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Ibsen's dramatic apprenticeship

In retrospect the 1840s appear relatively undramatic in Norwegian literary history. Writers were mostly cultivating collective memories and giving written form to folk tales and popular ballads and in other ways working on the construction of a national mythology, in historical studies as well as in poetry. There was no permanent theatre established in the country, although several towns by this time had more or less appropriate theatre buildings where itinerant theatre companies, mostly Danish, could perform vaudevilles and plays according to the popular taste of the small bourgeois audiences.

Theatrical activity in Norway was nothing more than a pale reflection of a Danish tradition which seemed to be losing the vigour it had enjoyed in the early decades of the century. Under such circumstances it was understandable that practically nobody in Norway was giving much attention to the art of writing for the theatre. In Grimstad the young assistant pharmacist Henrik Ibsen had no chance to acquaint himself with the standards and techniques of professional theatrical performance, but he must have been an avid reader of classical and contemporary literature. His reading in those early years included dramatic works by Shakespeare, Schiller, Ludvig Holberg and Adam Oehlenschläger, and his literary talent and ambitions were clearly recognized by his few intimate friends. At this point it was not Ibsen's primary intention to earn his living as a writer. In his spare time he was busy preparing himself for the entrance examination to the University of Christiania, where he hoped to be accepted as a student of medicine.

The academic curriculum included a selection of Latin texts by Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Ovid and others. Among the characters Ibsen came across in his reading was a nobleman of the first century BC, Lucius Catilina, one of the unsuccessful rebels of the Roman republic. He is an outstanding target of Cicero's polemical rhetoric (*In Catilinam*), and his story is told with much the same lack of sympathy by Sallust (*Bellum Catilinae*).

Together with the conspiracy of Brutus, that of Catiline seems to have

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been particularly attractive to writers of tragedy. The English Renaissance stage saw three plays on this subject, of which Ben Jonson's *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611) is the only one available to posterity. In his preface to the first edition of *Die Räuber*, his first play (1782), Schiller refers to the tragic potential of a Brutus or a Catiline. Even in Ibsen's own time the subject was not unknown. Together with Auguste Maquet, Alexandre Dumas the elder published *Catilina*, a five-Act drama, in Paris in 1848, and in 1855 Ferdinand Kürnberger published his *Catilina*, also in five Acts, in Hamburg.

There is no firm evidence that Ibsen knew any of the versions published prior to his own, which was written in the winter of 1848–9 and published in the spring of 1850 under the pseudonym of Brynjolf Bjarme. The ghost of Sulla appears in the third Act while in Ben Jonson's play the same ghost gives the opening expository monologue, but this does not necessarily indicate a debt. Ben Jonson's ghost may be seen as an inheritance from Seneca's tragedies, while Ibsen probably borrowed the device from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, also in the Senecan tradition.

Ibsen's main source for his first drama was no doubt Sallust. A comparison of the two texts reveals a certain parallel already in the openings. Sallust begins with a reflection on the double nature of man:

> It behooves all men who wish to excel the other animals to strive with might and main not to pass through life unheralded, like the beasts, which Nature has fashioned grovelling and slaves to the belly. All our power, on the contrary, lies in both mind and body; we employ the mind to rule, the body rather to serve; the one we have in common with the Gods, the other with the brutes. Therefore I find it becoming, in seeking renown, that we should employ the resources of the intellect rather than those of brute strength.[1]

The author is here concerned with the justification of his own historiographical project rather than with the character of Catiline, but Ibsen seems to have ignored this distinction. That the young Ibsen himself was preoccupied with the prospect of oblivion and more or less desperately clinging to his occasional glimpses of literary creativity as a way to renown, we know from the poem 'Resignation', written in 1847 when he was nineteen years old. Reading Sallust must have struck a chord in the aspiring poet. He had no difficulty in investing his own as yet unspecified ambitions in the ethically rather dubious character of Catiline. Here was a man in deep personal crisis, despising himself for his aimless life, ready to risk anything for some historical achievement:

> I must! I must! Deep down within my soul
> a voice commands, and I will do its bidding;
> I feel I have the courage and the strength

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to lead a better, nobler life than this.
One endless round of dissipated pleasures!
No, they can never still my inner urge! [. . .]
Yet still at times, as at this moment now,
A secret dream will smoulder in my breast!
Ah, as I gaze upon that city, proud
and lofty Rome . . . and the depravity
and rottenness in which it long lies steeped
stand out in sharp relief before my soul . . .
at once an inner voice cries out aloud:
'Wake, Catiline, awake and be a man!' [*i*, 39*]

In Ibsen's dramatic presentation the centre of interest is not so much the political conflict of Catiline versus the leaders of the Roman republic as the moral conflict within the character himself. The two opposing sides of his psyche are represented by two women fighting to get the upper hand. The structure of the plot verges on allegory. On the one side there is his loving wife Aurelia, urging him to settle down in some peaceful rural province with the promise of a harmonious existence enjoying the fruits of the earth. On the other side there is the vestal Furia, secretly scheming for revenge, appealing to his desire to play a role in history by means of organizing the many dissatisfied elements in an uprising aimed at the overthrow of the corrupt establishment in Rome.

The constellation of the hero between two women, one the embodiment of unselfish love and the other representing heedless and destructive ambition, was to become a basic pattern in several of Ibsen's later plays. This device of personifying a grave emotional and moral dilemma in the hero's turbulent mind is practically fully fledged from the start, a remarkable indication of something which for lack of a better word we may call dramatic instinct. The erotic triangle is certainly a commonplace in nineteenth-century drama, but the particular function developed for it on the Ibsen stage exceeds the ordinary measure of complication and brings out a tragic dimension in the situation of the character in question. The playwright also reveals a considerable talent for variation each time the tragic triangle appears in a new guise. Among the more striking examples from the later prose dramas are Rosmer between his late wife and Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Borkman between Ella and Gunhild in *John Gabriel Borkman*, and Rubek between Maja and Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*.

Another promising quality in Ibsen's first drama is the way he succeeds in creating a Romantic hero, a man who in his magnanimity is doomed to failure for reasons that are located partly in his own character, partly in the circumstances which have given him such ill-behaved and undependable

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followers. Catiline regrets the decline of ancient Roman virtues, but he is no virtuous Roman himself. He is attracted to Furia, the vestal virgin, but when she finds out that he is the man who seduced her younger sister and caused her death, her love turns into hatred and thirst for revenge.

The mixture of a frivolous lasciviousness, a greed for power and a certain highmindedness and generosity in dealing with the less noble characters who want him as their leader, may seem rather excessive for a theatre audience accustomed to a much less complex kind of hero. It is perhaps not surprising that the play was not accepted by the management of the Christiania Theatre in 1849. The reason given was not that the play was poorly written, but that the resources of the theatre were insufficient for such a task. The first performance of *Catiline* did not take place until 1881, in Stockholm.

A revised edition of the play was published in Copenhagen in 1875. It was prefaced with a short survey of the conditions under which it had been written, and the now famous dramatist, re-reading his first attempt, found that it contained qualities of which he had no need to be ashamed: 'Much of what my later writings have been about – the clash of ability and aspirations, of will and possibility, at once the tragedy and the comedy of mankind and of the individual – is already adumbrated here' [*i*, 112].

Neither the refusal by the theatre nor the lack of critical acclaim at the appearance in print of the first version of *Catiline* managed to curb the literary ambitions of the twenty-two-year-old student who had arrived in Christiania in 1850. Both his play and some of his poems met with sympathetic interest among his fellow students, and he was elected editor of the handwritten student society paper.

Ibsen clearly had noticed that the revolutionary fever which had spread so quickly among young intellectuals in Europe in 1848 and 1849, and which was part of his own incentive in Grimstad for writing about the Roman rebel, was no longer in vogue. The nationalist trend from the Forties was once more setting the tone in Norwegian art and literature. This was the spiritual context of his second effort to reach the stage, *The Burial Mound*, a dramatic poem in one Act, presented to the Christiania Theatre in the Summer of 1850. Ibsen still preferred to hide behind the pseudonym of Brynjolf Bjarme, indicating that he was not sure of himself yet. This minor play was accepted, and the first performance of an Ibsen drama took place on 26 September that year.

The Burial Mound is the product of a young writer trying hard to comply with what he considers to be the popular taste of the day. The central character of Gandalf, a Viking chief from Norway leading his men in a raid on the peaceful coast of Normandy, is a rather idealized figure, as indeed

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are most of the others too. The plot may be seen as a study in the construction of dramatic *peripeteia* and *discovery*, devices cultivated by playwrights since the golden age of Greek tragedy, and analysed in Aristotle's *Poetics*.[2]

There are a number of turning points and some surprising revelations in the one-Act play. The peaceful home of old Bernard and his foster-daughter Blanka is invaded by the rude Vikings, seeking revenge for the presumed death of Gandalf's father some years earlier. Gandalf has sworn by his native gods that since his father's death is not avenged, he will kill every person he comes across on the former battlefield, or else take his own life. The mound is believed to be his father's grave. Blanka's exercise of Christian virtues impresses Gandalf, and he decides not to kill anybody. Bernard is captured, and confesses to being the slayer of the old Norwegian chief. Gandalf feels bound by his oath and makes preparations for his own death. Witnessing the distress of Gandalf and Blanka, who are in love but must part, Bernard reveals that he is none other but Gandalf's father Audun, who was wounded and left behind by the returning Vikings. After being nursed back to life by the gentle Blanka, he had decided to change his identity, burying his Viking sword and armour in the mound and settling as a Christian recluse. This revelation unties the knot, and the two lovers can be happily married on the spot, under the pious hands of old Audun: 'Eternal blessing be upon this pact/Combining Nordic strength with Southern mercy' [*i*, 150].

The Viking age, ending in the triumph of Christianity over the ruthless tenets and practices of the ancient Norse religion, offered a historical theme which had been successfully explored and exploited by the Danish poet and dramatist Adam Oehlenschläger, who died in the same year as Ibsen's work reached the stage for the first time. Compared to the dramatic form of the old master, Ibsen's treatment of the religious conflict is full of improbabilities and curious coincidences. His verses were praised for their lyrical qualities, however, and he was considered a promising young writer by the theatre people in Christiania.

In 1850 the famous violinist Ole Bull had founded a permanent theatre in Bergen, his home town. The actors hired were native speakers, not Danish as at the Christiania Theatre. The national profile of the new enterprise was made clear also by its name, the Norwegian Theatre. In 1851 Ole Bull approached Henrik Ibsen in Christiania and offered him a post combining the duties of stage instructor with those of resident author at his theatre. He was to assist the artistic director in the production of the plays, arrange the settings, suggest costume designs, even supervise the dialogue, while the artistic director was in charge of the interpretation. As an author he was

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expected to write one play every year to be presented on the anniversary of the theatre's founding, starting on 2 January 1853.

Ibsen accepted the post, and he was to stay in Bergen from the autumn of 1851 to the summer of 1857, with the exception of part of the year 1852 which he spent in Copenhagen and Dresden, studying stage technique with a grant from the theatre's directorate. The all-round theatre experience he acquired during these years seems to have had a decisive formative effect on Ibsen's career. Initially he did not see himself exclusively as a writer for the theatre. He wrote poetry, he painted, he tried prose fiction, he published several critical reviews and articles. Later he also collected works in the oral tradition; and at one point in 1858 he considered the possibility of an academic career, applying for a scholarship to qualify himself for the first chair to be announced in Scandinavian literature at the University of Christiania. The application, however, was soon withdrawn.

The stay in Denmark and Germany, Ibsen's first visit abroad, which lasted more than three months, no doubt also meant a lot to the twenty-four-year-old apprentice. He met actors, instructors, critics and outstanding writers such as Hans Christian Andersen and J. L. Heiberg. He saw performances of different kinds of drama, four plays by Shakespeare and a number of plays by Holberg, Oehlenschläger, Heiberg and Henrik Hertz. Earlier that year Hermann Hettner's *Das moderne Drama. Aesthetische Untersuchungen* had been published in Brunswick. The author, a thirty-year-old professor at the University of Jena, opens his preface by expressing the wish that his book would fall into the hands of young dramatists. It is highly probable that this widely discussed book did fall into the hands of the young Norwegian, either in Copenhagen or in Dresden, and that it influenced his ideas about the nature of modern drama.

That year Ibsen wrote *St John's Night*, a fairy-tale comedy, to meet his obligation for the anniversary of the theatre, and the following year he revised *The Burial Mound* for the corresponding occasion on 2 January 1854. A more substantial contribution, and one with which he was rather pleased himself, was the new drama he completed for the 1855 anniversary, *Lady Inger*.

Hettner's book expressed a strong belief in the potential of historical drama on the modern stage. It is clear, he writes, that 'the seriousness of the age calls for the field of history'.[3] It is not sufficient to compose history and fiction in some gaudy mixture; the true historical drama is complete truth and complete poetry at the same time. To select characters and events from national history for dramatic presentation does not exempt the author from observing the principles and conditions of psychological drama, according to this German critic. Whether historical or fictitious, the plot must evolve

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in accordance with internal necessity and character logic. Hettner also strongly recommended the selection of historical events which would have potential significance for a contemporary audience. History should be regarded as a living presence, not as a dead thing of the past.

In *Lady Inger* Ibsen tried, but with rather limited success, to realize a concept of national historical tragedy. A couple of Danish historians had just published accounts of the events in Norway in the 1520s, an age when the decimated Norwegian nobility showed themselves more than ever to be lacking in strength and leadership, thus opening the country for Danish rule. Ibsen chose to focus on a female representative of the nobility, Lady Inger, a widow residing at Østraat on the Trondheim Fjord with her daughter Eline. He did not follow the sources available to him very closely, but took the liberty of investing his character with a complex mixture of national feelings and personal ambitions that the historical Ingerd Ottisdotter most likely did not entertain. The idea probably was that an anti-Danish sentiment might correspond nicely to the ideological features of Norway in the 1850s, thus colouring the events of the past to meet the needs of the present.

In this respect Hettner's recommendation can be said to have been obeyed, but his advice about avoiding coincidence in the development of the action was thoroughly ignored. *Lady Inger* is pre-eminently a study in the effects of chance encounters in an action which lacks any rigorous structure. During one dark night in 1528, at a time when the political and dynastic situation of Scandinavia was extremely confused, the Great Hall of Østraat receives a series of visitors representing Norwegian, Danish and Swedish interests. The half-expected and half-unexpected events on this dark occasion kindle a spark of secret hope in Lady Inger. As a young woman she bore an illegitimate son to the Swedish Count Sten Sture. In the light of the information available to her regarding the situation in the three countries, she now sees a promising future for her son, who is unknown to her since he was brought up in Sweden. Through her secret arrangements he is to become King of Norway as well as Sweden. A young Swedish visitor, whom she thinks stands in her son's way, is assassinated on her command. The play ends when she realizes that the man killed was in fact her son.

The plot is highly complex, with many cases of mistaken identity resulting from the extreme secretiveness with which the various visitors set about their missions, with some of them handing over information to the wrong person, and with nobody ultimately achieving their objective. The influence from the French tradition of *la pièce bien faite* is certainly noticeable; in October 1854 the theatre had performed a historical play by Eugène Scribe, *Les Contes de la Reine de Navarre*. Ibsen himself, who on several occasions expressed reservations regarding the Scribean art of dramatic intrigue,

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thought that *Lady Inger* was his best play from the Bergen years. It was his first attempt to write a complete play in prose, and the dialogue reveals considerable understanding regarding the construction of a dramatic scene, although frequent asides are used to inform the audience of the state of things, an element which is felt to be more artificial in a prose play than it seems to be in a dramatic poem.

The performance of *Lady Inger* was no success, and the author had problems in finding a publisher for it. Finally it was printed as a serial in a Christiania newspaper in the summer of 1857. A second revised and corrected edition was published in Copenhagen in 1874.

Most of the plays Ibsen composed in the 1850s were based on historical and literary sources. Norwegian history, Icelandic sagas (in Danish translation) as well as folk tales and ballads all stimulated his imagination. In 1853 a collection of Norwegian popular ballads was edited by M. B. Landstad. Inspired by the ballad rhythm as well as the medieval setting and love conflicts of this collection, Ibsen wrote a lyric drama, *The Feast at Solhoug*, for the 1856 anniversary. It is a three-Act play, alternating between verse and prose, with the plot built around the homecoming of an outlawed minstrel, creating erotic conflict because he is secretly loved by two sisters. The sisters, Margit and Signe, are vaguely reminiscent of the characters of Furia and Aurelia, but the young minstrel, Gudmund Alfson, is not like Catiline; he is of a forthright, gentle disposition, courting Signe since Margit in his absence has married an older man. Margit's character is more complex; she is ready to poison her husband in order to clear the way for a union with Gudmund.

The feast is an occasion for popular entertainment, and a lot of songs and tales are performed or merely hinted at in the various scenes, colouring the development of the plot with the appropriate sentiments of love, chivalry, enchantment and bravery. This strain of vaudeville and folklore helps to create an atmosphere of genuine peasant culture, so much adored by the townspeople of that age of National Romanticism. The play is not purely idyllic, however. Signe is also the object of the reckless and threatening sheriff, and Margit's rather slow-witted husband is killed by him in the skirmish off-stage. In spite of this episode, the ending is a happy one. The King's messenger arrives like a *deus ex machina*, announcing the annulment of the hero's outlawry, and the future of Gudmund and Signe is assured, while Margit announces her intention of joining a convent.

With its pleasant balance of lyric and drama but without any deeper personal commitment *The Feast at Solhoug* hit the mark of popular taste in Bergen, and shortly afterwards also in Christiania and Trondheim. It was the first stage success of the twenty-eight-year-old playwright; it was also

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the first play by Ibsen to be performed abroad – in 1857 at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. One of the critics in Christiania suggested that it was an imitation of an earlier Danish Romantic tragedy by Henrik Hertz, *Svend Dyring's House* (1837). This allegation was repeated by several critics, and Ibsen became increasingly annoyed by it. His play has the popular ballad atmosphere and the mixture of verse and prose in common with the Danish tragedy, but both plot and characters are much more closely related to the mythical world of the ballads in the latter case.

The notion that Ibsen was significantly influenced by Hertz's work was strongly resisted by Ibsen's first biographer, the Finnish scholar Valfrid Vasenius, as well as by Ibsen himself in a lengthy preface to the second edition in 1883 of *The Feast at Solhoug* [*i*, 369–74]. The author explains how his play grew out of his own experiences and preoccupations at the time. The story of Margit, torn between her wealthy but unattractive husband and the charming outlaw, developed as a transformation of a similar relationship in the saga drama he was planning in those years but which he hesitated to complete.

One of the reasons for this hesitation seems to have been his preoccupation at this time with the theory of drama and its relationship to the other main genres. He published an article in a Christiania newspaper in May 1857, 'On the Heroic Ballad and its Significance for Literature' [*i*, 672–84]. Following the aesthetic authorities of the age, J. L. Heiberg and G. W. F. Hegel, Ibsen states that drama is a higher synthesis of lyric and epic poetry. Since the saga presents its material in a form which is purely epic, the dramatist who wants to make use of this material will have to introduce a lyric element which would be alien to the world of the saga. However,

> in the heroic ballad on the other hand there are lyric elements present, admittedly in a different form from drama, but present nevertheless – and the dramatist who draws his material from the ballads does not have to subject his material to the kind of transformation necessary when it is drawn from the saga. This represents a very considerable advantage, permitting the poet to give in his work a more accurate and more intimate reflection of the period and of the events he is dealing with; and he is thereby enabled (if he is otherwise capable) to present his heroes to the beholder in the way in which they are already familiar from folk poetry direct. [*i*, 676]

This was the concept on which Ibsen had based *The Feast at Solhoug*; and the success which this play had enjoyed made him feel confident that it would work a second time. 'The Grouse in Justedal' was the title of a play he had been working on as early as in 1850. The story was based on a legend about a young girl who alone had survived the Black Death in the remote valley of Justedal. He had planned four Acts, but gave it up after an Act and

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a half was completed. In 1856 he returned to this epic material and combined it with one of the ballads of Landstad's collection. The result was a three-Act play, *Olaf Liljekrans*, Ibsen's last contribution under the contract with the Bergen Theatre, presented on 2 January 1857.

We may assume that this combination of narrative and ballad was intended as a dramatic synthesis according to the formula Ibsen had found in the writings of J. L. Heiberg. The play is a composite of two entangled love stories. A wedding is agreed between Olaf Liljekrans, son of Lady Kirsten, and Ingeborg, daughter of the rich Arne of Guldvik. Since the agreement is worked out by the parents and based on property considerations and not on love, it is by its very nature vulnerable. Almost as in the ballad, Olaf has come under the spell, figuratively if not literally, of the beautiful, innocent Alfhild, a girl who lives in a remote mountain valley with her father, an old minstrel and fiddler. Ingeborg loves Hemming, her father's page. The plot is constructed in a typical romantic way with a series of complications temporarily preventing the happiness of the two couples, and with true love triumphing in the end.

An important theme undermining the pastoral aspect of the play is the clash of Alfhild's natural innocence with the greed and moral corruption dominating the society to which she is introduced through her liaison with Olaf. A target for satire is also offered by Ingeborg and Hemming, whose expectations of a comfortable life-style turn out to be incompatible with a simple cottage existence in the mountain wilderness to which they have fled.

The dialogue is similar to that of *The Feast at Solhoug*, with a mixture of prose and verse. Occasionally ballad-style fragments are introduced as a lyric expression of the mood. Asides are as frequent as in any of the plays from this early period. Misunderstandings and unexpected reversals abound, and the play clearly belongs to the tradition of *la pièce bien faite*. The author of *Olaf Liljekrans* is still very much an apprentice trying to please his audience; but his audiences did not conspicuously appreciate the play. It is one of Ibsen's weakest works, and he decided not to try to find a publisher for it. His recent interest in dramatic theory clearly brought him no guarantee of success as a dramatist.

In the spring of 1857 Ibsen had completed the term of five years he had agreed to serve the Bergen Theatre. He did sign a contract for another term, but shortly thereafter received a better offer from the new Norwegian Theatre in Christiania and was permitted to leave Bergen. By this time he had achieved a certain reputation in the country at large as an ambitious but as yet not wholly accomplished playwright.

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