUCTION

HENRIK IBSEN was born, on 20th March 1828, at Skien, a small Norwegian town which concerned itself solely with the timber trade. About eight years later his father's means, which had originally been easy, were suddenly and disastrously reduced. The family had to remove to humbler quarters and live in a very small way, and thus the boy had an early initiation into the privation that was to be his lot in life for many years. One of his few pleasures in these early days was the possession, which was allowed to him undisturbed, of an attic in his father's house. Here he could rummage at will, we are told by Mr. Gosse, amongst "some dreary old books, amongst others Harrison's folio *History of the City of London*, as well as a paint-box, an hour-glass, and an extinct eight-day clock, properties which were faithfully introduced, half a century later, into *The Wild Duck*."

As a youth, Ibsen displayed some talent for painting, and, when he left school at fifteen, was anxious to be an artist. But poverty forbade, and for five years he was apprenticed to an apothecary. By the end of that time his literary gifts had begun to assert themselves, and his soul, stirred by the revolutionary wave that was spreading over Europe, unburdened itself in poetry. It was not long before the irksomeness of life in a small country town became insupportable by one who had ambitions, and in 1850 Ibsen managed to get to Christiania, where he eked out an existence by humble journalistic work. He had taken with him to Christiania a three-act blank verse tragedy, *Catilina*, which was published (under a pseudonym) in 1850 and fell

still-born from the press. The efforts of friends, however, procured him an appointment as "stage-poet" to the Bergen theatre; and after five years there (during which time one or two immature plays of his own were performed) he returned to Christiania to be "artistic director" of the new Norwegian theatre that had been established in rivalry with the old house. Except for the fact that his duties brought him some valuable experience of the technical side of the drama, the Christiania venture was disastrous to him. Ill luck and rebuffs pursued him; his theatre went bankrupt; and he was driven often back upon his painting to earn the price of a meal. Eventually he was forced to accept an offer of employment at the old theatre. He made repeated efforts to obtain a civil-list pension, but this was for a long time refused him, owing to the soreness produced in official quarters by the freedom with which Ibsen had, in his writings, satirised officialdom.

Having, by his uncompromising independence of temperament, made Norway too hot to hold him, Ibsen became a voluntary exile in 1864, and did not return to his own country (save for two brief visits) till some five and twenty years afterwards. The first four of these years were spent in Italy, the others mainly in Germany. The effect of a wider life was not long in making itself evident. From Italy *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, two magnificent "dramatic poems," came in successive years to astonish Ibsen's compatriots and make him famous. The long demanded pension could no longer be withheld, and Ibsen's time of penury was over. In 1877 he began to write the series of prose plays on which his wider reputation rests, the last of them being published in 1900, when their author was an old man of seventy-two.

Ibsen returned to his own people in 1891 and settled in Christiania. Returning with a European reputation, he somewhat grimly enjoyed the hero-worship showered upon him by a people who had formerly made an outcast of him.

In 1898 his seventieth birthday was celebrated with enthusiastic honours, and in the following year a statue of him was erected outside the Christiania theatre. When he died, after a long illness, in May 1906, he was accorded a public funeral.

A Doll's House (*Et Dukkehjem*), the earliest of Ibsen's "social dramas," was the first of his works to compel attention outside of Scandinavia. His reputation at home had gradually grown through a series of romantic and historical plays of less eventual importance, and had been sealed by the immense success of his *Brand*, which was published in 1866. From that point in his career, his work took mainly the form of political or social satire, for which he found an abundance of themes in the narrow and self-satisfied provincialism of Norwegian town-life. *A Doll's House* was written in 1879, when Ibsen was fifty-one, and published in December of that year. Shortly afterwards it was acted in Copenhagen. It was first seen in London in 1889, and in Paris in 1894; subsequently it has been widely translated, and the part of Nora (its heroine) has been included in the repertory of more than one world-famous actress.

The theme of the play, with its insistence on the woman's right to individual self-development, provoked a storm of discussion, and, in many quarters, an outpouring of violent abuse. The latter was possibly a good deal due to the fact that in this play (as, afterwards, in *Ghosts*) Ibsen seems unable to keep away from the topic of disease in its hereditary aspect. In *A Doll's House*, however, the topic is by no means essential to the scheme of the play as it is in *Ghosts*. The subject of *A Doll's House*—the awakening to the sense of individual responsibility on the part of a woman who has always been treated as a spoilt child—was of itself sufficient matter for any amount of discussion. Whether Nora acted rightly or wrongly, naturally or unnaturally, in leaving husband, home and children in order to develop her own

“individuality”; whether her casting herself adrift was indispensable to her development—all this was hotly debated. Though it may seem to some that, in his statement of the case, Ibsen thinks too much of a woman’s rights and too little of her duties, it must be borne in mind that in all his “social plays” he contented himself with stating problems as they appeared to him, and did not attempt to answer them. His reply to those who accused him of a merely destructive philosophy was that his task, as he conceived it, was to point out the weaknesses of the social fabric, and to leave constructive philosophy to those who were not dramatists. He diagnosed, and left the cure to others. Moreover, however sound or unsound his theory of Nora’s action may seem to us, it must be remembered to his credit that Ibsen, in spite of his enthusiastic advocacy of a woman’s right to the development of her own individuality, would never give any countenance to the self-styled “emancipated” woman. He had no patience with those whose idea of self-development seems to consist chiefly in the abandonment of the sphere in which woman is pre-eminent and the invasion of spheres for which she is organically unsuited. Women, he used to maintain, must inevitably in the future have an immense influence in the practical world; but as mothers, and as mothers only.

In the matter of technique, *A Doll’s House* marks a turning-point in the history of European drama. Twenty years have made us so accustomed to the results of the revolution worked by Ibsen’s dramatic method, that it is not easy to realise how complete the revolution was. Naturalness of dialogue and situation; adherence to the “unities” of time and place; the disappearance of such artificialities as the soliloquy; the avoidance of a happy ending when such an outcome is illogical—all this has become so familiar to us, and so inevitably a condition of any drama to be written nowadays, that we are apt to forget that the change dates from the year when an enthusiastic band of pioneers

gave the first performance of *A Doll's House* outside of Scandinavia.

The Wild Duck (*Vildanden*), which was published in 1884 and first acted early in 1885, represents a different mental attitude on Ibsen's part. In the five years which had elapsed since the appearance of *A Doll's House*, the controversy which that play had aroused had been intensified a hundred-fold by *Ghosts*, which followed it. Ibsen was the target for the fiercest attacks from his own people, to whom in retort he sent *An Enemy of the People*, a play charged with a mordant satire that added fuel to the flames. *The Wild Duck* seems to have been written in a condition of mental reaction after the heat of battle, when Ibsen was able to appreciate the irony of the situation. The play is, in effect, substantially a satire on some of his most fervently expressed theories, and, incidentally, of the "Ibsenites." The character of Gregers Werle satirises the unthinking reformers who would enforce an unpractical ideal of absolute sincerity and truthfulness. In his obedience to the "demand of the ideal," Gregers brings about a misery which ends in tragedy. A truthfulness that admits of no compromise wrecks a family's peace; insistence on the beauty of self-sacrifice leads to the suicide of a young and innocent life. In the end the reformer is confronted with the hard fact that, in this world, the ideal and the practical often can only be reconciled by compromise, and that the well-meaning busybody is responsible for a deal of mischief. It can scarcely be doubted that there are, in the exposition of Gregers' character, many sly hits at Ibsen himself and his usually uncompromising philosophy of life. Even such details as Gregers' unfortunate attempt to "do everything for himself" in his room, suggest some of the author's idiosyncrasies. Ibsen used to insist on sewing on his own buttons when they came off his clothes, maintaining that women could not sew them on firmly. (His wife, however, divulged the fact that she used to go surreptitiously to his

room when he had done, and "finish them off"—a process, very necessary to the durability of the sewing, that he usually forgot!) On one occasion he considerably startled a friend of his, late in life, by asking him suddenly whether he blacked his own boots.

The whole trend of *The Wild Duck* suggests that the storm of controversy that had raged round *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* had awakened Ibsen to the inevitableness of compromise in daily existence, if disaster is to be averted. In technical skill the play is his masterpiece; indeed, it would be difficult to name any modern drama that is its superior in construction, characterisation, and absolute naturalness and aptness of dialogue. The skill with which, as the play progresses, the audience is made aware, little by little, of the tragedy that is past before the play opens, is the more striking the more it is examined; and it is accomplished without any sacrifice of probability in action or speech. The only weak point in the play lies in the "symbolism" of the *Wild Duck* itself. Symbolism, especially when it descends to detail, is usually a mistake in the acted drama, and in this case its purport is too vague for it to be of any value. It is by no means clear which of the characters the *Wild Duck* is meant to symbolise; moreover, the symbolism is not essential to the development of the play, which would be the only justification for its use.

A more general and less detailed symbolism may produce a dramatic effect in the way of general "atmosphere," as it does to some extent (though, again, by no means as an indispensable ingredient) in the third play in this collection. *The Lady from the Sea* (*Fruen fra Havet*) was only published in 1888, but had been planned long before *The Wild Duck*, a fact which may explain its inferiority to that play in dramatic quality. It is not of the same stuff as Ibsen's "social dramas." It is a mixture of psychology and poetic fancy surrounding one of Ibsen's haunting principles—that an action is only valuable and reasonable if it be the spon-

taneous outcome of the individual will. The "Lady from the Sea's" shadowy sense of the attraction of the sea, coupled with the incident of the half-betrothal to the mysterious "Stranger" and her temporary infatuation to leave her husband for him, are really only embroideries round the theme of the play. That theme is the psychological development of an idle woman who has nothing particular to occupy her life. She frets at the restrictions of wifely duty upon which her husband would insist; until, when he realises the situation sufficiently to remove his restrictions, and the idea of compulsion is gone, the woman's mental attitude correspondingly alters. She now finds no attraction in forbidden fruit, and a strong attraction in her obvious duty.

The translation of *The Lady from the Sea* is that of Mrs. Marx-Aveling; for those of *A Doll's House* and *The Wild Duck* I am responsible.

R. FARQUHARSON SHARP.

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A DOLL'S HOUSE

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Torvald Helmer.

Nora, his wife.

Doctor Rank.

Mrs. Linde.

Nils Krogstad.

Helmer's three young children.

Anne, their nurse.

A Housemaid.

A Porter.

(The action takes place in Helmer's house.)