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Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater,
Philosophy (review)

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Reviews

Toril Moi. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 396, 4 color plates, 10 b/w illus. \$35.00.

Toril Moi deplores that academic modernists do not recognize Ibsen's rightful place in the canon as a pioneer of modernism. In the wider, nonacademic world of the theater and its public, Ibsen's place is secure enough—in fact, he is a cultural icon more instantly recognizable by the wider public than such indubitable modernists as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, or James Joyce. The academic world's stubborn refusal to grant Ibsen's place in its modernist, prestigious pantheon, however, is for Moi the injustice that rankles. *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* is determined to redress that injustice.

Her case for Ibsen's modernism is based on what she describes as his attack upon the tradition of cultural idealism through his "turn to the ordinary" in his modern realistic plays. These, she sees as a series of strategies in exposing the follies and dire consequences of the idealist approach to everyday reality. She gives extensive consideration to what she terms the "pre-modernist" major plays, *Love's Comedy* and *Emperor and Galilean*. Her recognition of the importance of these plays is a welcome aspect of her study. Moi's thesis and much of her critical terminology derive from the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whom she acknowledges and frequently cites. "Skepticism," the "Ordinary," "Idealism," "the Other" are among the Cavellian terms that recur throughout Moi's text. (The book owes other debts and some Ibsen scholars are likely to recognize their own insights recycled throughout the text diluted and often unacknowledged.)

The greater part of *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* is a cultural history of idealism from the time of Friedrich Schiller, who most influentially set the idealist agenda, to the decisions of the Nobel Prize Committee at the turn of the twentieth century. This is where the strength of the book lies. Moi unearths some truly eye-opening evidence on the tenacity of the idealist attitude even

when it was culturally on the retreat. "Modernism is built on the negation of idealism" she insists (67) and this constitutes the main burden of her thesis. Ibsen's modernism, she argues, is due to his decisive contribution to the effort to displace idealism. She is not concerned with the tradition of modernism that emphasizes the intersecting of mythic, archetypal, temporal, and realistic planes of reality as in the method of Pound, Joyce, and Eliot. Modernism, for Moi, rests on two main pillars: the assault by realism on the claims of idealism, and the recognition of the fully enfranchised status of women.

Her depiction of the idealist stranglehold on artistic production from the time of the Enlightenment to its discrediting in the later nineteenth century makes for engrossing, at times, revelatory reading. One example is her fascinating contrast between the parallel careers of Ibsen and the Idealist German author, Paul Heyse. Her lively contrast of the character of Heyse, urbane, widely read, familiar with and able fluently to discuss the cultural scene of Europe, and the taciturn, socially and culturally awkward Ibsen is a *tour de force* of exposing the difference between the ingratiating liberal idealist and the truly radical writer. It consequently comes as a shock to learn of Georg Brandes's preference for the idealist Heyse (destined for the Nobel Prize as Ibsen notoriously was not) over Ibsen; it well illustrates Moi's argument about the persistence of the idealist tradition in European culture. This is cultural history, commentary, and detective work of the highest order. *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* contains many such passages and is alone a reason for owning the book.

Also impressive is her account of "Ibsen's Visual World" (105–43). Beginning by confronting the vexed question of Ibsen's own taste in painting, Moi persuasively argues that Ibsen's failure to respond, for example, to the Impressionist movement and his preference for realistic historical and genre paintings were traits shared by many culturally impressive contemporaries—Henry James, for example (108–11). Moi then undertakes a well-informed analysis of the theoretical and practical evolution of the idea of the visual arts from the theories of Lessing and Diderot to the development of the visual elements of the theater up to Ibsen's time. This survey of the cultural scene with regard to the visual arts is expertly done. Sometimes, however, proposed cultural influences on Ibsen seem strained. I am not convinced *Emperor and Galilean* is responding in any way to Victor Hugo's Romantic melodrama *Hernani*, or that Arnold Böcklin was a source for *The Lady from the Sea*. Moi was struck by the "anguished" expression on the face of a mermaid in his painting *Im Spiel der Wellen* (color plate 4), but her companion in the water, a jolly, bearded sea god, is as distant from Ibsen's Stranger as one could imagine! Even less persuasive is the claim that the figures on a Böcklin postcard (illustr. 9) influenced *When We Dead Awaken*, written twenty-four years later.

In a discussion of *Emperor and Galilean* Moi locates Julian's dilemma in the opposing demands upon him of the theater and the temple. This is one of her many arresting insights. Julian's attempts at reviving the pagan Dionysian cults degenerate into ludicrously bad theater before cynical audiences, while his idealist attempt to make his imperial court into a model of the virtues theatricalizes the court and inevitably breeds the hypocritical flatteries to which the lonely Julian succumbs (208). However, despite claiming the drama is about "warfare, revolt, terrorism, dictatorship and gratuitous death" (189), Moi's account of the play reduces it mainly to a case study on the defects of Julian's character, with little regard for the "world-historical" dialectic Ibsen created for this huge play. Her reductive verdict that "Julian's whole life is evidence that idealist aesthetics simply cannot be lived" (216) ignores the urgent historical, cultural, and ideological dimensions of the play.

Moi sees Ibsen as a lifelong defender of "ordinary" and "everyday" reality and the plays as exhibiting strategies against idealism's lethal infiltrations into that reality. This conviction provides much of the cogency but also much of the limitation of her approach, which is a sophisticated elaboration of George Bernard Shaw's anti-idealist argument in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). Like Shaw, Moi is less interested in Ibsen as a dramatic artist and more interested in him as a social theorist and moral commentator. This emphasis will somewhat diminish the study's appeal to the academic modernists Moi is addressing.

Subjective assertion, without the backing of close analysis, is a troubling aspect of Moi's method when she comes to the realist plays: "The relationship between Hedvig and her father reminds me of *King Lear* ..." (248); "*The Wild Duck* is *King Lear* as it would have to be written after 1871" (13). Characters, mostly male, become case studies in idealist culpability and are brought to court for summary judgment. Falk, Julian, Torvald, Gregers, Hjalmar, Rosmer (most malign of all) make the line-up for the prosecution's case. Missing is recognition of the *dialectical* nature of Ibsen's art: the way conflicting values and forces, including, among others, Idealism and Realism, engage, evolve, and infiltrate each other and are "sublated" into more adequate states of consciousness. This is the process of the Realist Cycle as a whole, whose stages are revealed through beautifully shaped dramatic structures. Idealism, in Ibsen, cannot be demonized as simply a malign force; it is required to expose the extent of everyday reality's alienation from truth and freedom (the forces launched by Lona Hessel at the conclusion of *Pillars of Society*) and to envisage more adequate ideas of our human identity.

The criterion for a good interpretation of any work of art is one that manages to bring the greatest number of its details into a coherent interpretation

and which least distorts the overall nature of the work. An inadequate interpretation is one that selects only those elements that support one's thesis. An interpretation is defective to the extent it must evade some details and force significances on others. There are places, frequently, where Moi's judgments derive from dubious projections onto the text. One example is her reading of a scene in *A Doll House*, act 2:

(Rank sits at the piano and plays. Nora dances with increasing wildness. Helmer has placed himself by the stove, continually directing dancing instructions to her; she seems not to hear him; her hair loosens and falls over her shoulders; she doesn't notice but keeps on dancing. Mrs. Linde enters)

Mrs. Linde: (stands tongue tied by the door) Ah—!

Nora: (Still dancing) Watch the fun (løjer), Kristine.

Helmer: But dearest, best Nora, you are dancing as if your life were at stake.

Nora: But it is!

Helmer: Rank, stop it. This is pure madness. Stop it, I say. (Rank stops playing and Nora suddenly stops) (239)

A little later Nora hysterically begs Helmer not to open the mailbox and Dr. Rank asks Helmer, "There wouldn't be anything—anything on the way?"

Moi comments that Mrs. Linde, unlike the crass men folk, "sees Nora's pain ..." (240). Nora is directing Mrs. Linde to see "not just Nora but the relationship between Nora's performance and the men's gaze." They "watch her in a quasi-pornographic mode.... For them, Nora's dance is a display of her body; their gaze de-souls her, and turns her into a 'mechanical doll'" (239). They "see only Nora's wild body, which they theatricalize in the moment in which it is most genuinely expressive" (240). Dr. Rank's concerned query as to Nora possible pregnancy is "an attempt to reduce her dance to a mere effect of hormonal changes" (What, to a doctor like Rank, would be "mere" about pregnancy?) Both Helmer and Dr. Rank, unlike Mrs. Linde, refuse to see Nora "as a soul in pain"; "both men reduce it to a matter of hormones" (240).

Returning to that scene we see that it is Helmer who sees Nora's dance as expressing pain "as if your life were at stake." Dr. Rank is playing the piano and Ibsen makes no mention of his "gaze" or even if he is facing in her direction. Mrs. Linde's "Ah—!" is now made to carry a huge burden of elaborate feminist implication. Again and again Moi's speculative account of the plays leads her to reductive assertions and judgments based on purely subjective inference, not on close analysis.

Judgments are categorically stated without argument: "*The Wild Duck*, then, is specifically about Hedvig's struggle to uphold the meanings of the words 'daughter' and 'father', and Hjalmar's betrayal of that struggle" (263). Moi's specu-

lative retelling of Hedvig's past life with Hjalmar, her beliefs, feelings, etc., over the years (262–63) comes dangerously close to the Victorian mode of “The Childhood of Shakespeare's Heroines.”

There is always a danger of approaching works of art with a specific thesis and then selecting only those plays, and only those details, that serve the thesis. Nietzsche derided scholars who resemble archaeologists triumphantly unearthing artifacts they themselves had buried. The best precaution against this malady most incident to critics is close analysis of the *whole* play: submitting to its structure, its inner dialectic. Moi's commentaries and judgments, while frequently interesting and even penetrating, are rarely backed up by serious analyses of the plays as objective, finely accomplished works of dramatic art—which is what the academic modernists will be on the lookout for.

There is much in Moi's discussion of the plays and her judgments that one will agree or disagree with. It is difficult to do justice to this exasperating, frequently brilliant, often perverse study. There is not enough space here to cite all that I found impressive nor enough to list everything that I found mistaken in its approach. At least, however, *Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* is never a dull reading experience.

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Katharine Goodland. *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to “King Lear.”* Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005. Pp. 254. \$94.95.

The most innovative element in Katharine Goodland's capable study of female dramatic mourning lies in its willingness to trace the continuity from secularized presentations of mourning in Renaissance drama, back to the laments of the Virgin to the medieval cycle plays. For while a number of excellent studies have been done about Renaissance cultural trauma as a product of the radical changes of the Reformation, few of them give much attention to the elaborate scenarios of death and mourning promulgated by medieval theater. Medieval culture, Goodland explains, emphasized the continuity of the living and the dead by dramatizing communal grief over a dead body (e.g., Christ's or Lazarus's). Building on the work of Huston Diehl and Michael Neill, Goodland sees Renaissance secular drama as restoring the unity disrupted by the Protestant curtailment of Catholic mourning rituals. Thus, when the Reformation