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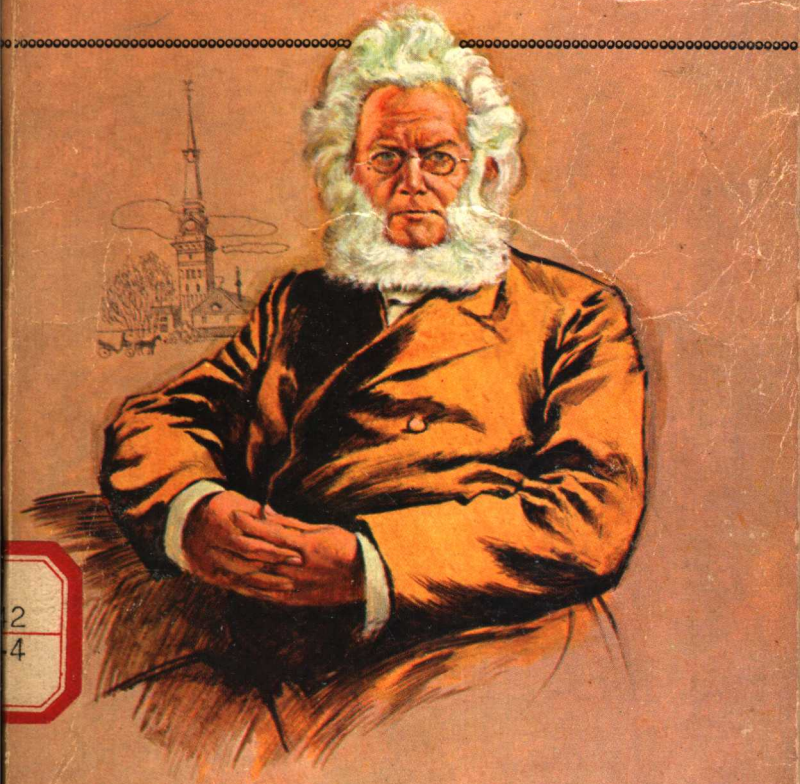
HENRIK IBSEN

FOUR MAJOR PLAYS

A Doll's House, The Wild Duck
Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder



Introduction by John Grube

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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MAJOR PLAYS

A DOLL'S HOUSE,
THE WILD DUCK, HEDDA GABLER,
and
THE MASTER BUILDER

HENRIK IBSEN

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CONTENTS

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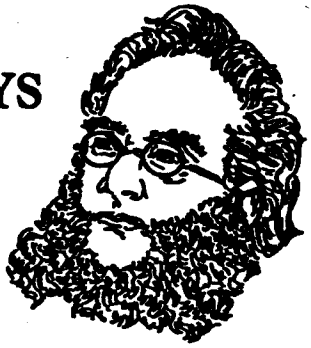

HENRIK IBSEN

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) holds a very key position in the history of European drama. The golden age of the theatre—Shakespeare in England, Calderon in Spain, and Racine in France—was barely a memory at the beginning of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the theatres were full—but they played melodramas and farces; on the other, the great creative artists of the century, Shelley, Byron, and later Tennyson and Browning, tried their hand at drama only to find that what they had written was unactable "closet drama," better read at home in the privacy of the study. Theatre is a communal art. The dramatist must be able to evoke a collective response from a live audience. It was partly due to the influence of the romantic movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the great gap between popular melodrama and "highbrow" art had arisen, since the romantic writers laid particular emphasis on the individual and his personal experiences rather than on the individual as a member of his community. Personal spiritual experiences make better poems than plays.

Ibsen changed all that by introducing real people in real situations, by tackling the political and social issues of the day, and by changing with some regret from poetry to prose. Bernard Shaw in England grasped the possibilities of these

innovations almost immediately and generously acknowledged his debt to Ibsen, as did Chekhov in Russia. Other writers followed suit. The current "realistic" vogue in British and American drama of our own time thus owes much to Ibsen in the freedom with which it is able to treat any area of human activity, even if the subject matter or the problem treated appears at first as sordid.

Ibsen had several very real problems as a writer to face before he produced the masterpieces upon which his subsequent international reputation has depended. First, he suffered the grinding poverty and lack of public recognition common to the beginning writer of all periods. Second, he was himself steeped in the Romantic tradition—his early plays such as *Peer Gynt* have the richness and fantasy but also the lack of "realism" that goes with this tradition—and it was many years before he was able to write the stark everyday language that good prose drama requires. Finally, the Norwegian language itself was in a difficult period of transition. Norway was in the process of liberating itself from centuries of physical and cultural domination by Denmark and Sweden. The language, full of pithy folk idiom, had to be turned into a "literary" language fit for novels, plays, and other forms of literature in much the same way that English was turned into a literary language in Elizabethan days. Of all these problems Ibsen was painfully aware, and aware, too, of the rôle he personally had to play in all these changes.

A Doll's House presents us with a marriage in which the husband, Torvald, expects his wife Nora not only to be a good wife, mother, and housekeeper, but also an eternally childish "baby doll." In order to pay for a medically required trip abroad for her husband, Nora had forged her father's signature to a promissory note. When this act comes to light, Torvald does not reward her loyalty with love, but reproaches her for her "sin," declaring that she is unfit to be the mother of his children. This is the moment of enlightenment for Nora. She suddenly understands that the married life she has been leading rests on false assumptions, that her husband is unwilling to be married to a mature, adult woman. It has been said that the door she slammed as she walked out

re-echoed through Europe, and it is true that this is the first European play to present the predicament of the modern woman refusing to be the "shrinking violet" and the "weaker sex" contemporary society demanded. The rôle of Nora has been a challenge to great actresses since its first performance. The dynamic rôle of the female in many plays of Bernard Shaw, such as *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, or even *Saint Joan*, may be said to spring from the same insights concerning the "new woman" just emerging onto the European scene.

The Wild Duck shows us the family of Hjalmar Ekdal barely struggling along financially but sustained by a day-dream world in which Hjalmar becomes a famous inventor and his old father regains the military prestige of his youth. Their family pet is a wild duck, wounded but loved and kept alive in the attic. Into this ménage intrudes the rigorous idealist, Gregers, presenting "the demand of the ideal," insisting that all tell the truth and "face reality." He reveals to Hjalmar that his beloved daughter is illegitimate, and tells the daughter that she must kill the wild duck since it is a symbol of the fantasy in which the family is enwrapped. She does so—and kills herself as well. Gregers' chief opposition is, significantly enough, the medical doctor, Relling, who knows perfectly well that most people are sustained through life by illusions, in most cases quite harmless. It is probable that Relling represents Ibsen's own views on the subject of idealism and the mischief it can do when insisting on some "system," political or religious, that is quite at variance with the facts of human nature.

The title rôle of *Hedda Gabler* is another female part, like that of Nora in *A Doll's House*, that offers a great challenge to even the most accomplished actress. Hedda is a beautiful young woman endowed with overpowering physical energy and almost no moral sense. She is a portrait of the female as predator. Married to a college professor with a newly minted German Ph.D., she rapidly tires of the academic life and begins to flirt with her former admirers. Concerned that a rival professor is about to publish a treatise that will threaten her husband's position (and academic posts were much harder to obtain then than now), she undertakes to destroy

the manuscript with a ruthlessness that opens his eyes to her real nature. Essentially she is a Brunhilde trapped in a *petit bourgeois* world—and she ends up shooting herself with her father's hunting rifle, unable to stand the *ennui* of middle-class life. This remarkable portrait owes a good deal to the vitalizing influence of Nietszche's philosophy on Ibsen's view of personality and society.

The Master Builder, one of Ibsen's last and greatest plays, reverts to the more symbolic method of composition seen in *The Wild Duck*. The hero, Solness, had built churches in his youth, but more recently has occupied himself with the more practical goal of building good houses for people to live in. Challenged by a young girl who has recently arrived on the scene, he adds a tower to his own new house, and, when it is completed, climbs to the top to put on it a wreath—a traditional custom in Scandinavia. He is a man of advancing years, worried about the challenge of "youth" and fighting to retain ascendancy over his employees. In some degree this must be seen as symbolic: the tower, particularly in association with an attractive girl, may be seen as a phallic image representing his desire to recapture the potency of his youth. It is possible, too, that Ibsen saw himself as a "master builder" in literature, challenged by the young writers arising in Norway and elsewhere. At the surface level, the play has been described as the story of "an elderly architect who falls off his scaffold while trying to show off before a young lady." Yet the reverberating symbolic levels which are also present give *The Master Builder* a depth and importance audiences have recognized since its first production.

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, the son of a man who had once been wealthy but was now living in genteel poverty. At sixteen, he was apprenticed to an apothecary. By the age of twenty-three, he had already written some fine poetry and had obtained a theatrical post in Bergen. After eighteen solid years of unsuccessful attempts to earn a living by his pen, he was finally granted a small pension by the government and went into voluntary "exile" in Germany and Italy, not to return to his native land to live until 1891. His early years, however harsh and embittering, gave him vital material for his later plays: the penny-

pinching, the meanness, the shabby genteel pretension of middle-class life that he himself had found so constricting in Bergen and Oslo. He was fortunate in his choice of a loyal and thrifty wife.

Gradually his plays began to produce both recognition and financial reward. His later life is without external incident, except for the accumulating honors bestowed on him as his plays succeeded in Norway, Germany, England, and even the United States. But his inner life grew more intense, and more solitary. He had abandoned the facile nationalism of his youth as delusive and now viewed the encroaching power of the state with some reserve. In a letter to his friend and disciple Brandes, he offered a far more radical solution than was then (1871) customary:

> The state must be abolished! In that revolution I will take part. Undermine the idea of the state; make willingness and spiritual kinship the only essentials in the case of a union—and you have the beginning of a liberty that is of some value.

JOHN GRUBE
University of New Brunswick in Saint John, Canada.

A DOLL'S HOUSE
(1879)

CHARACTERS

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.*

ACT I

SCENE.—*A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance hall, another to the left leads to* HELMER'S *study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small book-case with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.*

A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open. Enter NORA, *humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in out-door dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a* PORTER *who is carrying a Christmas Tree and a basket, which he gives to the* MAID *who has opened the door.*

NORA: Hide the Christmas Tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it till this evening, when it is dressed. (*To the* PORTER, *taking out her purse.*) How much?

PORTER: Sixpence.

NORA: There is a shilling. No, keep the change. (*The* PORTER *thanks her, and goes out.* NORA *shuts the door. She is laughing to herself, as she takes off her hat and coat. She takes a packet of macaroons from her pocket and eats one or two; then goes cautiously to her husband's door and listens.*) Yes, he is in.

Still humming, she goes to the table on the right.

HELMER (*calls out from his room*): Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA (*busy opening some of the parcels*): Yes, it is!

HELMER: Is it my little squirrel bustling about?

NORA: Yes!

HELMER: When did my squirrel come home?

NORA: Just now. (*Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.*) Come in here, Torvald, and see what I have bought.

HELMER: Don't disturb me. (*A little later, he opens the door and looks into the room, pen in hand.*) Bought, did you say? All

these things? Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?

NORA: Yes, but, Torvald, this year we really can let ourselves go a little. This is the first Christmas that we have not needed to economise.

HELMER: Still, you know, we can't spend money recklessly.

NORA: Yes, Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn't we? Just a tiny wee bit! You are going to have a big salary and earn lots and lots of money.

HELMER: Yes, after the New Year; but then it will be a whole quarter before the salary is due.

NORA: Pooh! we can borrow till then.

HELMER: Nora! (*Goes up to her and takes her playfully by the ear.*) The same little featherhead! Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds to-day, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and——

NORA (*putting her hands over his mouth*): Oh! don't say such horrid things.

HELMER: Still, suppose that happened,—what then?

NORA: If that were to happen, I don't suppose I should care whether I owed money or not.

HELMER: Yes, but what about the people who had lent it?

NORA: They? Who would bother about them? I should not know who they were.

HELMER: That is like a woman! But seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. We two have kept bravely on the straight road so far, and we will go on the same way for the short time longer that there need be any struggle.

NORA (*moving towards the stove*): As you please, Torvald.

HELMER (*following her*): Come, come, my little skylark must not droop her wings. What is this! Is my little squirrel out of temper? (*Taking out his purse.*) Nora, what do you think I have got here?

NORA (*turning round quickly*): Money!

HELMER: There you are. (*Gives her some money.*) Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas-time?

NORA (*counting*): Ten shillings—a pound—two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.

HELMER: Indeed it must.

NORA: Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. And all so cheap! Look, here is a new suit for Ivar, and a sword; and a horse and a trumpet for Bob; and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy—they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dress-

lengths and handkerchiefs for the maids; old Anne ought really to have something better.

HELMER: And what is in this parcel?

NORA (*crying out*): No, no! you mustn't see that till this evening.

HELMER: Very well. But now tell me, you extravagant little person, what would you like for yourself?

NORA: For myself? Oh, I am sure I don't want anything.

HELMER: Yes, but you must. Tell me something reasonable that you would particularly like to have.

NORA: No, I really can't think of anything—unless, Torvald——

HELMER: Well?

NORA (*playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his*): If you really want to give me something, you might—you might——

HELMER: Well, out with it!

NORA (*speaking quickly*): You might give me money, Torvald. Only just as much as you can afford; and then one of these days I will buy something with it.

HELMER: But, Nora——

NORA: Oh, do! dear Torvald; please, please do! Then I will wrap it up in beautiful gilt paper and hang it on the Christmas Tree. Wouldn't that be fun?

HELMER: What are little people called that are always wasting money?

NORA: Spendthrifts—I know. Let us do as you suggest, Torvald, and then I shall have time to think what I am most in want of. That is a very sensible plan, isn't it?

HELMER (*smiling*): Indeed it is—that is to say, if you were really to save out of the money I give you, and then really buy something for yourself. But if you spend it all on the housekeeping and any number of unnecessary things, then I merely have to pay up again.

NORA: Oh but, Torvald——

HELMER: You can't deny it, my dear little Nora. (*Puts his arm round her waist.*) It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money. One would hardly believe how expensive such little persons are!

NORA: It's a shame to say that. I do really save all I can.

HELMER (*laughing*): That's very true,—all you can. But you can't save anything!

NORA (*smiling quietly and happily*): You haven't any idea how many expenses we skylarks and squirrels have, Torvald.

HELMER: You are an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. You never know where it has gone. Still, one must take you as

you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora.

NORA: Ah, I wish I had inherited many of papa's qualities.

HELMER: And I would not wish you to be anything but just what you are, my sweet little skylark. But, do you know, it strikes me that you are looking rather—what shall I say—rather uneasy to-day?

NORA: Do I?

HELMER: You do, really. Look straight at me.

NORA (*looks at him*): Well?

HELMER (*wagging his finger at her*): Hasn't Miss Sweet-Tooth been breaking rules in town to-day?

NORA: No; what makes you think that?

HELMER: Hasn't she paid a visit to the confectioner's?

NORA: No, I assure you, Torvald——

HELMER: Not been nibbling sweets?

NORA: No, certainly not.

HELMER: Not even taken a bite at a macaroon or two?

NORA: No, Torvald, I assure you really——

HELMER: There, there, of course I was only joking.

NORA (*going to the table on the right*): I should not think of going against your wishes.

HELMER: No, I am sure of that! besides, you gave me your word—— (*Going up to her.*) Keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself, my darling. They will all be revealed to-night when the Christmas Tree is lit, no doubt.

NORA: Did you remember to invite Doctor Rank?

HELMER: No. But there is no need; as a matter of course he will come to dinner with us. However, I will ask him when he comes in this morning. I have ordered some good wine. Nora, you can't think how I am looking forward to this evening.

NORA: So am I! And how the children will enjoy themselves, Torvald!

HELMER: It is splendid to feel that one has a perfectly safe appointment, and a big enough income. It's delightful to think of, isn't it?

NORA: It's wonderful!

HELMER: Do you remember last Christmas? For a full three weeks beforehand you shut yourself up every evening till long after midnight, making ornaments for the Christmas Tree and all the other fine things that were to be a surprise to us. It was the dullest three weeks I ever spent!

NORA: I didn't find it dull.

HELMER (*smiling*): But there was precious little result, Nora.

NORA: Oh, you shouldn't tease me about that again. How could I help the cat's going in and tearing everything to pieces?

HELMER: Of course you couldn't, poor little girl. You had the best of intentions to please us all, and that's the main thing. But it is a good thing that our hard times are over.

NORA: Yes, it is really wonderful.

HELMER: This time I needn't sit here and be dull all alone, and you needn't ruin your dear eyes and your pretty little hands——

NORA (*clapping her hands*): No, Torvald, I needn't any longer, need I? It's wonderfully lovely to hear you say so! (*Taking his arm.*) Now I will tell you how I have been thinking we ought to arrange things, Torvald. As soon as Christmas is over—— (*A bell rings in the hall.*) There's the bell. (*She tidies the room a little.*) There's someone at the door. What a nuisance!

HELMER: If it is a caller, remember I am not at home.

MAID (*in the doorway*): A lady to see you, ma'am,—a stranger.

NORA: Ask her to come in.

MAID (*to* HELMER): The doctor came at the same time, sir.

HELMER: Did he go straight into my room?

MAID: Yes, sir.

HELMER *goes into his room. The* MAID *ushers in* MRS. LINDE, *who is in travelling dress, and shuts the door.*

MRS. LINDE (*in a dejected and timid voice*): How do you do, Nora?

NORA (*doubtfully*): How do you do——

MRS. LINDE: You don't recognise me, I suppose.

NORA: No, I don't know—yes, to be sure, I seem to—— (*Suddenly.*) Yes! Christine! Is it really you?

MRS. LINDE: Yes, it is I.

NORA: Christine! To think of my not recognising you! And yet how could I—— (*In a gentle voice.*) How you have altered, Christine!

MRS. LINDE: Yes, I have indeed. In nine, ten long years——

NORA: Is it so long since we met? I suppose it is. The last eight years have been a happy time for me, I can tell you. And so now you have come into the town, and have taken this long journey in winter—that was plucky of you.

MRS. LINDE: I arrived by steamer this morning.

NORA: To have some fun at Christmas-time, of course. How delightful! We will have such fun together! But take off your things. You are not cold, I hope. (*Helps her.*) Now we will sit down by the stove, and be cosy. No, take this arm-chair; I will sit here in the rocking-chair. (*Takes her hands.*) Now you look like your old self again; it was only the first moment—— You are a little paler, Christine, and perhaps a little thinner.

MRS. LINDE: And much, much older, Nora.

NORA: Perhaps a little older; very, very little; certainly not much. (*Stops suddenly and speaks seriously.*) What a thoughtless creature I am, chattering away like this. My poor, dear Christine, do forgive me.

MRS. LINDE: What do you mean, Nora?

NORA (*gently*): Poor Christine, you are a widow.