

The Smiling Power. Gender in Ibsen's Comedies

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I will start today by showing you a picture.¹ This is not a Norwegian Nisse or Troll, although it looks like that. This is the only picture we have of a laughing Ibsen. I have asked myself why, and the best answer I can find is this from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*: "Jeg er spøgefull igrunden,/ og paa Tomandshaand især./ Af min Stilling er jeg bunden / till en Maskes Alvorsskjær" (Ibsen 1867, 153) [I am full of jest at bottom,/ most of all when we're alone./ I am forced by my position/ to assume a solemn mask].

In connection with the 200 anniversary of our constitution Henrik Ibsen was recently in the newspaper *Verdens Gang* elected to be the most important Norwegian person during the last 200 years. But Ibsen was not only important for the Norwegians. In his life time, he also became the most important Danish dramatist, and some years later the most important German dramatist, and with some help from the British Empire he also became a famous English speaking dramatist. Today he is played World Wide, but certainly not because of his Norwegian background. What was the reason for Ibsen's success? That is my main question today. Was it because of his dramatic form, which made him the founder of the modern drama, starting with *The Pillars of Society* from 1877? Or was it because of his contribution to the women-emanicipation movement through plays like *A Doll's House* from 1879?

The Pillars of Society

As literary scholars we are used to interpret texts, and we usually do so by reading them closely, comparing them to other texts and studying them according to certain theories. But as literary historians, we are also imposed to explain their appearance and to point out the reasons for their importance. We are studying them according to certain changes and development within the history of literature. My case for investigating Ibsen's success World Wide is Ibsen's first great success in Germany with *The Pillars of Society* in 1878. Germany has always been a door into the world marked for Scandinavian literature. So let me start with some preliminary facts about the extent of the success. For it was certainly a success. The most reliable source remains J.B. Halvorsen's biographical article from 1889:

Of all Ibsen's dramatic works scarcely one, not even "A Doll's House", caught the attention of the general European public in as short a time as "The Pillars of Society";

it was indeed the play with which the author made his entry into the German theatres of central Europe, where it to date has been produced on more than 50 stages and given at least 1000 performances, when it was new even arousing such competition that in February 1878, in one and the same week, the play was on the repertoire of no fewer than 5 Berlin theatres [...] described by "National Zeit." as "a success without parallel in Berlin's theatre history" (Halvorsen 1889, 59).

Let us now move on to the various explanations, or at least some possible answers to the success of *The Pillars of Society* in Germany 1878. To keep things simple, I have prepared a list of six proposed answers, from the well-established to the more far-fetched and curious:

1. Six years after Georg Brandes' famous lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1871, Ibsen at last published a drama of contemporary life which satisfied Brandes' requirement for literature, which was that it must debate problems.
2. After ten years of introductions, translations and reviews, Ibsen's name was becoming a byword in the German theatre world. An entirely new drama by him, on contemporary society, aroused expectations which were also met.
3. *The Pillars of Society* is above all a well-written play that suited conservative German theatre audiences very well. It is a comedy which after numerous complications ends well for nearly everyone.
4. Ibsen's plays were not protected by copyright and could be put on free of charge, which the theatres preferred to performing costly plays on which there could be no guaranteed profit.
5. It was the theatre companies and the various companies' actors that aroused the interest of the general public, not Ibsen's play as such. The actor Ernst Possard deserves special mention.
6. It was the translator Emil Jonas whose reworking for German stages laid the foundations for the success achieved in German theatres. He simplified the exposition and cut it down from 30 pages to some 15 pages, and he let Hilmar Tønnesen be the storyteller at the beginning.

First explanation:

Let us now consider the different explanations more closely. One important item to note in connection with the first explanation is Ibsen's long friendship with The Danish Critic Georg Brandes, first expressed in correspondence from 1866 on, then from 1871 on also in personal meetings. Another item is the translation of Brandes' "Hovedstrømninger" (main currents)

into German 1872, and also the fact that Brandes' married the translator's wife and moved to Berlin in 1877, planning to build a career as a free intellectual. The Norwegian historian and Ibsen scholar Halvdan Koht called the relationship between Ibsen and Brandes a comradeship in arms. With hindsight this explanation looks plausible. Prompted by Brandes, Ibsen achieves a breakthrough in the German public sphere with a contemporary play dealing with the political, economic, moral and gendered challenges of the time.

Against this it can be argued that his friendship with Brandes was not important to Ibsen's dramatic output. Ibsen worked on *Emperor and Galilean* for three years after Brandes had delivered his lectures in Copenhagen. From 1877 to 1882 there was no contact between them. Brandes did not help to launch Ibsen in Germany. In these years that were so vital to the consolidation of the modern breakthrough, Brandes preferred to associate with the authors Paul Heyse and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Ibsen was regarded by Brandes as a national satirist and highly provincial dramatist with no European potential.

Second explanation:

A quick glance at the earliest reception of Ibsen reveals ten years of introductions to Ibsen in the form of translations, presentations, biographies, theatre performances and reviews. The first printed translation of Ibsen consisted of two poems published in Leipzig in 1868. A short biography of Ibsen was printed in Leipzig 1870. The first translation of a play was Peter Siebold's edition of *Brand* from 1872. In 1876, the first Ibsen play was performed on a German stage when the Meininger Hoftheater produced *The Pretenders*. In 1877 and 1878 three translations of *The Pillars of Society* were published. These publications and productions were accompanied throughout by reviews and commentaries in German newspapers and periodicals. The success achieved with *The Pillars of Society* can thus be regarded as the culmination of a deliberately sustained and targeted effort.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the public did not take in all these introductions. The public did not accumulate the information about Ibsen. To the Germans Ibsen was quite unknown, also during the success of *The Pillars of Society* in 1878. Few cared to know who wrote the piece. We can find testimony to this in a discussion by Brandes in the Norwegian paper *Dagbladet*: "at this moment there is no epidemic raging in Berlin like Pillars of Society". And he adds "this is by no means because Ibsen is particularly well known" (Brandes SS, vol.14, 39). Who wrote the scripts for the many plays being performed in German theatres and theatres elsewhere in Europe was a question few if any could be bothered with.

Third explanation:

This is an argument which one might initially be tempted to accept. The play is well constructed and gripping in its development. It has a large cast of characters and many challenging parts. Scholars and some contemporary reviewers have emphasized its quality. Particularly if we look back at Ibsen's earlier output, we shall see that this play has evident merits and represents a major artistic advance for Ibsen.

Arguing to the contrary, one can maintain that opinions of the play's dramatic qualities have varied considerably. In Ibsen's own days it was also met with shaking heads. In Karl Frenzel's opinion the play was not tightly enough composed. It contained little action and gave the impression of being a dramatized novel. Brandes was also negative and felt that the ending offered unreasonable reconciliation. Ibsen was far too cautious, caring unduly for his slowly acquired reputation. Brandes refers to the play as an image of all that is Norwegian, but he adds: "Unfortunately, the great task the author has set himself has been conceived and resolved on rather a small scale" (Knudsen 1988, 248). Later in the same review, Brandes gives greater emphasis to what he regards as the play's weak points than to its merits. He refers to Karl Frenzel's critique and repeats his two weak points in the play's technique before adding a third on his own account: "A third striking weakness is that Bernick is far from undergoing the punishment, threatening though it appears for a moment, of losing his son; the punishment itself turns out to be merely a false alarm" (Brandes SS, vol.14, 43).

Fourth explanation:

Writing about the production of *The Pillars of Society* in Berlin, Brandes mentions that the play is not a success because of Ibsen's reputation, "but because of the great shortage of modern plays and the satisfaction of having no author's fees to pay" (Brandes SS, vol. 14, 39). Ibsen was a member of the *Deutsche Genossenschaft dramatischer Autoren und Componisten*, an association that sought to promote dramatists' rights. As an organization, it never built up enough influence to make any significant difference to its members. Nor had international agreements at this time been entered into between the Scandinavian countries and Germany. That only came about with the Berne Convention, which entered into force in 1896 where Norway and Ibsen were concerned. Ibsen tried on his own account to create conditions under which he might make money on book sales and productions in Germany, among other things by supplying special, so-called authorized, translations, but little came of

it. Ibsen's own translations hardly sold at all compared to those from the *Reclam* publishing house.

The counter-argument can be put forward: the German theatres did not refuse to put on plays to which rights applied. The point is that the theatres adapted their practice according to whether the plays had to be paid for or not. In a re-worked version of his review of *A Doll's House* in Berlin, Brandes compares a production of Alexandre Dumas in Vienna with an Ibsen production in Berlin (Brandes SS, vol. 14, 267). Brandes finds that the author's name and reputation are all-important. This applies both to the theatre's preparations, number of rehearsals, purchase of new sets and costumes, and pay to the author. The greater the costs, the greater the demand and prestige. Ibsen is free of charge, and a theatre's reckless treatment of a new play by an unknown author can certainly explain a fiasco, but not a success – at least not the success of *The Pillars of Society*.

Fifth explanation:

What happened was that theatre companies built up their audiences by constantly renewing their repertoires. Spectators came because they knew they could rely on finding something to their taste in what they were to see and hear. Ernst Possard played Consul Bernick more than 200 times in Munich and other German cities. When *A Doll's House* was to have its première in Berlin, people came. Excited anticipation had been building up for some time. But people did not come to see a new Ibsen play. They did not come to see modern woman's emancipation from husband and children. They did not come to see a play that defined the political agenda. People came to see the actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe.

An objection to this is that an actor can rarely if ever carry a play alone. Nor could Mrs. Niemann-Raabe or Ernst Possard. So this at any rate does not explain why *The Pillars of the Society* was played at more than fifty theatres in over a thousand performance in 1878/79.

Sixth explanation:

No one is likely to find this last explanation reasonable. Obscure is more fitting. And for all those who may be in doubt, Ibsen himself excluded this possibility for all time in his letter to Emil Jonas dated the 18th of January 1878. We shall read the letter:

[...] A translation from your hand is therefore quite superfluous; and the adaption you propose to make I most definitely reject.

Your remarks about cutting the first act is nothing but nonsense and shows that you do not have the faintest understanding of the work you imagine yourself qualified

to adapt. I should have thought it would be obvious to even the most naive hack writer that in this play nothing can be left out and not a single line of dialogue can be cut. Furthermore, the play has already been accepted by many German theaters in its uncut and ungarbled form.

If, in spite of what I have told you, you continue with your proposed adaptation and by your incompetence butcher and ruin my play, I hereby warn you that you may get the publicity you deserve. I shall make you known in the highest circles, and what the consequences of that will be you shall learn in due course (Ibsen 1965, p. 173).

One rarely sees Ibsen work himself up as he did in this letter. But if we take all the explanations together, I still think this last one must be the most reasonable. It is Emil Jonas' reworking of the play which separates success from failure for Ibsen's play on German stages in the year 1878. Emil Jonas made the play more easily accessible, especially the beginning. Ibsen referred to the forthcoming reworking as crippling. But the play became more pointed from the start, and maintained its tension as it proceeded. The reworking made the exposition comprehensible to the audience, and it became an audience favorite, a "feel good" drama.

I do not intend to present more evidence to show that this explanation is the best. To do so I would have to read Emil Jonas' version together with you, and I will spare you for that. But let me briefly mention, however, that Emil Jonas was criticized in Nordic newspapers. Emil Jonas took the opportunity to defend himself. His rework had been used at as many as 32 theatres. The Berlin theatres that had used his version had also put on more performances than the others. Emil Jonas therefore believed that all in all he had appealed more to German tastes with his deletions and changes, and I think he was right.

A Doll's House

When *Nora* was put on by Berlin's Residenz-Theater in 1880, Georg Brandes reviewed the performance. It is a good review in the sense that it gives us insight into some of the factors which explain why Ibsen did not succeed with *A Doll's House*. But at the same time the review brings out something I find strange. Why does not Brandes use Ibsen in Germany to spearhead the modern breakthrough outside the Nordic countries. Instead he repeats his critical reservations where Ibsen is concerned. Here, first, is Brandes' question, clearly and concisely put:

What can the reason be, why this play, which most knowledgeable people regard as a masterpiece, has been so poorly received by the very audience before whom the much, much weaker *The Pillars of Society* was played to applause at six theatres at the same time in one and the same city? (Brandes SS, vol. 14, 265).

Why *A Doll's House* did not catch on when *The Pillars of Society* had been such a success all over Germany two years before is an interesting question. Brandes suggests an answer based on three factors, all of which are relevant. The first is the audience's lack of the necessary insight. The second is the author's lack of repute. The third is the play's many oddities. The play initially attracted considerable interest. Tickets were in great demand, and the performance ended to loud applause, Brandes writes. But it was not Ibsen who attracted the interest. It was Mrs. Hedwig Niemann-Raabe who attracted the audience to the theatre. The applause was for her. The first act was received with unmixed pleasure, but when Krogstad revealed himself there was mounting disquiet, dissatisfaction and displeasure: "in the third act there was laughter and mockery; the speeches were often difficult to hear because of the laughter and scornful outbursts. The play dragged on to its close. Hissing competed with applause" (Brandes SS, vol. 14, 265). Brandes adds that the displeasure was aroused by the play. In his opinion, the explanation could be sought in the audience. The Berlin audience he describes as artistically spoilt. They want value for money and resent any seriousness. Such slight appreciation as the play did earn was due to the acting and the production.

Brandes goes on to emphasize that in the Nordic countries Ibsen had built up both a name for himself and respect. This he had not done in Germany, whether among the public or in the theatres. Without a name, no respect, and without respect no financial rewards for the author. This leaves poor foundations on which to bring out the play's quality. The actors do not know their parts well enough and tend to cut poor figures, and the play makes an odd impression in several ways. And finally, none of the spectators know what to expect, not having read the play in advance as people did in the Nordic countries. In consequence, truth was met with contempt and seriousness with laughter: "wherever something true emerged in the play, something painfully true, it provoked outcries and protests" (Brandes SS, vol. 14, 269).

What is striking in this survey of Brandes' writings on Ibsen, is that Brandes himself, has a fundamentally critical and rather negative view of Ibsen's plays. One wonders how the relationship could be described as a comradeship-in-arms. And one wonders to find Brandes given the part as the great mediator and interpreter of Ibsen's works and personality, especially in Germany. Who would have been a likelier candidate capable of communicating the transition from *The Pillars of Society* to *A Doll's House* to a German audience than Brandes? But it was not Brandes who was to be the spokesman for Ibsen's naturalism in the German theatrical world. It was Otto Brahm. And finally, to his own great surprise, Brandes had to acknowledge that Ibsen was capable of arousing such enthusiasm among young people

as he did, ten years later (in a letter to Paul Heyse 1888). That was something Brandes had not foreseen, having largely dismissed Ibsen as a provincial and national satirist all the way from *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*.

Conclusion:

So what conclusions can we draw from the above? One important reason for maintaining that *The Pillars of Society* did not mark the beginning of Ibsen's modern breakthrough in German public esteem is that *A Doll's House* proved a setback, a turning point for Ibsen's reception in Germany. The number of theatre productions fell drastically after the triumphal progress of *The Pillars of Society* in 1878. With fifty performances in Germany, *Nora* was no success at all.ⁱⁱ And things got worse. The records show that in 1881, three German theatres put *A Doll's House* on for a total of seven performances. No productions of any Ibsen play were registered in the years 1883, 1884 and 1885. In Berlin not a single Ibsen play was produced between 1881 and 1886. In Munich, where Ibsen had lived since 1876, there were no new productions of Ibsen between 1880 and 1889 (Wagner 1958, 30-44). The interest in Ibsen simply faded away, and his plays completely disappeared from the theatre repertoire. In short, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in Germany represents the end of Ibsen's success, not the beginning. That is until Otto Brahm and his generation retrieved Ibsen's plays a decade later.

How and why did Ibsen have such a huge success World Wide? That was my question from the start. Was it because of his dramatic form? Or was it because of his contribution to the women-emancipation movement? The French researcher Pascal Casanova writes about Ibsen's success in her book *The World Republic of Letters*. She underscores that Ibsen became the symbol of modernity in European drama almost in spite of himself: "Ibsen was read and performed in theaters throughout the world on the basis of diametrically opposed interpretations corresponding to the literary and aesthetic categories of those who consecrated him (Casanova 2004, 158). Looking back on the previous reasons for Ibsen's earliest success in Germany one is attempted to agree with Casanova. Ibsen as a dramatist is a huge success, but the reason is multiple, depended on time and place and all the different people involved, not because of Ibsen's political intentions but because of his applicability.

Let us end this investigation by taking a look at a caricature presenting three of Ibsen's comedies, printed in the magazine *Vikingen* 1882.ⁱⁱⁱ The title is "Henrik Ibsen som Tugtemester" [Henrik Ibsen as master of chastise]. At the top Stensgaard in *The League of Youth* (1869) is beaten, to the delight of the political Right, in the middle Bernick of *The Pillars of Society* (1877) is beaten, to the delight of the political Left, at the bottom both sides

are beaten by Ibsen in the shape of dr. Stockmann from *An Enemy of the People* (1882). This is a drawing presenting a picture of Ibsen's position as a contemporary dramatist of his time. Ibsen is obviously political in his view, but to sum up neither left nor right. Instead he makes people laugh. In his last play he apparently frightens people by his views, but in fact this is ironically, because Ibsen is not dr. Stockmann, rather dr. Stockmann is a caricature of Ibsen, a comic figure. Instead of scaring people by his political views as dr. Stockmann does in the play, Ibsen include people of all opinions within his theatre. He does not frighten people, he pleases them by doing what he has done before, making comedy of his main figures who are all busy men, trying to rule the world according to their own mind.

One wonder, why are the characters just men? Where are the women? Well, in these three plays the women all play marginal roles, as Selma, as Lona Hessel, as Katrine Stockmann. They are all reasonable women, strong women, representing the truth, and still standing by their men. Although they act according to their gender, they represent a contrast to the ridiculous men which either has to leave the stage, or they have to change their behavior. In this respect it is worth noting that Ibsen did not invent a new form of drama. He picked up an old genre, the comedy. In opposite to tragedy comedy is characterized by prose dialog instead of verse, contemporary life instead of historical past, and ordinary people instead of men and women of royal birth. And then, as the great Norwegian comedian Ludvig Holberg has noted, no way of writing was more powerful than comedy when it comes to morality. For him morality meant a possibility to study the reasons for our views and judgment: "Concerning comedies it may be said that no more powerful way of writing has been invented which to moralize, or in which the nature of virtues and vices can be given a more lifelike presentation" (Holberg 1913-63, p. 130).

Ibsen's comedies are important for a number of reasons: They give him success in Scandinavia and build up his reputation among the audience; it is through comedy he becomes political; it is through comedy he presents main characters as main characters and makes fun of them; it is through comedy he lets the marginal women emancipate from these ridiculous men. The turning point for the success of Ibsen's plays *World Wide* is not his opinions, but the use and abuse of his plays on stage by all the other people involved. Like *Peer Gynt* Ibsen was Norwegian by birth, but the spirit of his plays became cosmopolitan.

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ⁱ Charcoal drawing by Erik Werenskiöld 1895.



ⁱⁱ The play's première took place at Stadttheater Flensburg on the 5th of February 1880 and it was performed five times altogether. At the Königliches Residenz-Theater in Munich the première was on the 3rd of March with a re-opening on the 17th of August. At the Thalia-Theater in Hamburg the première was on the 4th of September 1880, and the play was given ten performances. At the Residenztheater Hannover the première was on the 12th of October, but only two performances were given. At the Residenz-Theater in Berlin the play opened on the 20th of November and was given thirteen performances (Repertoardatabasen Ibsen.net).

ⁱⁱⁱ Caricature in *Vikingen* of 9 December 1882.

