Chronology

1828 Henrik Johan Ibsen born to Marichen and Knud Ibsen, a retailer and timber trader, in the town of Skien, 100 km south of Oslo (then Christiania).

1833 Starts school at Skien borgerskole (*borgerskoler* were schools for the bourgeoisie of the towns).

1835 Knud Ibsen is declared bankrupt. The family's property is auctioned off, and they move to the farm Venstøp in the parish of Gjerpen, just east of Skien.

1843 Travels to the coastal town of Grimstad, about 110 km south of Skien, where he is made apprentice in an apothecary's shop.

1846 Hans Jacob Hendrichsen is born to Else Sophie Jensdatter, the apothecary's maid, on 9 October. Ibsen accepts patrimony and is required to pay maintenance for the next fourteen years.

1849 Writes *Catilina*, his first play, as well as poetry, during the winter. Has his first poem, 'I høsten' ('In Autumn'), published in a newspaper at the end of September.

1850 Leaves Grimstad on 12 April, the publication date of *Catilina*. The play is published under the pseudonym Brynjulf Bjarme. Visits his family in Skien for the last time.

Goes to the capital, Christiania, where he sits the national high school exam in the autumn, but fails in arithmetic and Greek.

His first play to be performed, *Kjæmpehøien* (*The Burial Mound*), is staged at the Christiania Theater on 26 September.

1851 Starts the journal *Manden*, later *Andhrimner*, with friends.

The famous violinist Ole Bull hires Ibsen for Det norske

Theater (the Norwegian Theatre), his new venture in Bergen. Ibsen begins as an apprentice, then becomes director and resident playwright. He agrees to write and produce one new play for the theatre every year.

1852 Spends over three months in Copenhagen and Dresden studying Danish and German theatre.

1853 *Sancthansnatten* (*St John's Night*) opens on 2 January, the founding date of Det norske Theater.

1855 *Fru Inger til Østeraad* (*Lady Inger of Ostrat*) performed at Det norske Theater on 2 January.

1856 First real success with *Gildet paa Solhoug* (*The Feast at Solhoug*) at Det norske Theater; the play is subsequently performed at the Christiania Theater and published as a book.

Becomes engaged to Suzannah Daae Thoresen.

1857 *Olaf Liljekrans* premieres at Det norske Theater to a disappointing reception.

Moves to Christiania during the summer and takes up the position of artistic director at the Kristiania Norske Theater (Kristiania Norwegian Theatre) from early September.

First performance outside Norway when *The Feast at Solhoug* is staged at the Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern (Royal Dramatic Theatre) in Stockholm in November.

1858 Marries Suzannah Thoresen in Bergen on 18 June.

Hærmændene paa Helgeland (*The Vikings at Helgeland*) has its first night at the Kristiania Norske Theater on 24 November and is met with a resoundingly positive response.

1859 A son, Sigurd Ibsen, is born to Suzannah and Henrik Ibsen on 23 December.

Writes the long poem 'Paa Vidderne' ('On the Moors') as a 'New Year's Gift' to the readers of the journal *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*.

1860–61 Ibsen accumulates private debt, owes taxes and is taken to court by creditors. He drinks heavily during this period, and the family has to move a number of times. He is criticized for his choice of repertory at the Kristiania Norske Theater.

His epic poem 'Terje Vigen' appears in *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*.

1862 The theatre goes bankrupt, and Ibsen is without regular employment.

Ethnographic expedition to the West of Norway in summer, collecting fairy tales and stories.

Publishes *Kjærlighedens Komedie* (*Love's Comedy*) in *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*.

1863 Employed as 'artistic consultant' at the Christiania Theater from 1 January and made able to pay off most of his debts. The first, short Ibsen biography published by his friend Paul Botten-Hansen in *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*. Applies for a state stipend in March, but is instead awarded a travel grant of 400 *spesidaler* (in 1870 a male teacher would earn around 250 *spesidaler* a year) for a journey abroad.

Kongs-Emnerne (*The Pretenders*) published in 1,250 copies in October.

1864 *The Pretenders* performed at the Christiania Theater on 17 January. A great success.

Ibsen leaves Norway on 1 April and settles in Rome.

1865 Writes *Brand* in Ariccia.

1866 The verse drama *Brand* is published in 1,250 copies by Ibsen's new publisher Gyldendal in Copenhagen on 15 March, with three more print runs before the end of the year. The play is Ibsen's real breakthrough, helping to secure financial stability.

Given an annual stipend of 400 *spesidaler* by the Norwegian government, plus a new travel grant.

1867 Writes the verse drama *Peer Gynt* on Ischia and in Sorrento. Published in 1,250 copies on 14 November, with a second, larger print run appearing just two weeks later.

1868 At the beginning of October moves to Dresden in Germany, where he lives for the next seven years.

1869 Travels to Stockholm for a Nordic meeting for establishing a common Scandinavian orthography. Publishes *De unges Forbund* (*The League of Youth*) in 2,000 copies on 30 September; the play is performed at the Christiania Theater on 18 October.

Travels from Marseilles to Egypt in October and participates as official guest in the festivities at the opening of the Suez Canal.

1871 *Digte* (*Poems*), his first and only collection of poetry, is published in 4,000 copies on 3 May.

The Danish critic Georg Brandes, the propagator of the so-called 'Modern Breakthrough', comes to Dresden and meets Ibsen for the first time.

1872 Edmund Gosse's article 'Ibsen's New Poems' appears in *The Spectator* in March.

1873 Gosse's 'Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian Satirist' appears in *The Fortnightly Review* in January.

Travels to Vienna in June, as a member of the jury for fine art at the World Exhibition.

Kejser og Galilæer (*Emperor and Galilean*) published in 4,000 copies on 16 October; there is a new print run of 2,000 copies in December.

Love's Comedy performed at the Christiania Theater on 24 November.

1874 Ibsen and his family in Christiania from July to the end of September, his first visit since leaving Norway in 1864.

1875 *Catilina* published in revised edition to celebrate Ibsen's twenty-fifth anniversary as a writer.

The family moves from Dresden to Munich on 13 April.

1876 *Peer Gynt* receives its first performance at the Christiania Theater, with music composed by Edvard Grieg.

Emperor and Galilean translated by Catherine Ray, Ibsen's first translation into English.

The Vikings at Helgeland premieres at Munich's Hoftheater (Court Theatre) on 10 April, making it the first Ibsen production outside Scandinavia.

1877 Is made honorary doctor at the University of Uppsala in Sweden in September.

Samfundets støtter (*Pillars of the Community*) is published in 7,000 copies on 11 October and performed at the Danish Odense Teater on 14 November.

1878 Moves to Rome in September.

1879 Travels to Amalfi with his family in July and writes most of his new play, *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*), there. Goes on to Sorrento and then Rome in September and moves back to Munich in October.

Edmund Gosse publishes *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe*, devoting much space to Ibsen.

A Doll's House is published in 8,000 copies on 4 December and receives its premiere at Det Kongelige Teater (the Royal Theatre) in Copenhagen on 21 December.

1880 Ibsen returns to Rome in November.

Quicksands, an adaptation by William Archer of *Pillars of the Community*, at London's Gaiety Theatre, 15 December.

1881 Goes to Sorrento in June and writes most of *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*) there; the play is published in 10,000 copies on 13 December and is met with much harsh criticism, affecting subsequent book sales.

1882 First performance of *Ghosts* takes place in Chicago on 20 May.

Miss Frances Lord translates *A Doll's House* as *Nora*.

En folkefiende (*An Enemy of the People*) published in 10,000 copies on 28 November.

1883 *An Enemy of the People* first staged at the Christiania Theater on 13 January.

1884 *Breaking a Butterfly*, Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman's adaptation of *A Doll's House*, premieres at the Prince's Theatre, London, on 3 March.

Vildanden (*The Wild Duck*) is published in 8,000 copies on 11 November.

1885 First performance of *The Wild Duck* at Den Nationale Scene (the National Stage) in Bergen on 9 January.

First performance of *Brand* at the Nya Teatern (New Theatre) in Stockholm on 24 March.

Henrik and Suzannah Ibsen go to Norway in early June. They travel back via Copenhagen at the end of September, and in October settle in Munich again, where they live for the six following years.

Ghosts, translated by Miss Frances Lord, serialized in Britain in the socialist journal *To-Day*.

1886 *Rosmersholm* published in 8,000 copies on 23 November.

1887 A breakthrough in Germany with the production of *Ghosts* at the Residenz-Theater (Residency Theatre) in Berlin on 9 January.

Rosmersholm staged at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen on 17 January.

1888 Ibsen turns sixty. Celebrations in Scandinavia and Germany. Henrik Jæger publishes the first biography in book form.

Fruen fra havet (*The Lady from the Sea*) published in 10,000 copies on 28 November.

Newcastle-based Walter Scott publishes *Pillars of Society, and Other Plays* (it includes *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*) under the editorship of the theatre critic William Archer and with an introduction by Havelock Ellis.

1889 *The Lady from the Sea* premieres both at the Hoftheater in Weimar and at the Christiania Theater on 12 February.

The production of *A Doll's House*, with Janet Achurch as Nora, at the Novelty Theatre in London on 7 June, marks his breakthrough in Britain. This production goes on a world tour.

Pillars of the Community is produced at London's Opera Comique.

1890 André Antoine produces *Ghosts* at the Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre) in Paris, leading to a breakthrough in France.

The Lady from the Sea translated into English by Karl Marx's youngest daughter, Eleanor.

Hedda Gabler published in 10,000 copies in Copenhagen on 16 December, with translations appearing in near-synchronized editions in Berlin, London and Paris.

1891 *Hedda Gabler* receives its first performance at the Residenz-Theater (Residency Theatre) in Munich on 31 January with Ibsen present. Competing English translations by William Archer and Edmund Gosse soon follow.

Several London productions of Ibsen plays, starting with *Rosmersholm* at the Vaudeville Theatre in February. In order to avoid censorship, *Ghosts* is given a private performance by the new Independent Theatre on 13 March, leading to a big public outcry. *Hedda Gabler* is produced under the joint management of Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea in April, with Robins in the title role, and *The Lady from the Sea* follows in May.

George Bernard Shaw publishes his *The Quintessence of*

Ibsenism, based on his lectures to the Fabian Society in the preceding year.

Henry James publishes 'On the Occasion of *Hedda Gabler*' in *The New Review* in June.

Ibsen returns to Kristiania (as it was now written after the Norwegian spelling review of 1877) on 16 July and settles there for the remainder of his life. This year he befriends the pianist Hildur Andersen, thirty-six years his junior, often considered the model for Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder*.

1892 *The Vikings at Helgeland* is performed in Moscow on 14 January.

William and Charles Archer translate *Peer Gynt* in a prose version.

Sigurd marries the daughter of Ibsen's colleague and rival Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson.

Bygmester Solness (*The Master Builder*) is published in 10,000 copies on 12 December.

1893 *The Master Builder* is first performed at the Lessing-theater in Berlin on 19 January. It is co-translated by William Archer and Edmund Gosse into English, and premieres at London's Trafalgar Square Theatre on 20 February.

The Opera Comique in London puts on *The Master Builder*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm* and one act from *Brand* between 29 May and 10 June.

An Enemy of the People is produced by Herbert Beerbohm Tree at the Haymarket Theatre on 14 June. Ibsen's first commercial success on the British stage.

F. Anstey (pseudonym for Thomas Anstey Guthrie) writes a series of Ibsen parodies called *Mr Punch's Pocket Ibsen*.

1894 *The Wild Duck* at the Royalty Theatre, London, from 4 May.

Lille Eyolf (*Little Eyolf*) is published in 10,000 copies on 11 December.

Two English verse translations of *Brand*, by C. H. Herford and F. E. Garrett.

1895 *Little Eyolf* is performed at the Deutsches Theater (German Theatre) in Berlin on 12 January.

1896 *Little Eyolf* at the Avenue Theatre in London from 23 November, in a translation by William Archer.

John Gabriel Borkman is published in 12,000 copies on 15 December.

1897 World premiere of *John Gabriel Borkman* at the Svenska Teatern (Swedish Theatre) and the Suomalainen Teaatteri (Finnish Theatre) on 10 January, both in Helsinki.

1898 Gyldendal in Copenhagen publishes a People's Edition of Ibsen's collected works.

Ibsen's seventieth birthday is celebrated in Kristiania, Copenhagen and Stockholm, and he receives greetings from all over Europe and North America.

1899 *Når vi døde vågner* (*When We Dead Awaken*), his last play, is published in 12,000 copies on 22 December.

1900 *When We Dead Awaken* is performed at the Hoftheater in Stuttgart on 26 January.

C. H. Herford translates *Love's Comedy*; William Archer translates *When We Dead Awaken*.

Ibsen suffers a first stroke in March, and his health deteriorates over the next few years.

James Joyce's 'Ibsen's New Drama' appears in *The Fortnightly Review* in April.

1903 Imperial Theatre, London, produces *When We Dead Awaken* on 25 January and *The Vikings at Helgeland* on 15 April.

1906 On 23 May Henrik Ibsen dies in his home in Arbins gate 1 in Kristiania.

The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen, translated and edited by William Archer, appears in twelve volumes over the next two years.

Introduction

In 1884, the year Henrik Ibsen published the first of the plays collected in this volume, he was happily living in Rome, the city outside Norway he knew best. He had arrived here twenty years earlier, equipped with a government travel stipend and the ambition of becoming a full-time playwright. Since then, he had lived in Dresden and Munich in addition to Italy and made good on his original ambition. He had become a well-known, if rather controversial, dramatist, at least at home.

Becoming a playwright in exile was not easy because, in leaving Norway, Ibsen had also left behind the world of the theatre that had sustained his work. At the age of twenty-three, he had started out as an acting instructor and director at Det norske Theater (The Norwegian Theatre) in Bergen, moving on to Kristiania (now Oslo) six years later. He acquired an impressive amount of experience during these years, becoming what the French would call a man of the theatre. Along the way, he had learned every aspect of the trade, working with technicians and actors, thinking about the best use of theatrical spaces, designs and styles and anticipating the preferences of his audience for future seasons. His work in the theatre also exposed him to the dominant plays of the time, which were mostly Parisian exports, with their cleverly constructed clues and revelations, impeccable sense of pacing and neat, satisfying conclusions. Norway, at the time, was a theatre culture based on translations; perhaps this experience sparked Ibsen's later goal of reaching a larger, worldwide audience. For the time being, however, it drove him to seek out themes that were

specific to Scandinavia's past, to set his own dramas apart from what was being imported from elsewhere.

But then, at the very moment of his first public success on the stage, he had decided to remove himself from the Norwegian theatre community. Perhaps he felt that the practical requirements of the theatre and the tastes of audiences were constraining his work. The first plays he wrote in Roman exile, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt* and the book-length *Emperor and Galilean*, amounting to 512 pages in the first edition, were so-called closet dramas, plays meant for reading only. Ibsen's visions were too grand for the theatre, both practically and aesthetically. His new plays were dramas of ideas that grappled with the loftiest religious and philosophical problems while roaming freely across time and space. It was hard to imagine a theatre, or an audience, that would have tolerated such effusions. Ibsen was declaring his independence from theatre.

Even though Ibsen had chosen exile from Norway – and from theatre – his readership was still predominantly Scandinavian, and it was growing, despite the difficult nature of these plays.[1] The print-runs of his works were phenomenal. *Brand*, the first play he published with the Copenhagen publisher Gyldendal, brought him a new level of success with the reading public (though not on stage, since the play was not meant to be performed). There had also been indications that Ibsen was gaining followers outside Scandinavia, not least in Germany. This exiled man of the theatre was set on a new career trajectory as an author of distinctly literary plays that were addressed to readers.

But just when his future career path seemed clear once more, he made yet another turn by deciding to return to writing for the stage. This time around, however, he would seek a way of combining the two, the ambition of his literary closet dramas and the requirements of the stage. In order to achieve this goal, he would set his future plays not in the remote past but in the present, and specifically in the world of his home audience. Of all of Ibsen's twists and turns, this would prove to be the one with the most lasting importance.

Ibsen's new plays, beginning with *The League of Youth*, were

set in present-day Norway, and in a particular milieu consisting of lawyers, bankers, doctors, clergymen, newspaper editors and businessmen, in short, the Norwegian bourgeoisie. Ibsen's view of this group on the whole was not favourable. The four plays he wrote between 1877 and 1882 are relentless in their attacks on middle-class characters and the institutions they inhabit. Businessmen use their power to cover up their misdeeds, as in *Pillars of the Community*, whose sarcastic title announces Ibsen's aim of showing just how rotten those pillars really were. Ibsen returned to this theme in *An Enemy of the People*, a drama exposing the corruption surrounding a spa. In *A Doll's House*, lawyers and bankers come in for special treatment, always ready to cover up a crooked deal, while in *Ghosts*, it's the clergy that is both hypocritical and misguided, hiding sordid affairs and driving people into financial ruin. Ibsen reserved his harshest treatment for the institution of marriage. The enduring force of *A Doll's House* derives from Ibsen's harsh diagnosis of just how false and one-sided the traditional bourgeois marriage really was; he saw no solution but to dissolve it altogether.

If all Ibsen had done in these plays was expose the sins of the bourgeoisie, they would not have enjoyed such lasting success. In the course of chronicling corruption, he had stumbled on a more important theme: fear of social decline. Everywhere in his plays, bourgeois characters have a reputation to keep up, and not only because of social pressure. Their professions depend on reputation; it is the most important currency of this milieu, which means that loss of reputation is its ruling nightmare. The fear of losing a reputation is the stuff from which Ibsen forged his new plays.

The fear of scandal usually depends on events that have happened in the past. Ibsen's great insight was to realize that this meant the past was continually haunting the present, and he forged a dramatic form to suit this insight. To be sure, all plays have to introduce their characters to the audience, and this usually requires glimpses into their past. But usually exposition is used to launch characters on a path of action and interaction. Ibsen reversed the emphasis and devoted more attention

to the gradual uncovering of the past. (The technique was not without precedents: Sophocles' *Oedipus* had done the same, as several contemporary critics recognized.) Sometimes, this involved exposing past scandals, from crooked business deals to illegitimate children. But Ibsen went further and included events that took place in previous generations. He called this power of the past over the present inheritance. Inheritance could mean, especially for his bourgeois characters, financial inheritance, but it could also mean moral inheritance. Ibsen's characters are forever suffering from the sins of their parents, usually through some sort of medical or psychological condition that has been passed down. His doctors are very good at diagnosing these conditions, but usually the actual mechanism of inheritance remains vague, since it is not a medical condition but a technique through which Ibsen makes visible just how much the past rules over our lives.

These new plays, *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) chief among them, made Ibsen famous – and notorious. He was immediately denounced as a rabble rouser, a reformer, a suffragist, a radical seeking to shock the bourgeoisie out of its complacency. His plays were now performed not only at home but also abroad, especially in Germany, and the print runs of his plays increased.[2] He was able to live in Rome in comfortable circumstances. What would he write next? Which new turns would his art take? Which bourgeois hypocrisy would he attack now? Ibsen would provide answers to these questions with the four plays collected in the present volume.

The Wild Duck

Ibsen called his new play, first published in Copenhagen on 11 November 1884, *The Wild Duck*, and it has all the ingredients his audience had come to expect from him. There are hints here of shady business dealings involving illegal logging, for which only one of the two business partners has been punished. Will we witness the fall of the other, as we did in *Pillars of the Community*? The play revolves around a marriage, and there are strong suggestions that this marriage is built on deceptions

every bit as deep as those in *A Doll's House*. The clue? An inherited eye disease. Will we witness another confrontation in which the truth will be forced out? Gregers, the son of the surviving businessman, seems ready to do Ibsen's work for him.

But halfway through the play, it becomes clear that we won't revisit the old business deal that ruined a reputation. As for the marriage, confronting the ignorant husband with the truth turns out to be a terrible mistake.

This surprising twist could mean only one thing: Ibsen had undertaken another change in direction. Perhaps it was his increasingly scandalous reputation as a critic of the bourgeoisie that made him want to surprise his critics. Ibsen had come to be associated with Dr Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* (1882), the outspoken central character who exposes the truth about a spa town's contaminated water supply. Now it was as if he had turned the lens on himself. If they thought they had figured out his formula, he would prove them wrong. *The Wild Duck* would show them that he had other aims than merely to ferret out his characters' past misdeeds. This time it is Gregers, the character intent on exposing everything, who turns out to be the villain, or rather, the misguided idealist who can't deal with the complexities of everyday life. Ibsen turns to another doctor – in his plays, doctors often fulfil the role of the *raisonneur*, a character removed from the main action who explains and comments on it – to explain his thinking. The problem with insisting on the truth is that people sometimes need to be fed lies that allow them to go on living. Insisting on truth in all things is a juvenile shortcoming that must be cured.

Life-lies, as the doctor calls them, the lies that make life bearable, are particularly necessary for fragile male egos, of which there are several in this play (and all across Ibsen's oeuvre). One man must sustain the illusion that he is a great inventor and provider, when in fact his wife and daughter keep things going. Another one, excess-prone, must be fed the illusion that he is 'demonic', whatever that is supposed to mean, to absolve him from responsibility for having ruined his life. It was one of Ibsen's great insights that wounded male egos were a perfect way of diagnosing the fear and trembling of the bourgeoisie.

What gives this play its title is another illusion, one that is made visible right on stage: an elaborate contraption that turns an attic space into a wilderness, complete with live rabbits and birds. It is here that father and son go a-hunting, a substitute for the real wilderness which they have lost. Apparently, the illusion is good enough for them. At least they don't have to be tricked by others into it; they have convinced themselves and are content with the result. It is here, in this artificial wilderness, that the wild duck lives, the emblem of all the other illusions that abound in this play. Ibsen's surprise message is that such illusions are good. When they are shattered, blood will be spilled.

Usually, Ibsen set his realist plays in bourgeois homes with nice pianos, roaring fireplaces and lace curtains. In *The Wild Duck*, he gave his set designers a particularly interesting challenge, namely to use the stage as a place of illusion. *The Wild Duck* is a surprising play not only because it upends what audiences had come to expect from Ibsen; it is also a play that comes closest to commenting on theatre as a space of made-up artifice, though it does so, interestingly, through photography, which was generally regarded as a technology that guaranteed a new form of realism. In this play, however, it is shown to be every bit as artificial as theatre.[3] The central metaphor of the wild duck remains ambiguous as well. Different characters interpret it in different ways, all of them wrong. One such wrong interpretation will lead to a terrible death. Perhaps this turn to meta-theatre occurred because Ibsen used this play deliberately to interrupt a successful series of plays; it may be seen as a pause, an experiment in something new and therefore an occasion to reflect on the theatre itself. In Norway, it is frequently regarded as his greatest play, after *Peer Gynt*.

Rosmersholm

A year before the publication of his next play, *Rosmersholm* (1886), Ibsen had, in 1885, moved back to Munich, where he would live for the next six years. On the face of it, *Rosmersholm* returns us to the world of political rabble rousers we know

from his earlier plays. Norway at this time finds itself in the grip of a new democratic wave that threatens the status quo. Belatedly, lawyers, doctors and all the other old families are forming an alliance to turn back this democratic tide by purchasing a newspaper. The aim is to fight for decency and Christian morals, and to denounce everyone else as freethinking perverts. The political fight pits former friends against each other, and we feel that Ibsen is back in his role as a social critic. Early on in the play, it becomes clear that the conservative bourgeoisie fights dirty and that Johannes Rosmer has gone over to the democratic side, disgusted with their tactics. We are now ready for one of those political showdowns that had characterized Ibsen's earlier work.

But *Rosmersholm* isn't just a return to the old formula. Even though the political fight that divides old friends takes up a lot of room, it isn't the play's central theme. Rather, Ibsen doubles down on the technique that he had employed in most of his earlier realist plays: the power of the past. The Rosmer family has a long history and reputation to keep up and suffers for it. But the past exerts its power in more nebulous ways as well. Rosmersholm is a haunted place from the very opening scene, when we are introduced to the white horse, an apparition mysteriously connected to the death of Rosmer's wife, presumably by her own hand.

The character with the biggest secret is Rebekka West, the former live-in companion of Rosmer's wife who has insinuated herself into the household. With West, Ibsen created a type to which he would return repeatedly, the coldly scheming *femme fatale* who blithely brings destruction to those around her. As so often in Ibsen, this lethal character is explained by a dark inheritance, including suggestions of incest, a theme Ibsen had also sounded in *Ghosts*.

Rebekka West isn't just a scheming woman with a past, she is also a woman with dangerous opinions about morality, a radical who deems herself beyond good and evil. Ibsen does not present her as his own political ideal. But nor does he dismiss her ideas as merely dangerous illusions, as had been the case in *The Wild Duck*. Rebekka West is an ambivalent heroine who

ultimately abandons her scheming ways as the play takes a dark and unexpected turn at the end, when this calculating schemer finds herself in the grip of wild and uncontrollable forces that lead us to the play's dramatic conclusion.

In Rebekka West Ibsen created one of several characters that have become star vehicles for female actors, along with Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*, Hedda Tesman in *Hedda Gabler* and Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder*. Creating grand roles for female stars was one reason for Ibsen's success and for the enduring status of his plays. But his reach would go far beyond the stage.[4] In the twentieth century, the British freethinking writer Cicely Isabel Fairfield found Rebekka West, despite her destructive actions, so compelling that she adopted her name and henceforth published under the name Rebecca West.

Both Rosmer and Rebekka West refuse to be contained either by their political ideas or by their past, much as it haunts their present life. Rather, these characters are dissatisfied with the roles life has to offer and seek to escape from them at all cost. In *A Doll's House*, Nora had fled a repressive marriage out of desperation. In *Rosmersholm*, the political debates and even the uncovering of the past merely set the stage for the great flight from bourgeois life that takes place at the end.

The Lady from the Sea

Nordic mythology had always been an interest of Ibsen's; in 1862 he had gone off to western Norway to collect Nordic fairy tales and stories. He had let this topic take over his reading drama *Peer Gynt*, where he liberally populated the landscape with trolls and other mythological figures. (He also kept troll figures on his writing desk.) But many of Ibsen's putatively realist plays, with their solid bourgeois homes, have roots in folklore and mythology as well. Even *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen's most sceptical and ironic play, evokes the Flying Dutchman, the mythic figure who is condemned to roam the seas.

In no play are these mythological roots of Ibsen's work laid bare as fully as in *The Lady from the Sea* (first published on 28 November 1888, and premiered simultaneously in Kristiania

and Weimar on 12 February 1889), which takes place in the world of mermaids and mysterious sailors. At first, all this seems harmless enough, nothing but material for a minor character, a would-be sculptor with a vivid imagination, or a painting. In his later plays, Ibsen increasingly used artists working in various media to compare them to his own ambitions. Some of them work in recent crafts, such as photography in *The Wild Duck*, perhaps to help Ibsen figure out how theatre might relate to this new technology. But more often Ibsen was interested in painters and sculptors. He must have felt an affinity to them; perhaps he wanted them to represent his own profession in the midst of the bankers, doctors and businessmen that otherwise dominate his plays.

But the artistic treatment of fairy tales and mythology is just the beginning, and, as the play progresses, mythology takes on increasingly disturbing forms. At first, *The Lady from the Sea* looks like yet another haunted play. It opens with a birthday party, but there seems to be some awkwardness around the question of who is actually being celebrated. It turns out it is a dead first wife whom the husband and his two daughters commemorate in this way, to the consternation of the second wife, who keeps herself apart from the family.

In the end, it is the second wife who is most fully in the thrall of the past. There is, once again, a hint of an inherited disease when it is revealed that her mother had died mad. But for Ibsen, illness, especially inherited illness, had long ceased being a medical condition, despite the prevalence of doctors in his plays, and become part of his own mythology. This is most explicitly so in *The Lady from the Sea*. Speaking about the second wife, Mrs Wangel, one character explains her erratic behaviour medically: 'That's presumably a result of her frail state of mind.' But her husband knows better. 'It isn't just that. At its deepest level it's innate in her. Ellida belongs to the sea-people. That's the thing.'

There have been hints from the beginning that Ellida is different. She has never fitted in with the comfortable bourgeois home and its rich traditions. The water in the bay, the air, none of this is right for her; she longs for and belongs to the sea. And

so she withers, another Ibsen character trapped in a false life, dreaming of escape.

Ellida's longing may be innate, but there is, as always, a backstory. It involves a strange sailor, another Flying Dutchman, who encountered Ellida ten years earlier and believes that the two are married. Not in a regular marriage, mind you. They have exchanged rings in a kind of water-ceremony, and ever since, the sailor and Ellida have shared this secret bond, even after Ellida has got married in an official, land-based ceremony to Dr Wangel. But now the sailor appears again, and Ellida must choose between the two.

Ibsen's plays contain sub-plots that cast additional light on the play's main theme, often in a lower register (something he might have learned from Shakespeare). This is the case with marriage in *The Lady from the Sea*. While we're drawn into an increasingly mythological world of the sea, minor characters, above all the wannabe sculptor, present their own idea about marriage: the wife should aid the husband and live for his art. This is a clear case of a traditional marriage that is every bit as false as Nora's in *A Doll's House*. With this marriage, at least, we know where to stand, even as the question of land versus sea in the main plot remains open to the very end. Despite all these fundamental conflicts, the play ends on a surprisingly harmonious note, perhaps because the play, or rather, its male characters, allow Ellida a choice rather than force her into taking flight.

Hedda Gabler

If it looked as if Ibsen was drifting deeper and deeper into folklore and mythology, he once again had a surprise for his audience: his next play, *Hedda Gabler*, contains no hint of them. No Flying Dutchman, no mysterious sailor, no mermaids, no white horse, or any other ghost. Perhaps Ibsen felt that he was on a track that would lead him back to *Peer Gynt*, or he feared that Nordic themes would not work as well on the Continent, where he was finding increasingly ardent followers. Be that as it may, *Hedda Gabler* is set fully and entirely in a

bourgeois home, and Ibsen decided to devote all his powers to analysing its components.

Hedda Gabler premiered in Munich, on 31 January 1891. Before that, it had been printed and published in Copenhagen on 16 December 1891 for Ibsen's significant reading public. In fact, the play was available in several places at once (it was actually first published in Dano-Norwegian in London to secure English rights),[5] part of the new pattern of synchronized launches that Ibsen now enjoyed.

Ibsen begins with the setting. The drawing room is even more elaborately furnished than is usually the case in his plays (even *The Wild Duck*, which is set in a poverty-stricken attic, opens with a lavishly furnished room at another house).

A fine, spacious and tastefully furnished drawing room, decorated in dark colours. On the back wall is a wide doorway with heavy curtains that are pulled back. This doorway leads into a smaller room presented in the same style as the drawing room. On the wall to the right, there are double folding doors, which lead to the hallway. On the opposite wall, to the left, is a glass door, also with curtains pulled back. Through it can be seen a section of a roofed veranda and trees covered with autumn leaves. Towards the centre of the room is an oval table covered with a tablecloth and surrounded by chairs. Further forward, by the right-hand wall, are a wide porcelain wood stove, a tall armchair, a footstool with a cushion and two stools. In the right-hand corner, at the back, is a corner sofa and a small round table. To the front left, a little out from the wall, is a sofa. Opposite the glass door stands a piano. On either side of the doorway at the back sets of shelves contain terracotta and majolica ware. Looking into the inner room, we see a sofa, a table and a couple of chairs against the back wall. Over the sofa hangs a portrait of a handsome older gentleman in a general's uniform. Over the table hangs a ceiling lamp with an opaque, milky-white glass shade. Distributed around the drawing room are a number of bouquets of flowers arranged in china and glass vases. Other bouquets are lying on the tables. The floors in both rooms have thick carpets. Morning light. The sun shines in through the glass door.

Even for Ibsen, this is a bit much. It is almost as if he's back in his early theatre days, giving detailed instructions to carpenters, tailors and set designer before the play has even begun. At the same time, this extensive description reads like something out of a contemporary novel, perhaps a result of the fact that Ibsen knew he was addressing two audiences at once, those in the theatre and those reading his plays at home. (Extensive stage directions addressed at a reading public would soon become a hallmark of modern drama, especially at the hands of George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill.) As soon as the play opens, this elaborate stage machinery cranks into action. Hedda doesn't like direct sunlight, so the curtains have to be drawn; the piano is nice, but its style doesn't fit with the rest of the apartment, so a second piano will have to be purchased. In this home, everything has to be perfect.

The problem is money. Pretty soon we figure out that these elaborate furnishings are bought on credit. A pair of poor aunts mortgaged their annuity as surety for the loan, and Judge Brack, a somewhat shady character, helped the newly married couple to make some other, more complicated financial arrangement. Bourgeois life depends on credit, credit depends on reputation, and reputation ensures trust in future earnings. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's husband, a banker, knows this only too well; this is why he panics when his reputation is under threat. In *Hedda Gabler*, the two protagonists, the historian Tesman and his wife, Hedda, are much less financially savvy, and will suffer for it.

All this credit economy is not a problem because Tesman has been promised a professorship, and it is based on that promise that the elaborate furnishings, even the house itself, is paid for. This, after all, is how Hedda needs to live. In fact, the furnishings are just the beginning. Soon, there will be liveried servants attending to elegant guests, for Hedda intends to turn her home into the centre of the social world.

This is the beginning of the money plot, which Ibsen had used so successfully in *A Doll's House*. Inevitably, the promised professorship is suddenly less certain when a rival scholar turns up. He is a wild character – he goes on drinking rampages and

ends up in shady establishments – and has consequently disgraced himself. But when the play opens, Eilert Løvborg has cleaned up his act and just come out with a bold book about the development of culture. In fact, Tesman has just picked it up from the bookstore and is amazed by its sweep. Tesman is a historian as well, of course, but of a very different sort. He has a narrowly circumscribed specialty, the domestic crafts of Brabant during the Middle Ages. Needless to say, Hedda Gabler will have nothing to do with such a topic, and is nonplussed when her husband uses their honeymoon – another big expense – for archival research (perhaps Ibsen was thinking of Casaubon, the dedicated scholar in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*). But we don't need to be Hedda Gabler to feel that the domestic crafts of Brabant, a region in the Low Countries, can hold little interest. Even Tesman himself doesn't seem particularly taken with his topic; in any case, he isn't making much progress with it.

The problem of money hangs over the entire play as we begin to fear that the lavishly furnished house may be taken away by creditors at any moment. But that is not all. Gradually we learn that the house was the founding myth of the marriage between Tesman and Hedda. They had talked about it when they first met, and the idea of living there in high style was what fuelled the marriage. Imagine our surprise when we learn that Hedda Gabler never even liked the house in the first place. She kept mentioning it only out of sheer boredom, for lack of anything better to say during her painful courtship with the awkward Tesman (the home crafts of Brabant not being a suitable topic of conversation).

But why did Hedda marry him? She got tired of dancing. She also had an idea that it would be fancy to be the wife of a professor (in due course, she will see the folly of this belief). As the daughter of a general, she enjoys quasi-aristocratic status, lording it over the other characters with their embroidered slippers and cheap hats. She picked Tesman based on some vague promises and, really, on a whim.

This may or may not be the entire story because Hedda Gabler is, above all, an enigma. Like Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm*,

she is calculating and cold as well as wilful and capricious, playing with those around her for sheer fun. In this, she is more extreme than Rebekka West, who knew exactly what she wanted but found that it left her unsatisfied. Hedda Gabler doesn't seem to have a particular end in mind, which is why there remains something incomprehensible about her, incomprehensible but dangerous, for she is equipped with a pair of pistols, apparently her sole inheritance. She likes using them, and in any case, Ibsen knew – as any good playwright knows – that if you introduce pistols in the first act, they must go off in the last.

Ibsen didn't include any artists in this play, but his title heroine comes close: she speaks the language of beauty, perhaps because she herself is beautiful. This is why she is so particular about her furnishings and about the light. But her sense of beauty, that life must be beautiful, extends much further, and she even manages to infect others with it. Everything must be beautiful – even death.

In Hedda Gabler, Ibsen created his most enduring role. It allows actors to show off, to switch from playful bantering to steely calculation at the drop of a hat, and to dominate those around them. Above all, it allows actors to explore the hidden depth of this character, who never fully knows her own mind and who becomes increasingly bold, even brave, at the end. It is, perhaps, the single most challenging and rewarding role for an actress in all of dramatic literature, and the reason why *Hedda Gabler* has remained near the top of the Ibsen repertoire.

World Literature

The four plays collected in this volume were written during the period of Ibsen's life when he was in the process of transforming himself from a well-regarded Norwegian dramatist to a member of a much more exclusive club: world literature. For an author with a starting point in a language understood by just over four million people at the northern periphery of Europe, counting both Norway and Denmark, this was a most unlikely achievement. Ibsen, determined and always ready to try out something

new, deserves much of the credit. But he was also lucky in that he was writing at a time when the idea – and the reality – of world literature was taking shape.

The term had been coined sixty years earlier by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, on 31 January 1827, a year before the birth of Ibsen. Goethe had been talking to his secretary, Johann Peter Eckermann, reporting on his recent reading experiences.[6] Goethe was, of course, an avid reader of French literature, which dominated the literary world, including the theatre. Like Ibsen, Goethe was the manager of a theatre and therefore keenly aware of this dependence on France. In addition to French, Goethe had been an enthusiastic reader of Greek and Roman literature, which became a life-long passion that induced him to travel to Rome, a path Ibsen would later follow.

But these literatures of Europe were not enough for Goethe. Living in a provincial town in eastern Germany, far from the metropolitan centres of Europe, Goethe became increasingly unhappy with being on the receiving end of French exports and began to look for alternatives. For a time, he turned to England and adopted Shakespeare as an antidote to French literature. Another alternative to France would have been nationalism, with Goethe presenting himself as representative of a genuine German culture. Increasingly, those around him were doing just that. But Goethe chose not to pursue this path (though he was later pressed into national service). Instead, he chose world literature. World literature for him was a third way, different from both metropolitan imports and reactive nationalism.

The idea of world literature suggested itself to Goethe in part because of a changing literary marketplace. Even though he was living in a small town, numbering barely 7,000 people, at the semi-periphery of Europe, he had access to an increasingly wide range of literature hailing from the remotest times and places. Thanks to translators who profited from or were active participants in European colonialism, Goethe was able to read works of Sanskrit drama, such as Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, as well as Persian and Arabic poetry. He was so taken with one such poet, Hafez, that he composed an entire collection of poems as a response, his *West-Eastern Divan*. He also

started to read Chinese novels.[7] It was a Chinese novel that prompted him, on that fateful January afternoon in 1827, to observe to his startled secretary that the time of national literature was over, and that the era of world literature had begun.

Goethe, who was already quite old when he used the term, returned to the theme of world literature on a few subsequent occasions, but he never fully developed it. Next to pick it up was an unlikely pair of collaborators, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who mention it in their *Communist Manifesto*, where it appears at the end of a stirring paragraph describing the creative destructions brought by bourgeois capitalism.[8] Marx and Engels emphasize that this increasingly global form of capitalism pulls the rug out from under the feet of the feudal order by creating a global market in which any hope of national autonomy is futile.

Strangely, at this point in their argument, Marx and Engels have nothing bad to say about capitalism; instead they seem to cheer it on. There is nothing better, it would seem, for this pair of radicals, than the spectacle of 'national one-sidedness' being forced into commerce with the remotest corners of the globe. It is at the stirring climax of this story that they move from material products to immaterial ones. 'The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.'[9]

Marx and Engels's interest in world literature may be surprising, but it actually picked up on something Goethe had recognized as well: the emergence of a global market in literature. What Goethe, Marx and Engels glimpsed was finally becoming a reality towards the end of the nineteenth century, just when Ibsen was gaining prominence. Even though Ibsen was still drawing most of his royalties from Scandinavia (in part because of a lack of international copyright protections), now his plays were being translated almost immediately into other languages, especially in England, the US and Germany, with additional demand in France and Italy.[10] Ibsen was Goethe's idea of world literature come true: a peripheral author who could hold his own against

French metropolitan domination by appealing to an international market.

In achieving this status, Ibsen was aided by literary critics. The English Edmund Gosse devoted significant attention to Ibsen in a book on the literature of northern Europe; George Bernard Shaw, particularly taken with the early plays of Ibsen's realist period, hailed him as a fellow radical; William Archer, his most important translator into English, was attuned to Ibsen's poetic imagination; even Henry James spoke extremely highly of the Norwegian playwright. Equally important was the Danish critic Georg Brandes, who had taken up Goethe's mantle as promoter of world literature. He counted Ibsen among the handful of authors responsible for the 'modern breakthrough', as he called it, whose hallmark was realism. These different critics saw in Ibsen's work what they each valued most: freethinking ideas; poetic flights of fancy; psychological insight; and realism. Remarkably, they were all right. Ibsen's many surprising changes in emphasis and direction had created an oeuvre that was varied and multi-faceted, reflecting different perspectives and ideas.

Ibsen was at the forefront of what has been called the 'Scandinavian moment in world literature', which would include authors from August Strindberg to Knut Hamsun as well as the creation of the Nobel Prize in Literature, endowed by the Swedish inventor of dynamite.[11] Of the three writers, only the youngest, Hamsun, would ever receive the Nobel Prize because the Prize was initially in the hands of critics who rejected the realism associated with Ibsen and Strindberg. But the Nobel Prize itself, the fact that the Swedish Academy managed to acquire its status as the epicentre of the literary world, was connected to the confluence of forces that produced writers such as Ibsen, Strindberg and Hamsun as well as critics such as Brandes. The late nineteenth century turned out to be not only the Scandinavian moment in world literature, but also the moment when world literature, for the first time, was becoming a reality.

For Ibsen, being a world author was not an unmitigated good. The rough and tumble theatre industry didn't respect the work of this famous writer, who had to watch theatre managers butcher his work over and over again. Notoriously, a German

theatre director forced Ibsen to write an alternative ending for *A Doll's House*, one in which the heroine, after her argument with her husband, is shown her children and collapses, not leaving.[12] Faced with the question of letting someone else write that ending or doing the painful work himself, Ibsen chose the latter, hoping to limit the damage. Italian translations were often worse in that they treated Ibsen's written texts as polite suggestions and took all kinds of liberties with them, seemingly unaware that anyone might object.[13]

But despite these travails, Ibsen's work remained tied to the theatre, the métier in which he had grown up. In time, he was seen as the playwright who had restored a new seriousness to an art form that many had come to associate with frivolous plots, overwrought emotions and cheap effects. Ibsen's rise coincided not only with the emergence of world literature, but also with modern drama, that is, with the hope of turning theatre into a higher art. Shunning large theatres, some playwrights and directors in Europe, North America and elsewhere withdrew to smaller stages where they could experiment with new styles ranging from naturalism, with its particular attention to setting, to symbolism, with its preference for atmosphere and mysteries. Ibsen's plays, which had always retained a layer of meaning that went beyond strict realism, were well suited to all of these theatrical experiments, though they continued to be regarded as mainstream in Norway.

And so it has lasted until today. Ibsen's great female roles and his multi-layered plays have exhibited astonishing staying powers. But perhaps the most important vehicle for propelling Ibsen to the pinnacle of the dramatic world, second only to Shakespeare, has to do with his great theme: the fears and fantasies of the bourgeoisie. Even though he set his realist plays in Norway, they struck home wherever a bourgeoisie existed, and this meant, increasingly, all over the world. In chronicling the fantasy life of the bourgeoisie, Ibsen became the great poet of capitalism.[14]

Martin Puchner

NOTES

1. See Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
2. Ibid., pp. 71ff.
3. For a discussion of meta-theatre and its relation to the visual arts in Ibsen, see Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 248ff.
4. For a detailed discussion on the role of actors in the cultural transmission of Ibsen's plays, exemplified in *A Doll's House*, see Julie Holledge, Jonathan Bollen, Frode Helland and Joanne Tompkins, *A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 26ff.
5. Fulsås and Rem, *Ibsen*, pp. 194.
6. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, vols. 1 and 2 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1836), vol. 2, p. 325.
7. Bishop Thomas Percy, *Hau Kiou Choaan or The Pleasing History: A Translation from the Chinese Language* (London, 1761).
8. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings*, with an introduction and notes by Martin Puchner (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), pp. 10–11.
9. Ibid.
10. On Ibsen and copyright, see Fulsås and Rem, *Ibsen*, pp. 175ff.
11. On the Scandinavian moment in world literature, see Fulsås and Rem, *Ibsen*, p. 240. On the Nobel Prize, see James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
12. Christian Janss, 'When Nora Stayed: More Light on the German Ending', *Ibsen Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017), pp. 3–27.
13. Giuliano D'Amico, *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign* (Turin: Università degli Studi di Torino, 2013).
14. Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 169ff.

Further Reading

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Digital and Other Resources

IbsenStage is an extremely valuable performance database: http://ibsenstage.hf.uio.no.
Ibsen.nb is a website with much useful information on Ibsen and on Ibsen productions worldwide: http://ibsen.nb.no/id/83.0.
Henrik Ibsens Skrifter is the new critical edition of Ibsen's complete works. So far only available in Norwegian: http://www.ibsen.uio.no/forside.xhtml.
Ibsen Studies is the leading Ibsen journal.

A Note on the Text

This Penguin edition is the first English-language edition based on the new historical-critical edition of Henrik Ibsen's work, *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter* (2005–10) (*HIS*). The digital edition (*HISe*) is available at http://www.ibsen.uio.no/forside.xhtml. The texts of *HIS* are based on Ibsen's first editions.

THE WILD DUCK

A Play in Five Acts

CHARACTERS

MR WERLE, *owner of the Works, etc.*
GREGERS WERLE, *his son*
OLD MR EKDAL
HJALMAR EKDAL, *Old Mr Ekdal's son, photographer*[1]
GINA EKDAL, *Hjalmar's wife*
HEDVIG, *their daughter, fourteen years of age*[2]
MRS[3] SØRBY, *Mr Werle's housekeeper*
RELLING, *a doctor*
MOLVIK, *an ex-theologian*
GRÅBERG, *a bookkeeper*
PETTERSEN, *Mr Werle's servant*
JENSEN, *a hired servant*
A FAT PALE-FACED GENTLEMAN
A THIN-HAIRED GENTLEMAN, A NEAR-SIGHTED GENTLEMAN, SIX OTHER GENTLEMEN, *dinner guests at Mr Werle's*
OTHER HIRED SERVANTS

The first act takes place at Mr Werle's house, the next four at Hjalmar Ekdal's home.