

Henrik Ibsen and the Revival of Euripides

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IT HAS for a good many years been a commonplace among classicists to compare the last of the three great Athenian tragedians to the earliest of the modern dramatists; Wilamowitz, Nestle, and Wendland, among others, did so during the first decade of the twentieth century. Conversely, students of modern drama have—though less often—hailed Ibsen as a modern Euripides. It is, however, a different matter to claim that Euripides influenced Ibsen, or that Ibsen and his plays affected scholarship during the revival of interest in Euripides towards the end of the nineteenth century: in their legitimate eagerness to prove the importance of the classical tradition and the significance of Euripides' plays for modern times, classicists have asserted a connection that is not supported by the evidence.

For the first twenty-five years of his career as a dramatist, Henrik Ibsen did not strike his contemporaries as a revolutionary playwright. Most of his plays continued the romantic and nationalistic tradition of the early nineteenth century in Scandinavia, though two works do indicate an interest in classical antiquity. Ibsen's first play was *Catiline* (1850), based on his preparations for his *Abitur*, the university entrance examination, in Latin; and in the 1860's he created a grandiose view of the conflict between Christianity and paganism in his *Emperor and Galilean*, centered on Julian the Apostate and his contemporaries.¹ Otherwise, there is no evidence that Ibsen took any interest in classical antiquity or knew anything in particular about Greek tragedy until, late in 1878, he began working on *A Doll's House*.² Ibsen first mentions the play in a short outline in which he sets forth the main ideas of the drama, under the title *Notes for a Modern Tragedy*.³ When compared with Ibsen's earlier works, *A Doll's*

¹ The best general book in English on Ibsen is M. MEYER, *Ibsen, A Biography* (London 1969–70/Garden City 1971 [hereafter 'Meyer']); on *Catiline* cf. 41ff, on *Emperor and Galilean* 377ff. Meyer includes most of the background material on each of Ibsen's plays and translates many of the sources in the comprehensive *Henrik Ibsen, Samlede verker, hundreårsutgave* I–XXI (Oslo 1928–1958).

² For a thorough discussion of Ibsen and classical antiquity see Josef Faaland, *Henrik Ibsen og Antikken* (Oslo 1943), not mentioned in Meyer.

³ Conveniently translated in Meyer 446.

House does suggest a rebirth of ancient tragedy. Up to this point, his dramas had numerous characters and the action extended over a number of years; in *A Doll's House* and later plays Ibsen reduced the number of main characters to about five and condensed the plots to occupy only a few days. Further, *A Doll's House* is in some respects similar to Euripides' *Medea*: in both plays the heroine is a dominant figure who ultimately leaves her rather insipid husband.

There is, however, not one shred of evidence, either in *A Doll's House* or in any other play (such as *Hedda Gabler*, often compared to Euripides' *Hippolytus*), that Ibsen was influenced by Greek tragedy, not to mention Euripides. Though Ibsen undoubtedly read much—all good authors do—he did not strike his contemporaries as being an unusually well-read person: ten years before *A Doll's House*, the Danish art historian Julius Lange complained in Rome that Ibsen ought to acquaint himself with Greek literature and art in order to improve his feeling for harmony and form.⁴ Ibsen rarely mentions Greek and Roman authors in his papers and letters, and his plays were usually inspired by his personal experiences. In the case of *A Doll's House*, for example, we know that Nora's situation in the play was based on that of Laura Kieler, a Norwegian authoress who had responded to Ibsen's *Brand* with her own *Brand's Daughters* (1869); unknown to her husband she had borrowed funds to meet his medical expenses. Ibsen became involved when Kieler visited him in Munich to ask his advice and to secure his recommendation for a novel she had written to raise money to repay her debt.⁵

Finally, *A Doll's House* is not simply a feminist manifesto as we have become accustomed to see it. Ibsen was not opposed to the idea that a woman's place is in the home: for him the important point of *A Doll's House* was that a woman should be allowed to assert her personality just as much as a man. Again and again in Ibsen's plays we find the idea that personality and personal development are the most important elements in human life, and are not to be restrained by anything or anyone. This idea was combined with another that preoccupied Ibsen while he was working on *A Doll's House*, namely, Darwinism and the question of hereditary qualities. That the play was

⁴ Faaland (*supra* n.2) 183; Meyer 120, 230, 475. Cf. also the observation in an 1882 study on Ibsen by the Danish critic Georg Brandes (*Samlede Skrifter* III [Copenhagen 1900] 289), who knew Ibsen personally: "Ibsen reads very little and does not get his information about contemporary life through books. . . ." Since Brandes was a voracious reader, the statement should be taken *cum grano salis*.

⁵ See Meyer 443–45 for the severe personal toll exacted for her financial dealings and the general knowledge that Ibsen had used her as a model for Nora.

meant to be an illustration of Darwinian principles explains the character of Dr Rank: his father's dissolute life was the cause of Rank's disease, and the latter's disintegration and death is intended as an illustration of hereditary defect. Similarly, Nora's willingness to lie and to commit fraud is interpreted by her husband as a weakness inherited from her own father. The idea of hereditary qualities recurs repeatedly in Ibsen's later plays, most conspicuously, of course, in his next work, *Ghosts* (1881)—whose title in Norwegian means "Those who walk/appear again."⁶

Ghosts was the first of the plays to evoke comparison with ancient drama. In the midst of considerable adverse criticism and bigotry,⁷ Georg Brandes wrote a glowing defense of Ibsen, in which he notes that the catastrophe of the play grows out of necessity. "It is possible to compare the fatalism of Ibsen with that of the ancient world. But the real correspondence is simply that all of us, the period in which we live, have returned to the ancient world's naturalistic view of human life. The nineteenth century is deterministic, and so was classical antiquity. However, if you have the ancients' belief in a mysterious *fatum* in mind—that fate which in ancient drama forces Oedipus to kill his father and marry his mother because he is predestined to do so—then the fatalism of *Ghosts* is no more similar to it than knowledge is to mythology."⁸ Brandes' words were echoed in an 1882 review of *Ghosts* by a Norwegian classicist, P. O. Schjøtt: "Of all that we have read in modern dramatic literature, *Ghosts* is the play that comes closest to ancient drama. . . . Ancient tragedy is called 'tragedy of fate' or 'family-drama', the tragic fate being inherited in the family. Here, too, we have a family tragedy, but it is also a social drama, ancient drama resurrected on modern soil."⁹ Needless to say, both Brandes and Schjøtt have Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in mind; and in fact, it was not unusual, at the turn of the century, to compare Ibsen and Sophocles.

The juxtaposition of Ibsen and Euripides did not appear on the Continent until twenty years later, after Ibsen had finally become established as the leading playwright of his age, and when the revival of Euripidean scholarship was well advanced. In 1901 W. Nestle

⁶ Darwinism was a hotly-debated topic among the Scandinavians in Rome in 1878–1879: cf. F. Bull, F. Paasche, and A. H. Winsnes, *Norsk Litteratur Historie* IV (Oslo 1937) 403.

⁷ Meyer 483–87; cf. the articles mentioned in the following two notes.

⁸ Cf. G. Brandes' memoirs, *Levned* III: *Snevninger og Horisonter* (Copenhagen 1908) 21.

⁹ *Nyt Tidsskrift* 1 (1882) 102f. Another excerpt from this review is translated in Meyer 485; cf. 491.

stated that with respect to making tragic characters more like ordinary human beings, Euripides was related to Aeschylus and Sophocles as Ibsen is to Goethe and Schiller.¹⁰ In a 1904 review P. Wendland repeated this juxtaposition, asserting that anyone influenced by Ibsen and Tolstoy would understand Euripides better than many old-fashioned philologists equipped with all the tools of erudition.¹¹ In both cases the point is that knowledge of modern drama will make it easier to understand the value of Euripidean tragedy in comparison to that of Aeschylus and Sophocles, so idealized by the earlier nineteenth century.

In Wilamowitz's *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (1905) there is little trace of the traditional depreciation of Euripides. Although Wilamowitz is skeptical about the view of Euripides as a poet of the Enlightenment, he does see Euripides as much closer to the modern world than Aeschylus and Sophocles. It is in connection with his discussion of Euripides' innovations that Wilamowitz—well-read as he was in contemporary literature—brings up the name of Ibsen: "It is obvious that it all points towards a serious play that cannot correctly be called either tragedy or comedy, towards (re)presenting difficult problems—psychological and otherwise—in human life, problems which both the audience and the author face: you could say, towards Ibsen. But a Greek would never have given up the poetry and the stylized expressions that come with poetry, and this is the only way to avoid sinking into a vulgarity without style, that considers itself true when it is ordinary, makes prose into an imitation of dialects, and tries to express feelings through inarticulate sounds."¹² Consistent with his *Historismus*, Wilamowitz does not try to make Euripides an ancient Ibsen, or vice versa. It is, however, interesting to note that Schjøtt had made a similar comment about the fusion of tragedy and comedy in his review of *Ghosts* twenty years before (*supra* n.9).

Almost twenty years later, Wilamowitz appears to have changed his view, when in the last volume of his translations of the three Athenian tragedians he gave his final assessment of their work: "Only in the last generation has scholarship in Germany, France, and England tried with success to approach the thinker and artist Euripides, not without serious mistakes. To find in Euripides an ancient Ibsen is

¹⁰ *Euripides der Dichter der griechischen Aufklärung* (Stuttgart 1901) 34; cf. in general Calder 428ff *infra*.

¹¹ Cf. Steiger (n.15 *infra*) 113.

¹² *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Berlin 1905) 50; the comparison is retained in the second edition (1907, p.52) but is omitted in the third (1912).

more than that, it is simply silly.”¹³ Here Wilamowitz is not so much retracting his previous view as objecting to the ideas of Hugo Steiger, who had argued the close similarity between Euripides and Ibsen.¹⁴ Steiger did not claim that Euripides influenced Ibsen, but that the personality and career of the two dramatists resembled one another to such a degree that a comparison would make it easier to understand Euripidean tragedy. He was convinced that it is impossible to understand Euripides’ plays without knowing his personality. Since the only clue to this personality is to be found in the plays themselves, Steiger tried to avoid circularity by claiming that the similarity between Euripides and Ibsen was so evident that we, being well-informed about the personality of Ibsen from sources other than his plays, could by comparison draw conclusions about the relationship between Euripides’ personality and his dramas.

Steiger emphasized the following similarities between the two authors: (1) the plays of both exerted an immense influence on contemporary society; (2) both were primarily moralists; (3) both had formed their views at a very early period; (4) the rôle of women in marriage and society was an important topic for both authors; and (5) both had a negative attitude towards politics and social life. Steiger concluded that both authors were fighters, national leaders, and fanatically devoted to truth. Ibsen’s plays can only be understood on the basis of his personal life; so it is with Euripides. Steiger’s methods and views did not find favor with his contemporaries, and Steiger felt the sting of Wilamowitz’s criticism sufficiently to take up the matter again in 1925.¹⁵

Even so, this does not preclude the possibility that Wilamowitz’s interpretation of Euripides was influenced by his knowledge of Ibsen’s plays. This possibility, in particular, has been discussed in connection with the supposed influence of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, for example, upon the view of Phaedra that Wilamowitz presented in his edition of *Hippolytus*; but as Professor Calder has demonstrated, there is no documentary evidence to support this suggestion.¹⁶ Fur-

¹³ Cf. *Griechische Tragödien* IV (Berlin 1923) 368.

¹⁴ H. Steiger, *Euripides: seine Dichtung und seine Persönlichkeit* (Leipzig 1912).

¹⁵ In “Euripides, ein antiker Ibsen?” *Philologus* 80 (1925) 113–35, Steiger attempts to demonstrate that in fact he and Wilamowitz agree about Euripides—though it is no wonder that Wilamowitz had objected to Steiger’s ahistorical approach; the two scholars seem to have been antagonistic towards each another from before the turn of the century. Polemics aside, however, Steiger’s article is a useful survey of the Ibsen/Euripides controversy.

¹⁶ See 417f n.57 *infra*. It should be pointed out, however, that the speed of publication in those days would have allowed Wilamowitz to have read *Hedda Gabler* before

thermore, the similarities are quite superficial between Wilamowitz's 'aristocratic' Phaedra and Ibsen's heroine, caught up in her own psychological complexities. (Indeed, *Hedda Gabler* was poorly received by the public, who found Hedda an unbelievable character, too complex to be presented on stage.)¹⁷ All things considered, there is no need to assume the influence of Ibsen on Wilamowitz's interpretation of Euripides. Not because he did not know Ibsen: Wilamowitz read voraciously in contemporary literature—though he found little of importance—and after the success of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's plays were quickly translated into German and hotly debated. But proof of Wilamowitz's knowledge of Ibsen does not surface until 1896, when the Danish classicist J. L. Heiberg, in an unpublished letter to Wilamowitz,¹⁸ recalls the lively discussion on Ibsen that he and his colleague A. B. Drachmann had with Wilamowitz and Fr. Leo during a visit to Göttingen; but it should be noted that the only work mentioned by title is the early verse-play, *Comedy of Love*.

Wilamowitz continued to read Ibsen: in 1906 an incidental remark in a letter¹⁹ reveals that Wilamowitz considered Ibsen a prime example of modern drama; and in 1907, when Wilamowitz had been vacationing in Denmark and learned Danish well enough to read novels and some poetry, he declares that he has enjoyed reading Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* in the original alongside the German translation.²⁰ Finally, in his autobiography (1928) Wilamowitz presents himself—in contrast to the German public in general—as an admirer of Ibsen.²¹

Certainly Wilamowitz knew what he has doing when he rejected the obvious but uninformative comparison of Euripides to Ibsen. Wilamowitz's influence on Euripidean scholarship was not limited to Germany. It was his masterly edition of the *Heracles* (1889) that confirmed the young Gilbert Murray's determination to work on Euripi-

he finished his preface to *Hippolytus* (cf. Calder, *GRBS* 20 [1979] 233): *Hedda Gabler* was published in Copenhagen on 16 December 1890, and was translated and published in Germany within weeks. On the biographical elements in *Hedda Gabler* cf. Meyer 646–48.

¹⁷ Cf. Meyer 643–46. Such psychological complexity, it was thought, belonged rather to epic and prose: cf., e.g., *Deutsche Rundschau* 26 (1881) 301.

¹⁸ Dated March 1896, now in the the Göttingen University Library (ms. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 289).

¹⁹ To E. Fitch, 18 December 1906; published by W. M. Calder III, *HSCP* 83 (1979) 378.

²⁰ In a letter of 16 September 1907 to A. B. Drachmann; now in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Utilg. 188.

²¹ *Erinnerungen*² (Berlin 1928) 202 (tr. G. C. Richards [London 1930] 241f).

des. In 1894 he wrote to Wilamowitz asking advice about his own plans for an edition of the plays and an *Index Euripideus*. As so often before and after, Wilamowitz responded with enthusiasm and detailed advice when a younger scholar presented a sensible plan, and as a result of Murray's initiative a long friendship grew between the two men.²² It is, however, probably no coincidence that Murray began his work just as Ibsen was making his first impact on the English stage.²³ Murray was appointed to the Greek chair at Glasgow in 1889, the year in which *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's first play to be performed publicly in England, provoked vigorous debate in the press and elsewhere. In 1891 Bernard Shaw, who would later play an important rôle in Murray's life, published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in which he presented Ibsen as a naturalistic and reforming playwright who brought problems of contemporary life to the stage; he soon began to produce his own series of plays dealing with contemporary problems, in time inviting comparison with Euripides.²⁴ In the early 1890's Ibsen's plays were rapidly translated into English, and in 1895 Murray became acquainted with Ibsen's translator, William Archer. Ibsen, however, gained respect more rapidly than Euripides, to judge from a revealing comment by A. W. Verrall: "The ancients do not defend Euripides. In our time a defence, cordial sometimes or fervent but still a defence, is the utmost that he obtains."²⁵ In Murray's own *A History of Ancient Greek Literature* (1897) Ibsen is occasionally mentioned in connection with Euripides, less in order to compare the two dramatists as such than because Murray seems occupied with Ibsen.²⁶

As we have seen, Euripides did not influence Ibsen, nor did the latter influence the scholars who were responsible for the revival of Euripidean studies—at least not early enough to affect their decision to concentrate on Euripides. On the other hand, we have seen that

²² Cf. G. Murray, "Memories of Wilamowitz," *Antike und Abendland* 4 (1954) 9–14; Francis West, *Gilbert Murray: A Life* (London 1984) 69ff; on Ibsen and Murray cf. his index s.v. 'Ibsen'.

²³ For a lively account of the situation ca 1890 cf. H. Granville-Barker, "The Coming of Ibsen," in W. de la Mare, ed., *The Eighteen-Eighties* (Cambridge 1930) 159–96.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., G. Norwood's 1911 essay "Euripides and Shaw," reprinted in the volume of articles collected under that title (London 1921) 1–48.

²⁵ *Euripides the Rationalist* (Cambridge 1895) viii. Whether or not Verrall has Browning in mind, it must not be forgotten that Browning had defended Euripides warmly in his *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871), though this did little to enhance Euripides' reputation. On Euripides in Victorian England in general cf. R. Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1980) 87–111.

²⁶ " . . . but the significant fact is that, like Ibsen, Euripides refuses to idealise any man, and does idealise women" (263); "yet it is one of the poet's rooted convictions that an absolute devotion to some one principle—the 'All or nothing' of Brand, the 'Truth' of Gregers Werle—leads to havoc" (270).

the classicists who took a more positive view of Euripides also liked Ibsen, although the juxtaposition of the two dramatists did not come about until both had obtained a certain amount of respect and respectability. The obvious reason for this development is to be found in the artistic trend of the period towards Naturalism, or *Verismo*: a reaction against Romanticism, urging that literature and art concern themselves with contemporary life, and that the psychology of dramatic characters be admitted to literary works. Thus the rise of the women's movement in the 1870's produced a change in the way in which female characters were presented: women began to appear more active and independent, even in writers who did not endorse the new social trends—as in the case of Ibsen, who was not an advocate of the women's movement. (On one occasion, when a woman who had left her husband for another man defended herself with a reference to Nora in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen replied: "But *she* went alone!")²⁷

In contrast to Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides' plays had much in common with the Naturalistic movement, with its interest in psychological realism, new social trends, and new concerns that reflected the emergence of new social groups. But the differences between Euripides and Ibsen remain considerable. The one common denominator in the ascendancy of the two dramatists is, I believe, to be found in another aspect of Naturalism, stated most clearly by Georg Brandes. In the introduction to his famous lectures on *Main Currents of Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, given at the University of Copenhagen in 1872 and printed, reprinted, and translated repeatedly over the next fifty years, Brandes maintained that "Literature in modern times is only alive when it brings up problems for discussion."²⁸ The influence of Brandes' lectures produced a radical change in the understanding of Ibsen during the latter part of the 1870's. As a result, his plays came to be perceived as a contribution to the discussion of social questions. Bernard Shaw, in his *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, stressed that Ibsen was the first to introduce genuine discussion in his dialogue. In this context we see a clear connection between Ibsen and Euripides, who—as Wilamowitz claimed—invented the *drame à thèse*.²⁹ It was their willingness to discuss contemporary issues that, in the eyes of scholars around the turn of the

²⁷ Cf. Meyer 399.

²⁸ *Hovedstrømninger i det nittende Aarhundredes Litteratur* I (Copenhagen 1966) 246. This passage is not included in the English translation.

²⁹ *Supra* n.12: 49, where he also observes that "Euripides looks for problems in the old fables, problems about which they had no idea whatsoever."

century, was the essence of both Euripides and Ibsen. It was this aspect of their plays that caught the attention of two such different personalities as the conservative nobleman, Wilamowitz, and the English upstart with leftist inclinations, Gilbert Murray.

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