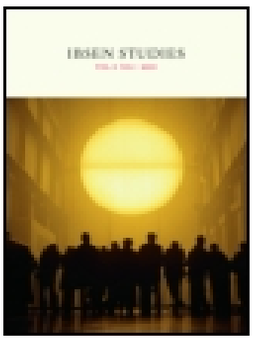

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IBSEN AND THE SCANDALOUS: *GHOSTS* AND *HEDDA GABLER*

Ellen Mortensen

Scandalous! This sonorous adjective has repeatedly been uttered in connection with the playwright Henrik Ibsen and his dramatic texts, above all his so-called contemporary plays. The word scandalous was used not only to defame the Norwegian dramatist in the wake of the appearance of *Ghosts* in 1881, by labelling both the play and its maker degenerate and immoral. The word scandalous was also invoked after the premiere of *Hedda Gabler* in 1890, when critics condemned the playwright for portraying such a bewildering, demonic and unfeminine female character. Paradoxically, the female protagonist, Hedda Gabler, is herself obsessed with the threat of scandal. In a dramatic confrontation with Hedda, Ejlert Lövborg exclaims in frustration: "Why didn't you shoot me down when you threatened to!" to which she retorts: "(…) I am as terrified of scandal as all that!"[1]

In the following, we will explore the multiple ways in which the word scandalous can be said to apply, not primarily to the signature of Ibsen himself, but to the two dramas in question. *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* both belong to the period during which Ibsen was preoccupied with the social problems of his time. In this respect, the two pieces form part of the modernist Ibsen – if we accept Toril Moi's definition of the term. In her book, *Ibsen's Modernism* (2006),[2] she situates the two plays at the heart of Ibsen's modernist period, which she claims can be located between *A Doll's House* (1879) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). According to Moi, some of the main characteristics of Ibsen's modernism, in addition to the aesthetic rejection of idealism by introducing realism and prose, are an emphasis on everyday life, on women's situations and on individual self-realisation within the realm of the everyday. Without necessarily buying into Moi's pragmatist thesis on modernism, one could claim that these characteristics are present in *Ghosts* and in *Hedda Gabler*, and could therefore agree with Moi in calling the

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plays "modernist". Moi contends moreover, that Ibsen's modernism is still our modernism today. I cannot wholeheartedly agree with Moi's notion of modernism in its overemphasis on everydayness at the expense of other aspects of modernism. I would argue that the scandalous in Ibsen is as often an effect of unreal and imaginary elements as it is of a realist portrayal of the everyday.

I do agree with Moi, however, in her discussion of the reception of the plays. To an audience and a generation of critics – accustomed to Romantic, idealist and highly formalized theatre – *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* were scandalous works, in every sense of the word. Ibsen's contemporaries were not ready for this kind of unpalatable theatre. And it is precisely because of his notorious ability to shake the foundations of the theatrical institution that Ibsen is regarded today as one of the major innovators of the modern theatre.

What is it then that makes Ibsen's plays truly scandalous in a modernist context? In these two plays, as in other tragedies in general, sexual transgressions contribute to making the plays scandalous. But is it sexuality *per se* that constitutes the most troubling aspect of the plays? In my view, Ibsen's drama becomes truly scandalous when Ibsen couples sexual transgression with disturbing gender figurations. Given the gender regime of the nineteenth century, it was above all the portrayal of women that created the greatest uproar for Ibsen. In that respect the female characters of *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* are no exception.

But the word scandalous also takes us in another direction: it forms a link to antiquity, more precisely to Greek tragedy. Much critical literature has already made this connection between *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and Greek tragedy;[3] both plays have repeatedly been referred to as "modern tragedies". One question we could ask is: are Ibsen's plays merely to be read as variations on an ancient theme, and thus not bound in time and place to modernity or a modernist complex of problems? Is the scandalous aspect of the two plays linked instead to a generic *topos* in tragedy, namely the re-emergence of that which is most feared and repressed in the familiar setting of everyday life?

Through a reading of the plays we will try to ascertain what the scandalous entails, first and foremost, within a modernist framework. In the last part of this paper, however, we will attempt to

articulate what the scandalous might mean in a post-modernist era. We ask: is the scandalous possible in the age of mass media and technology? Is Ibsen's realism outdated as a form of theatre, or can we read it as a precursor of today's reality shows? Have we, in the wake of nihilism, been deprived of any sense of meaning, of absolute values, and by implication, have we thereby been deprived of the experience of a scandalous fall?

An etymological detour: a stumbling block and an offence

As a curious detour, let us turn to the etymology of the word scandalous. The adjective is derived from the noun "scandal", in lower Latin *scandalum*, a word, in turn derived from the Greek *skandalon*, which means "stumbling block" or "offence". These two meanings, which are semantically related, but nevertheless distinct from one another, can aid us in a further investigation into the scandalous in *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*.

Both plays could most certainly be labeled "stumbling blocks", if by that we mean their respective aesthetic receptions, both in Norway and abroad. None of the operative aesthetic criteria for a well-made drama could be applied to these plays. Most critics therefore came to a radical halt in their first encounter with the plays. In this sense, the plays functioned as stumbling blocks in relation to an audience that was cultivated in an idealist aesthetic tradition. The theatre audience in general and the critics in particular were not at all ready for this scandalous form of theatre, that is, Ibsen's modernism. Accordingly, they were unable to approach his dramatic works in a rational manner. What ensued was a slew of more or less rabid attacks on the person Ibsen and his dramatic innovations.

The meaning of the word *scandal* in the sense of "stumbling block" entails that we are confronted in *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* with obstacles not easily penetrated. Ibsen presents us with interpretive hindrances or barriers that are not transgressed without considerable effort, and which often cause us to stumble and fall. The audience is introduced to a new dramatic form, one that demands quite different reading strategies. In its emphasis on the realistic portrayal of everyday life in a bourgeois setting – also called

"the fourth wall theatre" – the public is forced into the position of a voyeur. From this perspective, it has to endure all the gory details of bourgeois life, its glossy façade as well as its seething undercurrent of atrocities and abhorrence.

As we stumble through the labyrinth of this etymological detour, we come across yet another meaning of the word "scandal", namely "an offence". In this sense of the word, scandal connotes that which is an affront to public morality and sense of decency. Here we are confronted with the ethical implications of the scandalous, namely that which is either religiously defined as improper or sinful, or deemed unacceptable from the perspective of public laws or mores.

Ibsen shocked the world when he presented the well-mannered bourgeois audiences with a material that they found disturbing and disgusting. A long series of offences was paraded before the eyes of a proper and well-mannered bourgeois audience that was eager to be entertained and instructed. In the case of *Ghosts*, instead of being enlightened and morally uplifted, they were presented with infidelity, prostitution, fraud, child molestation, arson, incest, syphilis, and mercy killing. Likewise, in *Hedda Gabler*, they were witness to suicide, prostitution, drunkenness, infidelity, female aggression and, possibly, female homosexuality.

If we are to investigate the question of the scandalous further, the following questions beg to be asked: is the scandalous in Ibsen something that makes him truly modern, and is the scandalous something unique to Ibsen's modernist dramas? Or, is the scandalous rather a generic characteristic in all great tragedy, an element that we can retrace through all the history of drama, from ancient Greek tragedies, through Shakespeare, Goethe, Lessing and up to Ibsen?

The scandalous in Greek tragedy

According to Friedrich Nietzsche in his seminal work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1879),[4] the superiority of the Greeks rests on their ability to create exquisite art, which for him culminated in the creation of Greek tragedy. This specific form came about through the fusion of two major spiritual forces, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. For

Nietzsche the two gods incarnated two opposing forces, namely the Dionysian spirit of music, which he connected with the creative and destructive movements of the earth, and the Apollonian image-making forces, which account for the ability to bring forth images of individualised characters. These two forces work in a continuous struggle, a process whereby the clearly defined Apollonian characters in a tragedy would suffer gradual disintegration and, ultimately, annihilation through the working of volatile, Dionysian forces. This process of emergence and gradual destruction is mirrored in the tragedy through the dramatisation of the rise and fall of the hero. On a grander scale, this change in fate mimes the unavoidable, chthonic trajectory of all life, from birth to death.

In tragedy, the Greeks staged this cosmic drama in a form that was both enticing and horrific. For the tragic content to be revealed, there had to be an element of scandal. The Greeks let appear on stage what was forbidden, feared or shunned within the *polis*. All that was valued – be it the great personality (king or queen), the family or the city-state – was portrayed in all its glory in the beginning of the play, only to suffer disintegration and destruction towards the end. In all its gruesome detail, Dionysian violence was given dramatic form, for all to witness. According to Nietzsche, it was the Greeks' exceptional ability to give artistic form to these cosmic struggles and to confront them head-on which made them superior. The scandalous – be it incest, infanticide, patricide, matricide, infidelity, sacrilege, betrayal or fraud – played a crucial part in the tragic drama, and, although hidden from view and unstaged, was a necessary component of its plot. If there is no scandal, there can be no dramatic effect of fear and empathy, and hence, no *katharsis*.[5]

At this point, I hope to have established that Ibsen's use of scandalous material was an acquired taste that he appropriated from the writers of tragedy in antiquity. Ever since Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the scandalous transgression of codes of behaviour in sexual matters has been a subject matter for tragedy. Incest, for example, constitutes the most taboo-laden transgression of them all. This most horrible of crimes to civilization is located at the heart of the tragedy; thus, the scandalous constitutes an integral element of the tragic drama. This tradition re-emerges in the

Renaissance when Shakespeare continues this scandalous tradition by staging deadly conflicts within the family, for instance, in *King Lear* and in *Hamlet*. Furthermore, in the German tradition, the classicists Lessing and Goethe continued to invoke the scandalous in their respective tragedies, *Emilia Galotti* and *Faust*.

In as much as they are tragedies, both *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* conform to this tragic tradition in which the scandalous plays a decisive part. As such, Ibsen is most definitely a traditionalist, who is well informed with regard to the history of drama into which his plays are inscribed. Thus, when Ibsen in *Ghosts* seemingly lets Helene Alving, the mother of Osvald, condone incest by accepting a possible sexual union between her son and Regine, Osvald's half sister,[6] he most certainly offends public opinion. On the other hand, he remains true to the tragic tradition and, in this respect he brings nothing new or particularly modern to the stage by including the incest motif.

Modern(ist) scandals

And yet again, Ibsen is acutely modern in that he, as Georg Brandes has pointed out, was sensitive to the conflicts and burning issues of his time.[7] As he made a diagnosis of the social conditions, he insisted on dwelling on these social questions, putting them under scrutiny and exposing them to public debate. For that reason, he was loathed and hated.[8]

The old and the new woman: Ghosts

Ghosts is the tragedy of the demise of the bourgeois family. In the course of 24 hours, the bourgeois façade of the Alving family is shattered. In the process, lies and disasters surface, secrets which Mrs. Alving has spent a lifetime trying to cover up. Ibsen presents us with two female figures, Mrs. Alving and Regine. A superficial difference between the two appears if we separate the two characters along the dividing line of class, thus placing Mrs. Alving on the side of conventional, bourgeois femininity, whereas Regine would be identified as unconventional, working-class femininity. Such an opposition often becomes too rigid, since things are not

always as they appear on the surface in Ibsen. In the following, we will try to identify some of the ways in which both characters display character traits and forms of behaviour that are contradictory or at odds with this dichotomised reading. Mrs. Alving and Regine are scandalous in different, yet related ways.

Mrs. Alving, for her part, is the personification of the bourgeois woman, who sacrifices her own desires in order to keep up the decorum of a well-functioning family. At the same time, there is an unresolved contradiction and ambivalence in Mrs. Alving when it comes to matters of sexual conduct. On the one hand, she despises and condemns her late husband, Mr. Alving, for his sexual frivolousness. She places herself in a morally superior position in relation to him by sacrificing her own sexual desires for her duties as wife and mother.[9]

But this only bespeaks a partial truth as regards Mrs. Alving's moral constitution. To further complicate the matter, Ibsen leaves an element of doubt as to whether or not Mrs. Alving in fact committed adultery with Pastor Manders a year into her marriage with Mr. Alving. What is unequivocally stated is that she is ready to leave her husband for the clergyman at that time. But the conventional Pastor Manders backs out; he shies away from the possible scandal that such an action might cause. In her view, he thereby betrays their love, whereas he claims in retrospect that he merely acted according to moral norms, suited for a man in his position, a pillar of the community.

Torn between conventional and radical femininity, Mrs. Alving is, on the one hand, both virtuous and proper, a good mother and a representative of traditional womanhood. She sacrifices her own happiness for what she believes is the good of her family. But on the other hand, during this W*alpurgisnacht*, she reveals herself as a political and sexual radical, to such an extent that the sanctity of the family as an institution is undermined. Mrs. Alving and Osvald univocally condemn the hypocrisy of Norwegian bourgeois married men who go to Paris to enjoy prostitutes, while they publicly denounce extra-marital affairs at home. Ibsen here identifies a problem that haunted bourgeois society in the nineteenth century. Double standards and sexual lasciviousness on the part of the male population were an issue under debate,

both in England and in Scandinavia. The early feminist struggle focused on this apparent social injustice that cultivated one set of moral norms for women – "the angels in the house"– and another one for males, who were encouraged by the masculine ideology to seek sexual gratification outside the home.

One of the public hazards of this double standard was, of course, the threat of contracting infectious disease. Ibsen made use of this immanent danger of venereal disease – syphilis – in *Ghosts*. It forms a nodal point in the plot as well as in the thematic structure of the play. This deadly disease plagued bourgeois society in the nineteenth century and devastated families in its wake. Ibsen insinuates that Captain Alving's immoral conduct led to his contracting syphilis, which he again transmitted through his genetic material that he passed on to his son, Osvald. According to medical theories of contamination at the time, Osvald was infected already at birth.[10] The ghost-motif is most acutely articulated through the example of the transmission of this illness from one generation to the next. Ibsen famously expressed this horror in the line: "The sins of the fathers are visited upon their sons".

The play contains a host of scandalous transgressions. Not only does Ibsen suggest that Helene Alving might be willing to support an incestuous union between Osvald and Regine,[11] she likewise seconds Osvald and his advocacy of unmarried cohabitation, an arrangement that he suggests for himself and Regine. Furthermore, the text leaves as a viable possibility towards the end that she might kill her own son, which even in the Greek tragic tradition constitutes an unpardonable and horrific crime against nature. In the event that she should choose to perform an act of mercy killing she would administer a lethal dose of morphine to him in order to save him from suffering the final stages of syphilis. On all of these issues, Mrs. Alving's attitude is radically modern, and thus she defies all bourgeois morality and codes of behaviour for conventional womanhood. Her actions and attitudes are scandalously outrageous, not only if we consider the norms and mores in Norway and Europe at the time, but even with regard to public opinion today.

Regine, on the other hand, displays another type of femininity, considerably more modern. She incarnates "the new woman" in

the sense that she is strategic, ambitious, independent, strong-willed, pragmatic and adaptable.[12] In *Ghosts*, Regina exudes health, eroticism and strength; she is a natural survivor, despite her underprivileged origins. Both Osvald and Mrs. Alving show signs of degeneration and incarnate in that respect yesterday's order. In contrast, Regine announces the order of the future as she harbours a nietzschean "will to power". In this respect, she represents a kind of femininity that warns of a double revolt to come; one from below, from the lower classes, the other from women and the emerging feminist emancipation. She embodies agility and adopts a pragmatic attitude that enables her to adjust to the world, irrespective of hostile and changing environments.

Regine is a scandal by virtue of her bastard birth. That places her in some sense beyond good and evil, since she is already socially stigmatised. This allows her to exercise her freedom without any moral constraints in her ambitious struggle to rise in society. Her defiant attitude is revealed as she exclaims, after her dream of eloping to Paris with Osvald has been shattered: "I may drink champagne with gentlefolks yet!"[13] Regine will shy away from nothing to attain her goals, even if that entails working at Engstrand's brothel for a while. Her callousness and defiance are scary and scandalous, precisely because she is a woman. If confronted with similar attitudes and actions in a male character, like Mr. Engstrand, for instance, we would not consider them scandalous. Unsympathetic or morally suspect perhaps, but not scandalous.

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that the scandalous in *Ghosts* is primarily connected to the two female characters, Mrs. Alving and Regine, who in different, yet related ways transgress the social and moral norms. Both Mrs. Alving and Regine exhibit traits and attitudes that form the scandalous material in Ibsen's play, precisely by refusing to fit the stereotypes of femininity, be it the bourgeois or the working-class version of it. As such, they qualify to be called "stumbling blocks" or "offenses", not only against nineteenth century public opinion on "proper" femininity, but also against standard interpretations of their respective functions and values as female characters in the play.

Hedda Gabler: degenerate femininity?

If the public had problems swallowing the female figurations Ibsen presented in *Ghosts*, Hedda Gabler's femininity created an even greater uproar. The public's reaction to the protagonist of the play was overwhelmingly negative. She was condemned as neurotic, demonic and unfeminine.[14] Even women writers and intellectuals, such as Lou Salomé, were critical of Ibsen's female figure.[15] Hedda was rejected for being a self-righteous narcissist and a degenerate woman. What provoked the public at large was above all her blatant rejection of motherhood and the fact that she deliberately committed suicide, despite the assumed possibility that she was pregnant at the time.

But upon closer scrutiny, Hedda Gabler – like Mrs. Alving and Regine – is a paradoxical figure; she embodies both attractive and repulsive traits. Much critical attention has focused on her alleged arrested personality, her narcissism and her lack of empathy in her interaction with fellow female as well as male characters.[16] She appears unsympathetic and cold, attributes that are revealed in her puerile and jealous behaviour in relation to Thea Elvsted, her cruelty towards Aunt Juliane, her indifference to her husband, Jörgen Tesman, and her coy verbal sparring with Judge Brack and the beguiling of Ejlert Lövborg.

Hedda is an unconventional woman; she dissociates herself from all that is traditionally feminine. Her strong identification with her father and with his aristocratic ancestry has earned her the reputation of being a haughty, male-identified woman. She is obsessed with her father's guns, the portrait of him, the piano she has inherited – in short, with all the objects that remind her of her identity as the daughter of the late General Gabler. Her tall, dark and statuesque appearance gives her a phallic presence, not only in mentality and demeanour, but also in her bodily presence.

Hedda is disturbingly enigmatic, even today. Her interest in ideas and intellectual matters sets her apart from most other bourgeois women in her circle. In the past, she used to spend long hours reading and discussing idealist notions of beauty and heroism with Ejlert Lövborg. Their close and intimate friendship was based on a shared interest in intellectual pursuits. But when he allegedly tried

to accost her sexually in the past, she pulled a gun on him and threatened to shoot him. For a young woman in her position, Hedda's behaviour is most peculiar. Why would she want to shoot a man with whom she has shared great intellectual affinity and who has initiated her into his secret stories of sexual escapades?

Her behaviour does not make sense, except if we make an interpretive leap in an effort to confront the stumbling block that her enigmatic and allegedly incomprehensible character represents. What would happen if we questioned the basic assumption made by almost every Ibsen scholar, namely that Hedda is unequivocally attracted to men? What if we asked instead: does Hedda harbour sexual desires that are not directed towards the men in her circle: Ejlert Lövborg, Judge Brack or Jörgen Tesman? Is she completely asexual, or alternatively, is her sexuality so twisted that it has turned into sheer destructiveness, first directed towards the people around her, and then ultimately against herself? Or finally, is it possible to imagine that her sexuality is directed towards women? Has Ibsen made Hedda into a trope of perversity, by virtue of an impossible, homosexual desire for other women? Is that perhaps part of her scandalous character? And could this explain her paranoid fear of scandal? But above all, is there support in the text for such a reading?

I have elsewhere suggested that such a reading of *Hedda Gabler* is plausible.[17] The clue to such a reading is found in the interpretation of her obsession with hair,[18] in particular, Thea's hair. Throughout the play, Hedda is constantly playing with, pulling or commenting on Thea's beautiful, blond, curly hair. When they went to school together, Hedda repeatedly pestered Thea by pulling her hair. Later, when they meet in Thea's home with Tesman, Hedda's hands constantly tend to get entangled in Thea's curls, either as caresses or as an aggressive gesture. To me, this obsessive interest in Thea's hair can be symptomatically read as Hedda's libidinal attraction to Thea. However, given the taboo against this form of sexuality – both on the part of Thea herself and the world around her – this attraction turns to aggression, or thwarted or misguided affection.

In the nineteenth century, female homosexuality was unfathomable as an explanation for Hedda's enigmatic conduct, as is

evidenced in the early reception of the play. The most offensive part of her character at that time was usually connected to her blatant disgust at and total rejection of motherhood. To Hedda, the very thought of being pregnant seems repugnant. In addition, she will hear nothing of allusions to a possible sexual union between herself and her husband, Jörgen. She repeatedly interrupts any mention of conjugal intimacy, whether hints are coming from Aunt Julia or from Judge Brack. Her vocal disdain for motherhood is subject to commentary in much critical literature. For many critics operating within a Freudian parameter, she is defined in negative terms, either as suffering from some form of arrested development or neurosis, for the most part connected to her obsession with her dead father.[19]

But we need to ask why Hedda exhibits such fear and loathing of motherhood.[20] If we link her repulsion towards motherhood with her (repressed) attraction towards women, her attitude does not appear all that erratic. Furthermore, if we interpret other aspects of her unconventional persona, for instance her phallic appearance and her ''unwomanly'' conduct, we begin to decipher the contours of a ''deviant'' woman, to use Templeton's term.[21] Hedda thus becomes a trope of scandalous perversion, an impossibility within the social milieu within which she is confined. For Ibsen she becomes a symptom of the degeneration of the society out of which she emerges.[22] Her destructive conduct, which culminates in her own suicide, is outrageously scandalous. However, her character could appear less incomprehensible if we understand her actions in the context of this impossibility, that is, her homosexuality, which is both a cause and an effect of her internal battle. In this interpretation, the repression of this libidinal drive causes her to act erratically and sometimes aggressively. That does not make her less obnoxious, cruel and unpalatable, or to use the adjectives of the 1890s – incomprehensible, repulsive and degenerate – but it could help us explain the reasons for her odd behaviour.

Interestingly, not all critics consider Hedda to be totally vicious. Feminist critics have in the wake of the second wave of feminism read into her character many attributes that are valued, for instance, her strength, her intelligence and her autonomy. In spite of her being a heroine who ends up killing herself, many view

Hedda's suicide as a desperate act of revolt against female confinement, most notably within the limits of the bourgeois family. Her fate as portrayed in Ibsen's drama is one that was shared by many women at that period in history. A woman of Hedda's stature, of such apparent talent and strength, was in fact cloistered within the four walls of her home. Utterly idle and useless, and with no prospects of a future, except as wife and hostess for her husband's associates, she found her existence unbearably vacuous and boring. Her act of self-destruction becomes in this light a desperate heroic, but tragic gesture.[23]

Atle Kittang, in his incisive study of *Ibsens heroisme* (2005) argues that in the Norwegian dramatist's universe, the heroic character is without exception a masculine character. However, the hero is not always victorious. Often, the heroic figure fights an existential battle of life and death against forces that he does not control and whose power he does not comprehend. Thus, he may succumb, but he is still striving to reach his impossible goal, even as he realises that it is a futile endeavour. Kittang does not include Hedda in this study, given that Hedda is not a man. Consequently, she cannot be a hero. But Kittang does not ask the question of why it is, in his readings, that no women characters attain the status of hero in Ibsen's dramatic universe. A hero in the feminine would perhaps be a scandalous monstrosity? The question of gender does not figure among the problems in Kittang's study. That is unfortunate, because a study of heroism from a gender perspective in general and of Hedda in particular, asking the right questions, could potentially have yielded important and corrective insights.

If we read Hedda as a heroic, tragic figure in the feminine, her internal battles become all the more poignant. Read symptomatically, her erratic and aggressive behaviour could express a profound malaise, a melancholy which is not only caused by boredom and the frustration of being trapped in an unfulfilling and trivial marriage, but also by the repression of her homosexuality. In that case, Hedda's scandalous suicide could be read as an affirmative gesture, a desperate attempt to claim freedom and "greatness" in the face of submission and servility, the true marks of conventional femininity. Why shouldn't we interpret her suicide as a heroic gesture, as a negative trope of freedom? The fact that she is a

woman ought not to categorically prevent her from being a hero. At the moment when she finally realizes that her battles are futile, she opts for self-destruction. Such is her fate – a strong and willful woman succumbs, striving for freedom and greatness in a trivialised and confining world. And the fact that Ibsen chose to dwell on such a scandalous female character makes him complicit in the scandal.

The scandalous in the post-modern

Ibsen most certainly paves the way for later dramatists, who covet the scandalous in their own ways – be it August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Marguerite Duras, Cecilie Løveid or Sarah Kane. Unfortunately, we will not be able to deal with any of these dramatists in this study. Suffice it to use them as examples to support our argument that Ibsen changed the history of drama with the introduction of his modernist realism, scandalous as it was.

But one of the most significant changes that the world at large has undergone since Ibsen's time is the introduction of mass-mediated communication and information technology. In our post-modern age of technology the image prevails over the written word. And given the global spread of images through film and television industries and the worldwide web, the conditions in which it is possible to create dramatic art have drastically changed. With the global spread of visual technology, we no longer relate to the visual image in the same way they did during Ibsen's time. This is in part due to the bombardment of visual stimuli we are subjected to in our daily lives, due to the massive circulation of images through advertisement, the printed media, film and TV.

The question thus arises: is the scandalous possible in the age of technology? Today, the aesthetic condition under which theatre is produced and received is dominated by the imperative to "show-all" and an "in-your-face"-aesthetic. Can Ibsen's plays possibly have a scandalous effect on us today? Or are we too desensitised by the constant stream of sensory impressions inflicted on us by mass-mediated culture? These questions are difficult to answer in any

decisive manner, but it would probably not be an exaggeration to claim that it is not primarily his formal dramatic innovations that make Ibsen stand out today. Evil tongues have it that Ibsen's realism is totally outdated as a form of theatre in our day and age, and claim that traditional productions of Ibsen's ''talking theatre'' have become museum objects, cultivated primarily by conservative cultural institutions. Because the demands for visual effects have increased to such an extent, Ibsen's realism has, sadly enough, nothing new to convey to the generation fostered on contemporary film and mass-media. More benevolent critics argue that Ibsen may well be considered a precursor for today's reality shows, such as Big Brother and YouTube video clips.

Be that as it may; Ibsen is most relevant to us today for the scandalous themes and controversial issues that he raised, and the manner in which he critically scrutinised them. His attraction for readers and audiences today is first and foremost connected to the fact that he introduced the woman and the gender question to the stage, questions which still haunt us today. Ibsen asked: what kind of life and life arrangements are possible and desirable in the pursuit of happiness and meaning? What are the consequences of the choices we make, for men and for women? Is marriage a viable institution? Are freedom and beauty attainable within the constraints of conventional norms in society? These are still crucial questions in our post-modern, virtual reality.

But at the same time we may ask: have we been deprived of any sense of meaning, of absolute values in the wake of nihilism?[24] Have all values been devalued and to a degree that no thing can mean more (or less) than another? Are we any longer in a position to privilege one thing over another, or does everything circulate interchangeably? And by implication, have we been irrevocably deprived of experiencing a scandalous fall from greatness to destitution? What kinds of social problems and subject matters could possibly shake us as scandalous today? I ponder these questions as I zap through 54 TV channels that in the course of two minutes will expose me to war combats, soap opera, aids, lotto, trafficking of women, TV-shopping, football, Idol, famine, poker, child molestation, Snoop Dog, paedophilia, Madonna, 60 minutes, pornography, Hannibal the Cannibal, just to give you an

assortment of today's menu… I feel dizzy as I stagger towards the old stumbling block Henrik, begging for answers.

1 Ibsen, Henrik, (1961): *Hedda Gabler, Act two in* Hedda Gabler *and Other Plays*, trans. by Una Ellis-Fermor. London: Penguin Books, p. 317.

2 Moi, Toril (2006): *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

3 A number of critics have dealt with Ibsen's two plays in relation to Greek tragedy, ranging from Schjøtt, P.O. (1882): in his review of *Ghosts* in Nyt Tidsskrift, Kristiania, Vol.1 pp. 100–104 to Szondi, Peter (1987) in his *Theory of the Modern Drama*, ed. and trans. by Michael Hays. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, to Templeton, Joan (1997): *Ibsen's women*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

4 Nietszche, Friedrich (1956): *The Birth of Tragedy*, Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Doubleday.

5 See Nietzsche, (1956), XXIV, pp. 140–144.

6 This interpretation of the play is seconded by, among others, Joan Templeton in her chapter on *Ghosts*, when she makes the following observation: ''The play approaches parody as Ibsen includes the supreme family taboo, incest: the syphilitic son returns home and sees his 'salvation' in the body of his half-sister, and the mother, now desperate and ready to give him anything, is willing to let him have her''. in Templeton (1997), p. 160.

7 See Brandes, Georg (1982): *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*. New York: Haskel and Co.

8 There is ample evidence of the harsh criticism was met with upon the publication of *Ghosts*. According to Joan Templeton, *Ghosts*, ''one of the greatest literary scandals of the 19th century, inspired more venom than any other play has ever produced''.* Templeton (Autumn 2006): ''Ibsen's legacy: Making the Theatre Matter'', *Scandinavian Review*, p. 4. (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3760/is_200610/ai_n19198002)

9 In Ttempleton, Joan (1997), ''Mrs. Alving's Ghosts'', the author takes issue with what she calls the standard readings of the play, which she calls anti-feminist. These readings morally condemn Mrs. Alving for choosing the path of dutiful motherhood. Templeton argues that Helena Alving ought not be blamed for not responding to Captain Alving's sense of ''joy of life''. According to Templeton, Mrs. Alving should never have married the Captain, and in her reading the tragic demise of the whole family is connected to the fact that she agreed to marry him. However, given her position as a bourgeois woman in 19th Century Norway, there were not many alternative options open to her.

10 For in-depth discussions of Ibsen's treatment of the question of heredity and the contraction of syphilis, see Tjønneland, Eivind (2005): ''Repetition,

Recollection and Heredity in Ibsen's *Ghosts* – the Context of Intellectual History. In P. Bjørby, A. Dvergsdal and I. Stegane. Bergen: Alvheim & Eide, (eds.) 2005: *Ibsen at the Cusp of the 21st Century: Critical Perspectives*, pp. 193–206. Another treatment of the same issue of heredity and syphilis is discussed in Dines Johansen, Jørgen (2005): ''How Osvald got Syphilis. Pathology and Metaphor in Ibsens's *Ghosts*'', ibid., pp. 99–112.

11 Mrs. Alving's condones in my view a possible union between Regina and Osvald in the following exchange between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders ''If I thought he was in earnest, and that it would make him happy…''. This position is strengthened in her subsequent response to Pastor Mander's, who calls such a union ''monstrous''. To this, Mrs. Alving retorts: ''Do you call it unheard-of? Honestly, Pastor Manders, do you really believe there are not plenty of married couples out here in the country who are just as closely related?'' Ibsen (1964), Act two, p. 60.

12 Few readings of *Ghosts* have focused on Regina, who tends to be overlooked as only a representative of the lower classes. In my view, she plays a crucial role in the play, notably because she is the only character that is unequivocally connected to the future by being the surviving force in the play.

13 Ibsen, Henrik (1964): Ghosts. In Ghosts *and Other Plays*. Trans. by Peter Watts. London: Penguin Books, p. 94.

14 In the 19th century she was condemned by, among others, Georg Brandes who sees in Hedda ''a true degenerate'' (''en Sand Degenerasjonstype'') who incarnates ''raw and low instincts'' (''raa og lave Instinkter''). In Rekdal, Anne Marie(ed.) (2001), pp. 79–80.

15 Salomé, Lou Andréas (1893): 'Excerpt from Henrik Ibsens Fauengestalten nach seinen Familiedramen' (1893). In Rekdal, Anne Marie, (ed.) (2001:): *Et skjær av uvilkårlig skjønnhet: Om Henrik Ibsens* Hedda Gabler. Oslo: Landslaget for norskundervisning (LNU) / Cappelen Akademisk Forlag, pp. 72–74.

16 See for example, Finney, Gail (1989): *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism and European Theatre at the Turn of the Century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Moi, Toril (1983). ''Narsissisme som forsvar: Ibsens Hedda Gabler''. *Eigenproduksjon*. Bergen: Nordisk institutt, Universitetet of Bergen, pp. 43–58.

17 Mortensen, Ellen (2006): ''Feminine floker i Ibsens Hedda Gabler ''. *Edda*, No.4, pp. 388–395; Mortensen, Ellen (2007): ''Hairy Entanglements in Ibsen's Hedda Gabler''. In *Proceedings from the XI International Ibsen Conference*. (Forthcoming)

18 See Haugom Olsen, Stein (1985): 'Why Does Hedda Gabler Marry Jørgen Tesman?' *Modern Drama* 28:4, pp. 591–610 for an alternative reading of the hair symbolism in the play.

19 This is true for both male and female commentators. See for instance, Nissen, Ingjald (1931), who in his book, *Sjelelige kriser i det menneskelige liv. Henrik Ibsen og den moderne psykologi*, Oslo. Nissen argues that Hedda is sexually repressed,

as a result of an internalization Norwegian Puritanism. Furthermore, in Finney, Gail (1989), Hedda is called an hysteric.

20 It has been repeatedly argued, among other by Templeton, Joan (1997) that Hedda's rejection of motherhood is connected to the theme of female entrapment in a debilitating and boring marriage with Jörgen Tesman, who is both intellectually and emotionally inferior to her. A baby would, in Templeton's reading, only strengthen Hedda's feeling of being trapped in a meaningless existence, devoid of freedom. I have taken issue with the readings that unequivocally claims that Hedda is pregnant upon their return from the honeymoon, see Mortensen, Ellen (2006).

21 See Templeton, Joan (1997), where the author in the chapter entitled ''The deviant woman as hero: Hedda Gabler'', argues for an interpretation of Hedda as ''deviant'', not in the Freudian understanding of the term as sexually deviant, but in terms of dominant norms for feminine behaviour. Templeton performs a convincing reading of the play from this perspective. However, she aligns herself with all other readings of the play by insisting that Hedda is passionately attracted to Ejlert, and that it was her admitted cowardice that made Hedda refrain from acting upon this attraction. According to Templeton, this was a wise, albeit difficult decision, given her vulnerable and precarious position as a woman. Like all other women of her class, Hedda would be economically dependent upon the reliability of the man whom she would choose as a husband. Ejlert's prospects of being a provider, was at best doubtful, and for a young woman in her position in society, the prospects of being tied to a man who could not support her financially, would be potentially catastrophic.

22 In this sense, Ibsen does portray a ''degenerate'' woman, to use Brandes' characteristic in his description of Hedda, see Brandes, Georg (2001). There is little evidence that Ibsen would disagree with this characterization. However, that did not refrain him from taking an interest in such a female character and to write a play in which this degenerate femininity takes central stage.

23 This ''positive'' reading of the play can be found, among other, in Finney, Gail (1989), Moi, Toril (1983), Mortensen, Ellen (1996), ''Å kjede seg til døde: Kvinnen og det tragiske i Ibsens *Hedda Gabler*', *Vagant*, no. 4, pp. 71–94, Templeton, Joan (1997).

24 The question of nihilism was first introduced in Nietzsche's famous dictum ''God is Dead'', and is further elaborated in Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968): *Will to Power*, trans. William Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

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