

**A DOLL'S HOUSE: A
PLAY IN
THREE ACTS**

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HENRIK IBSEN & WILLIAM ARCHER & EDMUND GOSSE

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A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

By HENRIK IBSEN

TRANSLATED BY
WILLIAM ARCHER

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

PREPARED FOR THE PRESENT EDITION BY
EDMUND GOSSE

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HENRIK IBSEN.

INTRODUCTION.

IN presenting to the American public the first collected version of the works of Ibsen, it may not be uninteresting to consider in what particulars the local position of his genius, and the society out of which it springs, present a similarity with those out of which the great American dramatist, that phoenix of the future, will have to struggle to the sun. Norway, like America, but like no other country of the modern world—since the republics of South America can scarcely boast the same conditions—is a young and a vigorous people, which has broken away from an ancient power, whose population it now greatly outnumbers. In each case the parent, instead of dwindling in intellectual vitality after the secession, has rather increased in vigor and individuality; while, although developing a public spirit entirely independent, the child has preserved the paternal traditions of the race on most essential points. And more than all besides, through each political and social schism the language has remained the same, as an inseparable bond of unity. As, therefore, in considering a great American talent, we are obliged to look back and see what roots it has sent down into the earth of English litera-

ture, so, to conceive arightly how a genius like Ibsen's has become what it is, we must briefly see what it owes to its Danish as well as its Norwegian predecessors.

When Henrik Ibsen was a very young man, when he first appeared before the public as the author of that crude Roman tragedy "*Catalina*," Norwegian literature, as a separate growth, was still in its boyhood. The hot, romantic lyrics of Wergeland were its most characteristic products. In drama it had practically done nothing. The Norwegian poet who desired to write for the stage—and Ibsen has been essentially a dramatist from his earliest lisplings—was obliged to look to Denmark for his inspiration. In that energetic little country he would find, forty years ago, a condition of things calculated to dazzle the judgment of a provincial. Copenhagen, from 1805 to 1845, was perhaps the country in the world in which dramatic literature flourished best and was the most judiciously fostered. During the greater part of that time the severe and beautiful genius of Adam Oehlenschläger was filling the stage with his stately figures, creating a national and historical body of tragic poetry so pure, and, in its earlier forms at least, so exquisite and tender, that, whatever is neglected, young men and maidens in Scandinavia must always read Oehlenschläger as they must read Walter Scott with us. When the influence of Oehlenschläger's tragedies was on the wane, a school of refined poetical comedy began to assert itself in Copenhagen, with, at its head, Henrik Hertz, in my judgment not one of the strongest, indeed, but one of the most exquisite poets that the nineteenth century has produced in Europe. The famous translation of Shakespeare by Foersom was the

direct model upon which these Danish writers of romantic comedy proceeded. Their whole outlook upon life was fanciful and optimistic, or else national and heroic, in either case purely romantic; and this dramatic serenity was only broken by occasional fits of local or temporary satire, mere outbreaks of stage petulance at the creaking of the times.

In order to understand Ibsen, whose figure has been too often presented to us of late as though it were a perfectly solitary one, we must try to realize the apothecary's apprentice of 1848 in his little, miserable shop at Grimstad, looking, in all his ignorance and *ennui*, toward a distant and magnificent Copenhagen, in which, at the King's Theatre, mighty figures of buskined actors and superb actresses with sweeping trains were spouting the resonant iambs of Oehlenschläger, or delicately emphasizing the points of the rhyming couplets of Hertz.* In "*Catalina*" we seem to see the work of an ambitious lad who has read nothing but Foersom's Shakespeare and a few tragedies of Oehlenschläger; and it is very important to see this great realist starting from the innermost recesses of romanticism. But the change was not to be only in Ibsen; it moved in all Scandinavian drama also. It was in 1849, the year in which Ibsen completed his "*Catalina*" in Norway, that J. L. Heiberg became sole director of the Royal Theatre at Copenhagen, and by his cynical wit and satire, by his recognition of the requirements of the modern audience, and by his encouragement of a more realistic and less merely "po-

* I do not know that any writer has noted the influence of Hertz's "*Amors Genistreger*" (1839) upon the form of Ibsen's "*Love's Comedy*."

etical" drama, did more than any other man to prepare for the Scandinavian theatre of to-day.

The career of Ibsen, happily not yet completed nor even past its prime, has of late been so often chronicled that it is not needful to dwell upon it here in detail. For the first twenty years of his work for the stage he remained strictly in the Scandinavian ideal. His four tragedies of Norwegian history, published from 1856 to 1864, form the earliest of these sections of his work. They possess a certain severity of form which is characteristic of their author, and they are written in the plainest prose, instead of blank verse; but they are nevertheless wholly romantic in character, and not to be distinguished, in kind, from what other poets were doing at the same time. Not one of them perhaps is quite equal to Björnson's "*Sigurd Stenbe.*" In 1863 Ibsen began to occupy an entirely fresh field. Retaining in a measure the sublyrical forms adopted by Hertz and his school in Denmark, he turned the artillery of his delicate rhymes and flowing epigrammatic verse against the follies, narrowness, and weaknesses of local Norwegian society. "*Love's Comedy*" forms the brightest and lightest expression of this particular class of his genius. The manner deepened into the gloom of "*Brand*" and widened into the lambent wit, splendid and whimsical fancy, and penetrating insight of "*Peer Gynt.*" These poems have been described as forming a trilogy of satiric drama, but they resemble one another more in form than in anything else. The singularity is that all three were written in running rhymed verse, and in the cases of "*Brand*" and "*Peer Gynt*" in verse of a kind so rapid, brief, and profuse, and so absolutely unflagging,

that not Goethe himself has bequeathed to the world a dramatic *tour de force* more amazing.

It would be exceedingly pleasant to dwell on the characteristics of these picturesque and highly original, if imperfect, poems. In another place I have attempted to analyze their contents, and to give some specimens of what any translator may despair of reproducing at length—their sententious melody and richness. But fine as these rhymed dramas are, and firmly as a poet of less ambition might be willing to base his reputation upon them, they form but an episode in Ibsen's dramatic career. There are not wanting signs, to those who are familiar with his early work, that he was already dissatisfied with the ideals of his youth and was preparing for a crisis in style. One of the characters in his "*Warriors at Helgeland*," had said, "Sing! no, I could do that yesterday; to-day I am too old." It seemed as though Ibsen almost suddenly grew too old, too serious, for the gentle agitation of prosody; as though in the very maze of the linked melodies of "*Peer Gynt*" he had whispered to himself, "these indictments are too serious, these charges too heavy and too direct, to be accompanied by a tinkling of the lyre." In the fourth act of that poem he had said things almost too scathing, too bitter to be said in verse. Such accusations against humanity ought to be made in prose or not made at all. So he seems to have reflected, and suddenly a new form of dramatic art occurred to him as that for the execution of which he had naturally been born into the world.

This first experiment in it was a little conventional, and at all events deserved no particular attention through its novelty of form. The zealous Ibsenites of to-day have