



Ibsen and the Classic World

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## IBSEN AND THE CLASSIC WORLD<sup>1</sup>

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In 1848 in the provincial town of Grimstad on the south coast of Norway a drug clerk began to prepare for his entrance examinations to a course in medicine at the University of Christiania. Among the subjects required were, strangely enough, Sallust's *Catiline* and the Catilinarian orations of Cicero. The results of this preparation were of greater importance for the future of literature than for that of medicine. For, as the drug clerk himself has later told us, he *devoured* these writings, and in the night hours stolen from sleep he wrote a drama *Catiline*, published soon afterward, under the assumed name of Brynjolf Bjarme. The real name of the drug clerk was Henrik Ibsen.

At this time, the winter of 1848-49, the atmosphere of Europe was surcharged with the spirit of revolt, and the youthful poet saw in *Catiline*, not the arch-anarchist that his sources made him out to be, but a man whose remarkable powers had been suppressed and perverted by his surroundings and whose reputation with posterity was based exclusively on the testimony of enemies.<sup>2</sup> The figure of *Catiline* struck a sympathetic chord in the mind of Ibsen; for the latter found the smug society of Grimstad averse to accepting him among the socially elect, and felt furthermore that of the banquet of life he was afforded only a glimpse through the windows of others feasting. So, in the soliloquy of *Catiline* with which he begins the play, Ibsen to a considerable extent reveals himself and his own feelings:

I must, I must; thus rings a voice within me  
In my soul's abyss, and I shall heed its call.  
Power have I and heart for something better,  
Aye, something nobler than this life I lead.

<sup>1</sup> Read at the joint meeting of the American Philological Association and the American Archaeological Institute at Haverford, December 30, 1914.

<sup>2</sup> These and other facts about the writing of *Catiline* are told by Ibsen himself in the preface to its second edition, the publication of which marked his twenty-five year jubilee as an author.

An examination of Ibsen's *Catiline* shows that it was the cold and austere Sallust rather than the impetuous and ebullient Cicero that impressed him, though neither won him to his view, and perhaps the future historian of Latin literature will record this as an awakening worthy of comparison with that of St. Augustine by the lost *Hortensius*. What matters it that dramatically the *Catiline* of Ibsen was crudeness itself, if it contained situations and ideas that foreshadowed the author of the social dramas, and if it disclosed a mastery over metrical form that marked a new epoch in the literature of Norway? Its fine flashes of divine fire revealed to the callow youth his poetic strength of wing. Had not Ibsen as apprentice written *Catiline* at twenty-one, he could hardly as master have created *Brand* at thirty-seven.

Between the lines of this, the first of Ibsen's dramas, may be read his hope that he might see the places where its action occurred. But he found his apprenticeship to the Muses far longer and more exacting than that to Aesculapius, and it was not until fifteen years later that he was able to come to Italy. Fortunately his coming resulted in no mere transient visit but in a rich sojourn of four years, 1864-68, a period in his life which the writer has deemed worthy of special treatment of which the present paper is merely an offshoot.<sup>1</sup>

Ibsen spent his first summer in Italy at Genzano in the Alban hills in company with his friend Lorentz Dietrichson, afterward professor of art. During the afternoons they were accustomed to read and converse as they reclined under the trees on some hillside overlooking the opal waters of Lake Nemi, and here he heard his friend read Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the campaign of

<sup>1</sup> Most of this time was spent at Rome and its vicinity, the summer months of 1864 at Genzano, of 1865 at Ariccia, where he wrote *Brand*, of 1866 at Frascati. He had planned to visit Greece in the summer of 1867, but instead he was kept busy on the island of Ischia and at Sorrento all that summer and part of the autumn finishing *Peer Gynt*. His second Italian period was from September, 1878, to May, 1885. Rome still remained his favorite among Italian haunts, but he made stays of some length also at Sorrento and Amalfi. This Italian period was broken by short intervals, generally in summer, spent at Munich or Gossensass. During this period he wrote *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *The Wild Duck* (1884).

Julian against the Alemanni. The story of Julian's splendid victory and the imperial intrigue that would have robbed him of his reward made a lasting impression on the mind of Ibsen in much the same way that the story of Catiline had affected him, and we are assured that already there began to germinate in his mind the theme that was later to develop into *Emperor and Galilean*.<sup>1</sup> This work was less spontaneous, as is clearly indicated by the fact that it was on his mind more than eight years after he conceived it (1864-73) as well as by the many changes of plan that it suffered; yet, even so, he regarded it both at the time of publication and afterward, when he could survey all his literary productions in retrospect, as his greatest work. For the historical events his chief authority was Ammianus Marcellinus;<sup>2</sup> next in importance among the works consulted are those of Julian himself, notably the *Misopogon*.<sup>3</sup> These as well as other ancient authors dealing with the period<sup>4</sup> he read in translation. He also went through a number of church historians in the German library on the Capitol<sup>5</sup> (not that of the Archeological Institute); and after his return to Germany he studied modern works on Julian.<sup>6</sup> In all these various writings he found copious references to the great authors of the classical period, whom besides he may to some extent have read in

<sup>1</sup> Dietrichson, *Svundne Tider*, I, 336.

<sup>2</sup> Ibsen used the German translation by Trosz and Büchele (Stuttgart, 1827-53); see *Efterladte Skrifter*, Vol. II and notes at the end of Vol. III.

<sup>3</sup> This was accessible to him in the translation by Reichardt (Stuttgart, 1856); the *Caesares* was accessible in that by von Osiander (Stuttgart, 1856). See further Woerner, *Henrik Ibsen*, I, 394.

<sup>4</sup> Woerner, *op. cit.*, I, 300, mentions Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Dio Chrysostom, Theodoretus, Zosimus (accessible in the version by Seybold and Heyler, 1802), Zonaras, Sozomenus, Eunapius (see Ibsen's *Breve*, Nos. 100 and 103), Libanius, Rufinus, Philostorgius, Socrates (Sophist), Suidas.

<sup>5</sup> See Ibsen, Letter 235.

<sup>6</sup> Here may be mentioned: de Broglie, *L'Eglise et l'Empire Romain au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 1st ed., 1859 (Ibsen used 2d and 3d editions); Auer, *Kaiser Julian der Abtrünnige im Kampfe mit den Kirchenvätern seiner Zeit*, Wien, 1855 (excerpts from both of these historians are given in *Efterladte Skrifter*, II); Neander, *Über den Kaiser Julianus und sein Zeitalter, ein historisches Gemälde*, Leipzig, 1812, 1867; Strauss, *Der Romantiker auf dem Throne der Caesaren, oder Julian der Abtrünnige*, Mannheim, 1847; Ibsen's opinion of this work is given in Letter 82. This work was really a veiled attack on Frederick William IV of Prussia.

translations, since as he has himself told us he was not much of a Greek scholar.<sup>1</sup> Here and there an expression is met with that is worthy of Greek tragedy, such as "the waves of destiny," "the wrath of necessity," "the shadow of a cloud," "unfathomable all-leveling righteousness." Only a few of the authors need to be referred to, those of which the reminiscence is clear and definite. He speaks of a teacher of Homer who could make his pupils see

Heroes in battle with heroes,  
And above them the fiery gods.

He saw Apollo in anger ranging over the Trojan strand, and speeding the arrows against the Greeks; there is an echo of the Ares and Aphrodite episode (*Odys.* viii. 266 f.); and against the impious Heraclius he makes Julian quote *Odys.* xx. 18:

Heart, endure; for a shamefuller thing thou hast borne with aforetime;  
Bear that a mad dog insults the immortal gods.

Julian is made to improvise the second (and un-Homeric) line as describing more specifically the situation that he felt himself confronted with.<sup>2</sup> Plato is another of whom he has pronounced reminiscences. He sees the beauty of Socrates as set forth by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* 215; from the *Crito* 49 (and also the *Gorgias*) he sees that it is better to suffer than to do wrong; and to Plato he ascribes the thought several times repeated in the drama that only a god can rule mortals. The conception of "the third empire" (*det tredje rige*) is worthy of comparison with Plato's theory of ideas, of which indeed it may be an adaptation. The impious utterances of the poet Heraclius in the opening pages of the third act of *Emperor Julian* are strongly reminiscent of Ovid, and of the *Timon* of Lucian, both of whom he mentions a few lines farther on.

But Ibsen and the classic world met at a great many other points than those mentioned above in the discussion of *Catiline* and *Emperor and Galilean*. To him a poet dealt, not with mere fancies, but with realities, and this may be seen in his attitude toward

<sup>1</sup> See Letter 100; he had a good working knowledge of Latin.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Julian, *Oration* vii. 204 C: πρὸς Ἡράκλειον κυνικόν·

τέτλαθι δὴ, κραδίη· καὶ κύντερον ἄλλο ποτ' ἔτλης,  
ἀνάσχον καὶ κυνὸς ληροῦντος ὀλίγον ἡμέρας μύριον, κτλ.

Homer, first of poets, whom he seems to have known chiefly through the Danish version by Wilster. The anthropomorphism of the Greek gods made them as real to him as were those of the Norse mythology. In the *Balloon Letter*<sup>1</sup> he says:

Still at Yuletide Thor rides tooting  
Foremost in the wild array;  
And the gods of Greece, though fallen,  
Truly live, aye, live today.  
Still Jove dwelleth on the Capitol,  
Here as *tonans*, there as *stator*.

. . . . .  
Oh, how true to life is Juno,  
Pale and tall in anger's fire  
When her husband she surprises!  
And what manhood Mars betrays  
Underneath the golden meshes!

In one of his letters he compares to the Vikings those Greeks who in the olden times went against Troy and who had the courage and faith and strength of will and therefore also the gods on their side. His *Peer Gynt* is a modern *Odyssey* with a moral, and during the time when he was writing *Peer Gynt* he told the Danish poet Bergsøe in practically the words of Thucydides i. 22 that he was working not for the present (*tiden*) but for eternity (*evigheden*).

Vergil and Ovid he knew from the Danish hexameter version by Meisling, and probably also in the original, since he had a good working knowledge of Latin. Horace, with whom he has much in common, including his horror of the *profanum volgus*, he certainly read in the original; and in one of his letters he compliments his friend Professor Gjertsen on his translation of the *Ars Poetica*, both for his forceful rendering and for his having had the courage and good sense to break away from the dactylic hexameter as being unsuited to Scandinavian. It is hardly probable that he knew Lucretius; and yet their personalities and their attitude toward their times were very much alike. Lucretius ascended to the

edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,  
despicere unde queas alios passimque videre  
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae [ii. 8-10].

<sup>1</sup> Translation published in the *English Review*, November, 1914.

As Masson suggests, Lucretius may have found these heights lonely and cold; Ibsen surely did, and in the splendid poem *P& Vidderne*, "On the Heights" (*sic*), he has told the story of his renunciation and his hardening. In the final stanza he says:

Now I am steeled; I follow the voice  
That bids me to roam on the heights;  
My lowland-life is finished now;  
Up here on the highlands are freedom and God;  
Down there the others are groping.

The lines of Lucretius ii. 55-58—

nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis  
in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus  
interdum, nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam  
quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura—

may be regarded as containing the kernel of Ibsen's poem "Afraid of the Daylight—"

When erst I was a schoolboy, there was courage enough in my heart—until the sun went under behind the mountain peak.

But as soon as the shadows of night were laid over hill and plain, I was frightened by the ugly goblins of legend and fairy tale.

And if only I closed my eyelids, I dreamt such a host of things that all my courage had flown away—God only may know how far.

But now all things within me have fully been transformed; my courage starts its wanderings with the very first ray of morn.

Now 'tis the trolls of the daylight and the bustle and din of life that send those chilling horrors darting through my breast.

I hide beneath the covers that the darkness may shield me from fear; as before, my ambition rises by eagle wings upborne.

Then flood and flames defying I soar like a falcon in the skies, all care and woe forgetting—until next morning dawns.

But if night's cloak has left me, it leaves me in despair; if ever bold deed I accomplish, it will surely be born of the night.

In one of his letters he speaks rather disparagingly of the philosophy of Cicero and of Seneca, but there is some indication that this was only a temporary mood. He probably did not know either Plautus or Terence even in translation, but he surely had caught the spirit of Plautus in the fine adaptations of his plays by Holberg (1684-1754), the father of Dano-Norse literature, whom he never tired of reading—an author who unfortunately is but little known to English readers.

His knowledge of Greek tragedy he gained through translations, and his appreciation of it must have deepened as he advanced toward perfection in his social dramas. One of the most potent factors in bringing this about was his study of Greek art, which he began soon after his arrival in Italy. In his letter to Björnson of September 16, 1864, from Rome he says:

I have not yet come to an understanding with ancient art; I cannot make out its connection with our own time; to me it is void of illusion, and more than that, of personal and individual expression both in the work of art itself and on the part of the artist; nor can I help (at least thus far) seeing only conventions where others insist that there are enduring laws. Even as our own heroic ballads, so it seems to me that the plastic works of antiquity were the product of the age in which they were created rather than of this or of that master. . . . The architecture has taken better hold on me, but neither the antique architecture nor its descendants appeal to me so much as the Gothic [Letter 17].

His letter to Björnson of January 28, 1865, registers the change:

The beauty of ancient sculpture becomes revealed to me more and more as you predicted in your letter. It comes to me in flashes, but such an occasional flash casts its searchlight over vast areas. Do you remember the Tragic Muse which stands in the hall just outside of the rotunda in the Vatican? No statue that I have yet seen down here has brought me so much illumination as this. I verily believe that through this has been revealed to me what Greek Tragedy really was. That indescribably great, noble, and calm joy in the expression of the face, that richly wreathed head that has about it something supernaturally awe-inspiring and bacchantic, those eyes that look inward and yet far beyond the outward object they are fixed upon—such was Greek Tragedy. The statue of Demosthenes in the Lateran,<sup>1</sup> the faun in the Villa Borghese, and the faun (Praxiteles') in the Vatican (Braccio Nuovo) have given me a deep insight into Greek life and character and have moreover helped me to understand what the imperishable element of beauty really is. O that I could bring this understanding to bear upon my own work! [Letter 18].

Of all the departments of ancient literature this is the one that lies closest to his own; and no greater tribute can be paid to his originality than the fact that it is well-nigh impossible to establish any real influence of it in his work.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, some very

<sup>1</sup> The statue of Demosthenes is in the Vatican; or, did Ibsen mean the statue of Sophocles in the Lateran?

<sup>2</sup> In 1867 to the criticism that his *Peer Gynt* was not poetry Ibsen replied: "The Scandinavians of this century are not Greeks." And yet by the time that he



striking parallels and resemblances; for instance, his plays at the very outset presuppose the situation that leads to the catastrophe. He has his affinity with all the three tragedians. Quite as much as any one of them he regarded himself as the chosen awakener and teacher of his people.<sup>1</sup> His ruggedness and imagination and creative power remind one of Aeschylus.<sup>2</sup> Like him he was slow in the development to the full maturity of his powers, and he had unbounded confidence that posterity's estimate of his plays would be highly appreciative. And is not *Brand* a Titan Prometheus built in the language of the Bible? And does not more than one of Ibsen's plays show by its action the operation of the Aeschylean principles *δράσαντι παθεῖν* and *πάθει μάθος*?<sup>3</sup>

Woerner<sup>4</sup> has linked the names of Ibsen and Sophocles in a comparison too long for quotation and rather difficult of summary. In it he justifies the choice of incidents set forth in *Ghosts* by citing the even stranger chain of events that make up *Oedipus Rex*.

Ibsen's type of mind, however, was utterly different both from that of Aeschylus and from that of Sophocles, and is rather to be likened to that of Euripides, whom indeed Woerner,<sup>5</sup> most felicitously calls *der athenische Ibsen*. Both were apostles of new ideals of thought, both had to submit to the misrepresentation and abuse

finished *Ghosts* (1881) he had, though unconsciously perhaps, gone over to the essential structural principles of Greek tragedy—another proof, if proof be needed, that it represents the final and universal type.

<sup>1</sup> See Letter 26.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Ibsen's *En Livstid* 27-28

der går en vellystig fødselsve  
igennem dens jomfrukviste,

(of the birch in springtime)

"there goes a birthpang full of joy  
all through its virgin branches,"

is practically a combination of *Ag.* 1391:

(χαίρει) σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν,

and *Ag.* 1417:

ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλότατην ἐμοὶ  
ὦδιν'.

<sup>3</sup> Ibsen's fondness for bringing up situations in which the sins of the fathers are visited on the children (*Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *Ghosts*) is due to biblical rather than Aeschylean influence.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Henrik Ibsen*, II, 97-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

always heaped upon reformers in their own lifetime, and both were singularly indifferent to hostile criticism. Euripides was at an immense disadvantage through having to convey his message in the terms of a dramatically overworked mythology. Ibsen was not persecuted by an Aristophanes and while he by no means escaped scot-free he received the sympathetic interpretation of some of the ablest critics of his age. What a pity that he did not give us his authoritative comments on the dramatic contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in the *Frogs* 1004-76 as far as the problem play is concerned! He would probably have held that any poet who treats largely of women must bring forward the demonic (Phaedra, Sthenoboea) as well as the angelic (Alcestis, Macaria, Polyxena) and the less pronounced types between, and that Euripides showed himself a real friend of woman's cause in the *Medea* even as he himself did in *A Doll's House*. Ibsen might further have cited the extreme types of women in his own works: Furia, Hjordis, Rebecca, Hedda, over against Aurelia, Margaret, Agnes, Solveig, Hedwig, Asta; and as a still further parallel he might have pointed out that some people talked scandal even about a poet whose life was as pure as his own. When Aeschylus (or Aristophanes for him) said (1054-55)

τοῖς μὲν γὰρ παιδαρίουσιν  
ἔστι διδάσκαλος ὅστις φράζει, τοῖσιν δ' ἡβῶσι ποιηταί.  
πάνυ δὲ δεῖ χρηστὰ λέγειν ἡμᾶς,

the remark might have been made, as was recently made by Brandes, that grown-ups are qualified to be their own censors.<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing statement of Ibsen's relation to the classic world and of its influence upon him involves a conception of him that is

<sup>1</sup> How suggestive the study of Ibsen may be made for the interpretation of a classical author will be evident to anyone who compares Steiger, *Euripides, seine Dichtung und seine Persönlichkeit* (1912)—a work in which such comparison is made—and Decharme, *Euripide et l'esprit de son théâtre*, published at a time (1892) when such comparison was hardly possible. Steiger cites from the poems and letters of Ibsen many passages the thought of which he felt that Euripides *might* have uttered in regard to himself; and while no one is likely to accept *all* that Steiger thus reads into Euripides, it will hardly be denied that in this stimulating comparison he has placed before us the means of gaining a deeper and truer understanding of *der athenische Ibsen*.

in some respects new. While doing full justice to his originality, it maintains that he is to be regarded, like any other truly great author, not as a separate stream in the world of literature, but rather as one of its main currents. Even so he remains in a class by himself. No writer has ever more thoroughly infused his works with his own personality, nor reached greater heights of moral earnestness in insisting that life should be made harmonious with doctrine, nor has anyone ever shown greater courage in probing humanity's ills. To Ibsen a good subject was by itself worthless, and what made his work so poignant is that it presents, not what he had merely observed, but what he had actually experienced. What his contact with the past accomplished—whether with classical literature or art, the Bible, the civilization of Egypt, the Renaissance, or with Goethe or Schiller or Heine—was to supply the leaven that enabled him to rise to his true height. He believed that literature, to be vital and effective, must constantly progress. Such an author would not be likely to accept the literary standards of any previous age as definitive. His attitude toward the remote past may be paralleled by his attitude toward his own works as set forth in his famous statement in regard to *An Enemy of the People* made in a letter to Brandes:

I maintain that a fighter at the intellectual outposts can never gather a majority around him. In ten years perhaps the majority may occupy the standpoint which Dr. Stockmann held at the public meeting. But during these ten years the Doctor will not have been standing still; he will still be at least ten years ahead of the majority. The majority, the mass, the multitude, can never overtake him; he can never have the majority with him. As for myself, at all events I am conscious of unceasing progression. At the point where I stood when I wrote each of my books, there now stands a fairly compact multitude, but I myself am there no longer; I am elsewhere, and, I hope, farther ahead.

The fact that he always remained supreme over all the influences that affected him is what has made his own influence so potent, not only in the literature of Scandinavia, but also in the great literatures of the world.