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## What Shaped Ibsen into a Major Playwright?

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### **Abstract:**

Henrik Johan Ibsen is known as the 'Father of Modern Drama.' His dramas have influenced many well-known dramatists the world over. However, Ibsen's development as a dramatist of repute had been influenced by various factors. Various Scandinavian dramatists like Holberg, Oehlenschläger, Heiberg, Hertz and even his contemporary, Bjornson influenced Ibsen's dramatic techniques. Others like Shakespeare and Scribe also influenced him a lot. The first seeds of feminism were sown in Ibsen's mind by Collett and Hansteen. Georg Brandes inspired Ibsen to write the modern social plays which ultimately made him known worldwide. The aim of this paper is to find out how these persons influenced Ibsen.

**Keywords:** Ibsen, Shakespeare, Scribe, Feminism, Bjornson, Brandes.

Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906) is a very significant figure in the history of Modern Scandinavian Drama. He was such a successful innovator that the whole of European drama since his days had in one way or the other felt the impact of his dramas. However, Ibsen's development as a dramatist of repute had been influenced by various factors and in this regard, Brian W. Downs pointed out:

Ibsen was not a sudden, causeless phenomenon, born in a hyperborean desert with no traceable ancestry, but stood well in the stream of the ethical, religious, political and sociological thought of his time. (Durbach 3)

Before Ibsen, Scandinavian literature was mainly of a Romantic tradition. Even Ibsen, the father of modern drama, started his literary career by composing historical plays in verse. In his youth, Ibsen regarded Danish literature as his own and had studied it. Brian W. Downs said:

Meanwhile for the school-boy at Skien and the pharmacist's assistant at Grimstad in the 1830's and 1840's, the literature which he would rightfully look upon as 'his' literature was Danish literature. (23)

The Danish playwrights that Ibsen studied or came into contact with included among others Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), Adam Oehlenschläger (1779-1850), Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860) and Henrik Hertz (1805-1871). Ibsen was familiar with the plays of Holberg and Oehlenschläger while he was writing his first play, *Catiline* (1849). Holberg's comedies are known for the economy in the use of words and for the power of combining theatrical entertainment and social criticism. It was partly because of Holberg's inspiration that Ibsen later on started writing dramas as social criticisms. Michael Meyer said that Holberg 'was one of the very first authors whom Ibsen admitted to admiring.' (239) Ibsen was also influenced by the play, *Fisherman* (1779) written by Johannes Ewald. This play is the earliest play in which the problems of ordinary, common man are portrayed in tragedy.

Adam Oehlenschläger also influenced Ibsen a lot. Oehlenschläger was a great romantic poet of Denmark. His plays were generally written in honour of the legendary and

romantic historical past of the Scandinavian peoples. Ibsen likewise wrote his earlier plays in verse and these were entirely on historical settings. Special mention can be made of *The Warrior's Barrow* which took up the subject matter of Oehlenschläger's plays. Mention can be made about another Ibsen play, *The Vikings in Helgeland*.

Another Danish dramatist who influenced Ibsen was Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Ibsen met Heiberg when he first visited Copenhagen in 1852. Ibsen had been greatly influenced by Heiberg's essay, '*On the Vaudeville*.' In this essay, Heiberg states that drama represents a mixture of the lyric and the epic elements of literature. All the plays of Ibsen beginning with *St. John's Eve*, which he started writing while he was in Copenhagen, until *Peer Gynt* (1867), show a unique determination to include both the lyric and the epic. Moreover, in this essay, Heiberg severely attacks the concept of Poetic Justice. Ibsen later on followed Heiberg's suggestion in his famous twelve realistic plays. In these plays, Ibsen did not follow the concept of Poetic Justice.

Another author who influenced Ibsen was Henrik Hertz. He was famous not for his dramatic art, but for the manner in which he led a conscious reaction against Oehlenschläger's full-blooded romanticism. His *Svend Dyring's House* and *King Rene's Daughter* were outstanding successes. Hertz uses some of the conventions of the old ballad ages like the casting of magical spells, and the returning of Ghosts from the dead and so forth in his play, *Svend Dyring's House* (1837). Inspired by this play, Ibsen also uses such supernatural elements in *The Feast at Solhaug*. Such was the extent of Hertz's influence that some critics even accused that Ibsen had 'plagiarised Henrik Hertz *Svend Dyring's House*.' (Meyer 148)

Ibsen was also influenced a great deal by the theatre of Denmark. Even after Ibsen's first play *Catilina* was published in 1849, Norwegian Theatre was still nonexistent. In this respect, Brian W. Downs said:

In his biography of Ibsen Gerhard Gran observes that as late as 1850 our [Norwegian] theatre was to all intents and purposes wholly and completely Danish: Danish pieces, Danish translations, Danish actors, Danish directions. (38)

Thus, the Norwegian theatre of the early nineteenth century depended entirely on the Danish Theatre. It was at that time that the Norwegians planned to set up a completely Norwegian theatre with Norwegian actors and Norwegian producers. Ole Bull set up such a theatre in Bergen in 1851 and two years later another Norwegian theatre began operating in Oslo, the capital of Norway. Ibsen held appointments in both these theatres. Ibsen was appointed as the Theatre Playwright in the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen in 1851. He also became the Assistant Stage Manager and helped in instructing the actors of the Theatre. Ibsen supervised the staging of plays and sometimes designed the scenery and costumes. He performed practically every theatrical task except acting. The Bergen Theatre sent Henrik Ibsen abroad in 1852 to study foreign theatre. He visited Denmark and Germany to acquire foreign theatrical methods and to obtain new plays to be shown at the Norwegian theatre in Bergen. While at Copenhagen, he got the chance to see plays of William Shakespeare, Holberg, Oehlenschläger, Heiberg and Henrik Hertz in the Royal Theatre. He also visited other theatres like the Casino Theatre and the Royal Court Theatre. When he arrived in Dresden, he found and read Herman Hettner's *Das Moderne Drama*, which was to have a considerable influence upon his writings:

Hettner believed that even the historical tragedy must be psychologically oriented: the historical characters must have motives and reactions that are

recognizable to the modern audiences. (Encyclopedia of World Drama, Vol. 2, 387)

Hettner's ideas on modern drama are successfully incorporated in Ibsen's famous prose plays. Thus, it was only after Hettner's influence that Ibsen's plays began to have a strength and vigour which no other dramatists could achieve. During his six years stay at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, Ibsen designed and stage-managed one hundred and forty five plays, five of which were his own. He also wrote prologues to other people's plays that were shown in the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. *The McGraw Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama* said:

These early technical labors and concern with detail in the Bergen Theatre were probably responsible for developing in Ibsen the meticulous attention to realistic detail that later became a consummate art and resulted in his painstaking characterizations. (Encyclopedia of World Drama, Vol. 2, 382)

It was in 1852, while in Copenhagen, that Ibsen saw four plays of William Shakespeare performed on the stage. These plays were *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As you like it* and *Hamlet*. Further, he saw another two Shakespearean plays *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Richard III* while in Dresden during the same year. He also got in contact with Shakespeare through another source, Herman Hettner's book, *Das Moderne Drama*, in 1852. In that book, Ibsen found out that Shakespeare's greatness was that he broke away from the ancient dramatic idea of fate and always presented the dramatic catastrophe as the inescapable outcome of the tragic flaw of the hero. He further found that the psychological qualities of Shakespeare's characters are the essence and real motive power of his dramas. The plays of Shakespeare and the theory on Shakespeare provided by Hettner created a deep impact on Ibsen's mind. On the theme of the influence of Shakespeare's plays on Ibsen, Halvdan Koht said:

They [Shakespearean dramas] inspired him with the passion of search for the psychological forces at the bottom of dramatic conflicts. Through them he learned to focus his efforts on the one decisive element of true drama, the study and depiction, merciless and merciful at the same time, of individual characters opposed in battle for life or death, living themselves out, so to speak, according to their innermost essence and for that very reason typically human in their individualities. (Fjelde 44)

The first play in which Shakespeare's influence on Ibsen can be seen is *Lady Inger of Ostraat* (1854). *Lady Inger* reminds us of *Lady Macbeth* when *Lady Inger* walks through the halls half sleepwalking, tormented by the notion of being the King's murderer. We can also see the traits of *Hamlet's* 'to be or not to be' in *Lady Inger*. *Lady Inger* is obsessed with the idea of her duty to carry out a great task, that of restoring national independence. However, she keeps on doubting and cannot perform it. Other notable plays of Ibsen influenced by Shakespeare's plays include *The Pretenders*, *Peer Gynt*, *Brand* and *An Enemy of the People*. Professor A. E. Zucker even claimed:

The title of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882) may be traced back to Shakespeare's calling *Coriolanus* an "enemy to the people" or "the people's enemy." (Fjelde 50)

Thus it can be said that Shakespeare's dramas had a deep influence on Ibsen.

Ibsen's *Lady Inger of Ostraat* is also one of the early plays to be influenced by Eugene Scribe. Ibsen presented at the Bergen Theatre nine plays by Scribe while he was the

Assistant Stage Manager there. Thus, Ibsen was fairly familiar with Scribe's technique. Regarding the technique of Scribe, Brian W. Downs said:

That technique [Scribe's] may be said usually to rest on a foundation of ignorance, misunderstanding and intrigue—in the sense that the action is guided to a goal of some difficulty by a person (the 'intriguer') (sic.) who has certain important information which he utilises to gain his end, but of which those whom he meets are wholly or partially ignorant; these other personages are frequently played off, the one against the other, by the varying share of the intriguer's knowledge to which they are progressively admitted, and incidental complications proceed from the misunderstanding to which different degrees of participation in the secrets give rise. (52)

Ibsen uses this very technique in his *Lady Inger of Ostraat*. Lady Inger tries to place Nils Stensson on the throne of Ostraat and to drive out the Danes using her wits and her daughter's charms. However, Nils Lykke, the Danish diplomat, tries to capture Nils Stensson and to render Lady Inger politically weak by implicating her in the peasants' uprising. Lykke has a secret, which no one in Ostraat knows, and that is Nils Stensson is in the vicinity of Ostraat. Lady Inger too has a secret and that is Nils Stensson is her own illegitimate son. Eline, whom her mother uses to entice and defeat Lykke, falls in love with him and changes sides. Lady Inger's daughter might not have changed sides had she known that Nils Stensson was her own brother. This misunderstanding between mother and daughter because of Eline's ignorance of her mother's secrets brings about a tragedy more successful than any of Scribe's plays. Intriguers of the nature that are usually found in Scribe's plays are seen in Ibsen's latter plays. Bishop Nicholas in *The Pretenders* and Stensgaard in *The League of Youth* are intriguers of that type. In *The Pillars of Society*, Carsten Bernick proves successful by using secret knowledge denied to others. It became an almost compulsory aspect in Ibsen's plays that certain characters are ignorant of secret wrongs committed by their counterparts long ago. These past secret wrongs create dramatic tension in Ibsen's plays. Evidences of this are found in all plays of Ibsen except in *An Enemy of the People*.

In the middle of 1850's, the first waves of feminism were brewing up in Norway. The pioneers of this movement were all females. These feminists advocated rewriting laws for the greater freedom and protection of the women. However, they also believed that rewriting the laws alone would not successfully liberate the women towards self-realization. In their writings, these feminists demanded respect for feminine abilities, feminine emotions and feminine personality. They believed that the emancipation of women is the emancipation of all human beings. The first feminist who influenced Ibsen is Camilla Collett (1813-1895). Her *The Sheriff's Daughters* (1855) is one of the earliest realistic novels in Norwegian literature. It is the first literary work in which 'the woman question' is raised. The underlying idea of this novel is a bitter attack on the institution of marriage with its total disregard of the woman's feelings. In this regard, Brian W. Downs said:

Regardless of any considerations which might be urged from the masculine point of view, Fru Collett evidently believes marriage to be the prime aim of society and satisfactory marriage guaranteed by one thing only, the liberty of the bride to take unto herself the man on whom her unfettered choice has lighted. (71)

The impact of this novel on Ibsen can be seen for the first time in Ibsen's play, *Love's Comedy* (1862). *Love's Comedy*, like the novel, is a biting satire on marriage. In this play, Ibsen shows that a girl should be allowed to choose her own husband. We can find traces of Collett's thoughts in many of Ibsen's latter plays. In *A Doll's House*, Nora leaves her

husband as he does not have any regards for her feelings. Even in Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, we find that Maja leaves her husband and goes with another man of her choice, Ulfhejm. The fact that Ibsen had been inspired by Collett's writings was acknowledged in a letter Ibsen sent to Collett in 1889:

But it is many years now since you, by virtue of your characteristic spiritual and intellectual developments, began, in one form or another, to make your influence felt in my writings. (Morison 423-424)

Another feminist, though not an author, who immensely influenced Ibsen is Aasta Hansteen (1824-1908). She was an accomplished portrait painter but left that career to work for the women causes in Norway. It is important to note that in 1874, a certain Swedish Baroness claimed that she had been seduced by a Norwegian medical student who then refused to marry her. Hansteen joined the Swedish Baroness in demanding that the student be expelled from the university. She tried to draw the attention and support of the public by holding speeches, writing articles and organizing demonstrations. However, this kind of agitations for women's rights was not acceptable in the society of that time. Thus, Aasta Hansteen became a laughing stock in front of the public. Henrik Ibsen, who was on a short visit to Norway at that time, was greatly moved by the undaunted spirit of this woman. The spirit of this woman is present in many of Ibsen's women characters, the most immediate being the character of Lona Hessel in *The Pillars of Society*. In this regard, Katherine Hanson said that the most important legacy of a woman like Aasta Hansteen was not ideas, but rather the heart, soul and personality of the character she gave rise to. (Abraham 74)

Around the same time when the ideas of feminism was emerging in Norway, a new series of drama known as 'National plays' was started by Bjornstjerne Bjornson (1832-1910) with the publication of *Between the Battles* (1857). These plays are set in Norway of the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries during which a civil war was going on in that country. Bjornson used the language of the sagas in his national plays. His next play *Limping Hulda* (1857) was a much better success in the use of the saga-style. Inspired by the success of these two plays by Bjornson, Ibsen wrote *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1858). In this play, Ibsen abandoned the ballad-style, which he previously used, in favour of the saga-style. Later on, Ibsen wrote *The Pretenders* (1863), which was another imitation of the kind of National play which Bjornson initiated in Norway.

In the year 1871, the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes gave a series of lectures in the University of Copenhagen about the society and literature of the nineteenth century Europe. In his speeches, Brandes put forward the idea of a new form of literature that is to be socio-critical and realistic in nature. He advocated that the existing social values ought to be changed under the onus of the writers. With this, he called for an end to Romanticism. Ibsen was very much influenced by these speeches of Brandes. Moreover, a few years ago, in 1865, Bjornson had published *The Newly Weds*, a play with a contemporary setting. This play which was written in prose deliberately raises questions of conduct applicable to the common people. In this play, a young wife disregards the teaching of the gospel by putting her duty towards her parents before that of her husband. She looks upon herself as a daughter and never as a wife. Through this play, Bjornson insists that a wife should be adult and also suggests that lack of adequate response in the wife towards her husband leads to infidelity in the husband. Though, *The Newly Weds* had shown signs of being socio-critical and realistic, Bjornson consolidated his position as a modern playwright when he published two other plays, *The Editor* and *A Bankruptcy*, in 1875. These two plays inaugurated the realistic contemporary and problem drama in Scandinavia. And these plays were very much in the lines of Georg Brandes' new theory of literature. Influenced by Georg Brandes and inspired

by the success of Bjornson's *The Editor* and *A Bankruptcy*, Ibsen also started writing realistic contemporary dramas or problem dramas. Though Bjornson wrote the first realistic contemporary plays in Scandinavia, Ibsen followed in his footsteps and surpassed him with *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and *A Doll's House* (1879). Moreover, Bjornson's realistic plays were performed outside the Scandinavia. They achieved resounding success in the great theatres of Germany and Austria, thus clearing the way to the world arena for Ibsen's later dramatic works.

In his great works starting with *The Pillars of Society*, Ibsen began making the problems in society the subject of debate. The relationship between the sexes is the subject in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. Problems like social morality and tyranny of the majority are debated in *The Pillars of Society* and *An Enemy of the People*. In these social problem plays, Ibsen tried to show the negative sides of society. Ibsen made a determined demand for truthfulness and freedom. Truth, emancipation, self-realisation and personal freedom are key terms in Ibsen's realistic plays. In *The Pillars of Society*, when Bernick says that women are the pillars of success, Lona Hessel has the last word saying that truth and spirit of freedom are the true pillars of society.

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen hints at divorce as a possible solution. In *Ghosts* Ibsen takes up typical taboos, incest, venereal disease and euthanasia. His works created violent controversies in the Victorian society of that time. Eric Bentley pointed out:

Calling attention to the rotten bottoms of ships, the subjection of Victorian wives, the ravages of syphilis, and the corruption of municipal journalism and politics, he made himself the father of the reformist drama of the end of the [Nineteenth] century. (92)

Ibsen's works had enormous influence on some social movements. There is hardly a literary work that has meant so much to women's liberation as *A Doll's House*.

The actions in all the dramas that Ibsen wrote starting from *Pillars of Society* are set on the problems of contemporary society. Thus these dramas came to be known as contemporary dramas or social problem plays. Historical dramas were out of fashion to Ibsen at that time. Ibsen's plays no longer dealt with Gods and heroes, kings and General but these were replaced by ordinary people. The course of the action in his dramas dealt with common problems of the common man. The first notes Ibsen made for *A Doll's House*, dated 19<sup>th</sup> October 1878, bear the heading 'Notes for modern tragedy.' (Heiberg 203) The term "modern tragedy" shows that Ibsen's plan in this play is to apply the classical form of tragedy to a modern body of material. Ibsen does not engage in a complete overhauling of the form of tragedy in his first four realistic dramas. For example, the three classical unities are maintained, the unities of time, space and action. What is new is the modern material of conflict and the realism of what is taking place on the stage. Ibsen sets his first four modern plays almost entirely indoors in order to make his plays look realistic. In this regard, P.F.D. Tennant said that 'the indoor setting is the direct result of Ibsen's conscious effort to create a realistic illusion.' (67)

Ibsen's *Ghosts* was refused to be performed in any of the Scandinavian theatres because the public viewed it as something that could not be decently staged. However, a young Swedish director, August Lindberg, asked for Ibsen's permission to stage the play in various parts of Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Ibsen advised Lindberg, who was in the

process of staging *Ghosts* that various measures had to be taken up in order to make the play realistic. Ibsen said:

The language must sound natural and the mode of expression must be distinctive of every character in the play; one human being does not express himself like another... The effect of the play depends greatly on the audience feeling that they are listening to something that is actually happening in real life. (Meyer 540)

Ibsen took extra care while writing his contemporary dramas so that the audience could be able to witness events that could have happened to them. This required that the characters in his plays spoke and behaved naturally and that the situations had the stamp of everyday life about them. The characters could no longer speak in verse like Brand and Peer Gynt. The realistic drama was to provide the illusion of recognizable reality.

By the time *The Wild Duck* (1884) was published, the conventions of the social problem plays have completely disappeared. All succeeding plays of Ibsen are psychological in nature and are sometimes referred to as psychological plays. All the plays starting from *The Wild Duck* involve the conflict between the unfulfilled desires of the characters and the cruel reality they find themselves in. This conflict is shown by Ibsen as a major cause of the unbalanced state of mind of the characters.

After his four great realistic plays were published, Ibsen became a master in his own right. He could then understand the exact course of his mission as a playwright and a propagandist. Right from *The Pillars of Society*, his plays became the subject of 'exaggerated propaganda on the one hand, and of savage abuse on the other.' (Garland 414) And he continued in that fashion in all his latter plays. His own ideas became the genuine materials of his latter plays. Accordingly, Ibsen's latter works revealed 'fewer and fewer obviously external impulses.' (Downs 170) Thus, by the time, he wrote his last play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), there were practically no external impulses on him. Indeed, it can be said that Ibsen did not need any more influences and inspiration from others. Rather, other dramatists started looking up to Ibsen's plays and imitated him.

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