

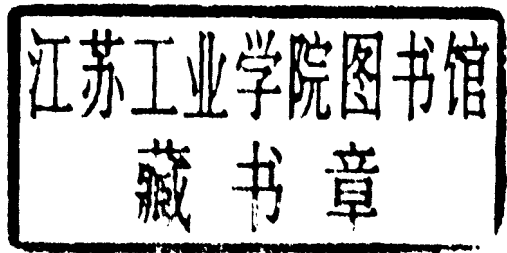
Ibsen's women

Joan Templeton

IBSEN'S WOMEN

JOAN TEMPLETON

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This is the first comprehensive study of the women in Ibsen's plays. It provides a close reading of the texts and a reexamination of the critical tradition on Ibsen's women, including the much-debated question of the playwright's relation to feminism. Templeton traces patterns of gender throughout Ibsen's work, analyzing the women of the lesser-known early plays, from *Catiline* through *Love's Comedy*, as precursors of later, famous women like Nora Helmer of *A Doll House* and Hedda Gabler. Templeton also reexamines how the women in Ibsen's life influenced the women in the plays, and offers new information on and a new reading of Ibsen's relation with the young women of his later years. The book contains photographs of important women in Ibsen's life as well as of prominent actresses in the major roles.

IBSEN'S WOMEN

*For my students in Brooklyn and France, who have taught
me much*

The glory of Ibsen is that he refused to make certain fatal separations. He refused to separate the individual from the collective, the personal from the social.

Eric Bentley *In Search of Theatre*

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.

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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, 1962–70). 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.

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