

Ibsen and Tragedy: A Study in *Lykke*

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

31 March 2003

Abstract

This thesis traces Ibsen's development as a writer of tragedy through *lykke*, contingency and happiness.

Chapter I explains why notions of chance and happiness are so central to tragedy, and shows how the interests of tragedy and ethics converge in these concepts. Aristotle's arguments in the *Poetics* for the secularisation of tragedy are examined, along with basic ethical and tragic categories of *eudaimonia* (happiness) and *tuche* (luck). The case is then made for seeing Norwegian *lykke* as a concept straddling both these notions. This leads to the argument that Ibsen performs an analogous secularising gesture on his own tragedies, which explains the development from an excessive reliance on external agencies in his historical tragedies to the highly sophisticated accounts of *lykke* in later works.

Chapter II presents the early historical tragedies from *Catilina* to *Kejser og Galilæer*, dramas written in 'high tragic' mode, dependent on notions of fate and other forces hostile to human happiness.

Chapter III argues that with *Brand*, Ibsen turns away from manifestations of contingency, and is more concerned with human agency. Here the spiritual discipline of the hero, not contingency, is pitted against happiness, and the move towards secularisation is discernible.

Chapters IV, V and VI focus on Ibsen's realist tragedies *Et Dukkehjem*, *Gengangere* and *Rosmersholm*, secularised tragedies *par excellence*. Through their explorations of happiness, they participate in philosophical debates such as the affirmation of the ordinary life and utilitarianism.

The last two chapters examine *Bygmester Solness* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, in which Ibsen returns to an analysis of notions of extra-human agencies and chance as determiners of happiness, not as a return to the cosmologies of his historical tragedies, but as a part of the dramatization of the hero's search for truth.

Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Chapter I Introduction	
1.1 Introduction	7
1.2.1 Ibsen Criticism	9
1.2.2 Ibsen the Tragedian	12
1.3.1 Ethical Criticism	13
1.3.2 Tragedy and Philosophy	16
1.4.1 <i>Lykke</i>	18
1.4.2 Aristotle: <i>tuche</i> , <i>eudaimonia</i> , <i>hamartia</i>	20
1.4.3 The Tragic Plot	24
1.4.4 <i>Hamartia</i> and the Secularisation of Tragedy	25
1.4.5 Ibsen and the Secularisation of Tragedy	27
Chapter II Early Historical Tragedy and <i>der göttliche Gegensatz</i>	
2.1 Introduction	36
2.2 <i>Catilina</i>	37
2.3 <i>Fru Inger til Østråt</i>	42
2.4 <i>Hærmændene på Helgeland</i>	49
2.5 <i>Kongsemnerne</i>	59
2.6 <i>Kejser og Galilæer</i>	65
Chapter III <i>Brand</i>: Mellem Lykke og Pligt	
3.1.1 Introduction	84
3.1.2 The Failure of the Enlightenment Project	86
3.1.3 Kant: The Pure Will and Duty	88
3.1.4 Kant: Happiness	89
3.1.5 Kant and Aristotle	92
3.1.6 Necessary Identities	94
3.2 Brand – Helt og Holdent Kallets Mann	97
3.3 Agnes and Ejnar: Sensible Happiness	100
3.4 Ought and Can	102
3.5 Duty vs. Duties	106
3.6 Mellem Lykke og Pligt	108
Chapter IV Opptegnelser til nutids-tragedier	
4.1.1 “The Death of Tragedy”	124
4.1.2 Realism and Naturalism	128
4.2 <i>Et Dukkehjem</i>	135
4.2.1 <i>Lykke</i>	139
4.2.2 My Station and its Duties	146
Chapter V <i>Gengangere</i>: Livsglæden – kan det være redning i den?	
5.1 Introduction: Tragedy?	156
5.2 <i>Gengangere</i>	158
5.2.2 Livsglæden – kan det være redning i den?	163
Chapter VI <i>Rosmersholm</i>: Lykken som Livsmål	
6.1 Tragedy or Tragi-Comedy?	189
6.1.2 Ibsen and Utilitarianism	193

6.2 Act I	
6.2.1 Ulrik Brendel	196
6.2.2 <i>Frigørelsens Værk</i>	199
6.2.3 <i>Lykke</i>	205
6.3 Act II	
6.3.1 Kroll and Mortensgård	209
6.3.2 Den stille, glade skyldfrihed	214
6.4 Act III	
6.4.1 Lykke for alle	219
6.4.2 The Mainspring of Morality Has Been Taken Away	222
6.5 Act IV	
6.5.1 Nu er jeg ble 't slig	227
6.5.2 Å holde justits selv	234
Chapter VII <i>Bygmester Solness. Lykke</i> as Compensatory Fiction	
7.1 Introduction	246
7.1.2 Despair	249
7.2 <i>Lykke</i>	253
7.3 <i>Kunstnerplads</i>	259
7.4 Denne her sprukne skorstenspiben	263
7.5 <i>Pligt</i>	265
7.6 <i>Hjælperne og Tjenerne</i>	267
7.7 De er syg, bygmester	272
7.8 Revelation	275
Chapter VIII John Gabriel Borkman Emotions of Self-Assessment	
8.1 Introduction Crime and Punishment	288
8.2 Act I	
8.2.1 Reparation: Erhart	290
8.3 Act II	
8.3.1 <i>Lykke</i>	293
8.3.2 Helping Friends and Harming Enemies	296
8.3.3 <i>Ulykke</i>	299
8.3.4 <i>Forbryder</i>	304
8.4 Act III	
8.4.1 Jeg <i>måtte</i> det	308
8.4.2 Emotions of Self-Assessment	315
8.4.4 <i>Lykke</i> : Erhart	321
8.5 Act IV	
8.5.1 Utenfor muren	323
Conclusion	334
Bibliography	340

Acknowledgements

Without the unflagging support and commitment of my supervisor, Dr Marie Wells, this thesis would never have been written. My thanks to her for nurturing my undergraduate interest in Ibsen into an enduring passion.

I have also benefited immensely from the help of my mother, Turid Stanton-Ife, whose irreverent wit sustained me during our marathon proof-reading sessions. My brother, Dr John Stanton-Ife, has frequently proved a valued *cicerone* to 'en søster i nød' through the complexities of moral philosophy.

Several others have given generously of their time, in particular, Professor Emeritus Thomas Van Laan, whose work has been an inspiration to me. He has been kind enough to let me consult the manuscript of a major work in progress. I thank him for this and for all the encouragement he has given me. My thanks to Arnbjørn Jakobsen for sharing his formidable knowledge of the biblical background to Ibsen with me, to Dr Vasiliki Giannopoulou, an invaluable consultant on matters classical, and to Dr Mozaffar Qizilbash for providing me with unexpectedly useful resources.

Warmest thanks are due to Professor Vigdis Ystad, Randi Meyer and all at the Ibsen Centre in Oslo, where I spent three productive and happy months in 2002. Thanks are also due to the Research Council of Norway for so generously funding this stay, and to Persephone and Nikolaos Nikolaou, who made it possible for me to take up the scholarship by holding the fort at home. I cannot thank them enough.

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Vasilios and my children Clio and Nicholas, who have all taught me so much about *lykke*.

Hvorfor blir man stående ved Sokrates?
Hvorfor går man ikke et lidet skritt videre
og følger Diogenes eller - om jeg tør sige -
mig, da vi dog fører eder til *lykken*? Thi er
ikke *lykken* formålet for al visdomslære? -
Kejser Julian

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Julian the Apostate defines *lykke* (happiness) as the end of all philosophical enquiry.¹ This is one of his less controversial statements, because as Simon Blackburn explains,

All ethical theories accord some importance to human happiness. They differ first in their conception of what that happiness consists in, secondly in views of how an agent's own personal happiness is aligned with, or traded against, the general happiness, and thirdly in whether it is necessary to acknowledge any other end for human action.²

This thesis sets out to explore *lykke* and kindred concepts in the tragedies of Henrik Ibsen. It does not do so in order to distil a discrete philosophy from these dramas, nor to crystallise any neat definition of 'Ibsenian tragedy,' but rather to locate *lykke* at the tragic core of these works. Norwegian *lykke* (happiness, luck, success) will be considered alongside Greek *eudaimonia* (happiness) and *tuche* (chance) within a specifically Aristotelian framework.

The main point of entry is Aristotle's canonical anatomy of tragedy contained in the *Poetics*³ supported by his views on *eudaimonia* as expounded in the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics*.⁴ By establishing an affinity between *lykke* and *eudaimonia*, it will be possible both to evaluate the extent to which Ibsen's tragedies are Aristotelian and to delimit the conceptual spine which supports these plays and what Miguel de Unamuno would term their "tragic sense of life".⁵

The evolution of *lykke* is traced from *Catilina* (1850) to *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), with the emphasis on the post-*Brand* dramas. The early historical works are of interest not because they uniformly indicate the levels of subtlety Ibsen was to reach in later works, but because they evidence a writer who was vexed by the *lykke* question from the very beginning of his dramatic output, and who would never be free from its reach. These plays also enable us to appreciate the continual refinements in Ibsen's thinking on *lykke*, both in the sense of 'happiness' and 'chance'. It is these refinements that so enlarge his tragic vision.

Ibsen once remarked, "Man taler her i Landet om min Filosofi. Jeg *har* ingen Filosofi".⁶ This is one of the few pronouncements of Ibsen's which should be accepted without qualification. However, this does not mean that Ibsen's dramatic works have no philosophical content. *Tvoertimot*. They constantly bring to the fore problems that are as old and enduring as philosophy itself – happiness being the prime example, "Thi er ikke lykken formålet for al visdomslære?"

I will argue that the basic structure of Ibsen's exploration of *lykke* is Aristotelian, but I also argue that his treatment of the problem undergoes several important modifications and is nuanced at times more obviously by other thinkers, most notably the ideas of Kant, Kierkegaard and the Utilitarians.

Although I make extensive reference to Aristotle and other philosophers I am not undertaking a study in influence; nor do I consider it essential to my argument to establish whether Ibsen owned or read these works at any given time in his career. (The burden of the evidence suggests that he did not read

them, not the primary texts anyway. He is likely to have encountered them in the countless newspapers and journals he devoured so eagerly.) The point is that Ibsen's drama engages issues of enormous and inexhaustible philosophical importance, issues which at once 'belong' both to discrete thinkers and to any mind vexed by the problem of existence.

1.2.1 Ibsen Criticism

This section serves to situate this thesis in the precise context of Ibsen research; the next section will situate its method in a broader literary-critical framework. In his brief historical survey of Ibsen criticism written in 1994, Errol Durbach divides the secondary literature into distinct phases: 1) Marxism, Propaganda and Shaw⁷; 2) Modernist-Symbolist criticism⁸; 3) Freudian criticism⁹; 4) Textual Criticism, focussing on Ibsen the theatre-poet¹⁰; 5) Performance criticism¹¹ and finally 5) 'Supertextual Criticism'.

By christening this last critical tendency 'Supertextual', Durbach is clearly winking in the direction of Brian Johnston's 1989 *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*.¹² Durbach defines Supertextual interpreters as "critics who conjoin text to 'supertext' and insist upon intellectual process and philosophical idea as the deep structure of the drama – a *Weltanschauung* experienced in the dialectical tensions within reality and tested upon the plane of universal reason."¹³ He also cites an important article by Rolf Fjelde, Richard Hornby's book and his own work as belonging to this sub-category.¹⁴

This thesis identifies itself completely with this Supertextual school.

The Supertextual school has its pedigree in earlier philosophical approaches to Ibsen. One of the earliest of these was Josef Faaland's study published in 1943 and entitled *Henrik Ibsen og Antikken*¹⁵, which was a detailed reading of the presence of Classical mythology, philosophy and drama in Ibsen. It signalled a departure from morally interested readings, (which I will turn to presently), highlighting the great classical heritage in Ibsen's oeuvre. In England, also in the 1940's, Brian Downs drew together all the philosophical ideas he identified behind Ibsen's dramatic works in *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background* (1946).¹⁶

After 1975, the philosophical approach underwent a renaissance with the publication of Brian Johnston's three Hegelian interpretations of Ibsen, which although too totalising a reading, had an energising effect in their irresistible assertion of Ibsen's intellectual range, generally undervalued by Anglo-Saxon critics.¹⁷ In 1981 Richard Hornby published his Kierkegaardian appraisal of Ibsen's so-called social plays in *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays*, and in 1982 Errol Durbach's landmark work *Ibsen the Romantic* placed Ibsen in the context of a more pluralistic philosophical encounter with the history of ideas.¹⁸ Durbach is one critic who always reads Ibsen with one eye on the tragic.

1996 saw the publication of Theoharis C. Theoharis's *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, a work interpreting three plays by Ibsen as the site of collision between Aristotelian humanism and Nietzschean will to power.¹⁹ This book, like Johnston's *The Ibsen Cycle*, represents a watershed in Ibsen scholarship for its insistence on the intellectual weight of Ibsen's drama, but is flawed in the same respect; perhaps too evangelical, its absolute positions force

the author into some unfortunate corners. In Norway, Egil Wyller in *Henrik Ibsen: et enhetssyn* (1999) recalls earlier Christian interpretations,²⁰ while Tom Eide's *Ibsens Dialogkunst*, a book-length study of *Når vi døde vågner* (2001), offers a much more measured and open approach.²¹

Some of the earliest Ibsen research in Scandinavia was carried out by theologians with overtly ethical, if not moralistic concerns. This research was documented by Hjalmar Brenel whose thorough Christian reading of Ibsen, *Etiske Motiv i Henrik Ibsens dramatiska diktning*, was published in 1941. Brenel traces the theological reception of Ibsen's work from the 1890's to the 1930's.

Interpretations were often polemical (Olaf Holm, *Kristus eller Ibsen?*, 1893; A. Schack, *Om udviklingsgangen i Henrik Ibsens Digtning*, 1896). These critics find Ibsen's view of life devoid of any clear "moraliske Grundanskuelse".²² Two further researchers, Heinrich Weinel in his *Ibsen. Björnson. Nietzsche. Individualismus und Christentum* (1908) and J. C. A. Fetter in his *Henrik Ibsen* (1917) focus on Ibsen's early dramas, and both conclude that *Kejser og Galilæer* represents Ibsen's own apostasy. *Alles oder Nichts!*, written by Emil Felden in 1911, approaches Ibsen's dramas from a very different perspective, evaluating them as potential sermon material.²³

Brenel himself insists that Ibsen's dramatic output opens a number of theological questions, and his aim is to establish the distance between Ibsen's presentation of the human and a Christian concept of man. In evaluating Ibsen's view of the human, he concludes that Ibsen "har i huvudsak samma strukturella grundsyn på människan, när hon är utan gudsrelation, som när hon skildras i medveten motsättning till Gudsbestämmelse".²⁴

The first critic to insist on the predominance of the ethical over the Christian/moral and the social dimensions in Ibsen's work was Daniel Haakonsen. Unfortunately Haakonsen restricted his observations to one, albeit groundbreaking, article, "Ethical Implications in Ibsen's Drama". What Haakonsen responds to in this discussion is the non-normative approach to moral questioning in Ibsen's dramas. It is the moral questions Ibsen asks over and over again, most commonly articulated as a conflict between loyalty to an ideal and loyalty to another human being, which for Haakonsen make him unequivocally a writer of tragedy.²⁵

1.2.2 Ibsen the Tragedian

Beyond a rather restricted battery of scattered articles, albeit in some cases highly provocative and illuminating, the subject of Ibsen as a writer of tragedies has received lamentably scant attention.²⁶ Theoharis's *Right Action* is the most substantial recent treatment, but since it deals with only three works (*Ghosts*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder*) and gives uneven attention to them) has obvious problems. Thomas F. Van Laan is currently drawing together years of deep engagement with Ibsen as a writer of tragedy in a book-length study which embraces his entire dramatic output.

Van Laan's basic premise is that Ibsen must be seen "as essentially a dramatist in the Aristotelian mode". He correctly identifies an Aristotelian tragic patterning underlying his tragic composition: "the pattern in which the protagonist, beginning in a state of good fortune, initiates an action by acting in error (hamartia) and then experiences reversal, recognition, and, finally,

catastrophe".²⁷ My reading of Ibsen is tangential to Van Laan's, as I too assume a basically Aristotelian framework.

Atle Kittang's *Ibsens Heroisme* considers aspects of heroism. Although his focus is on the narrower theme of self-transcendence rather than the tragic *per se*, his arguments do address several aspects of the problem.²⁸

At the moment there is a definite need for a sustained discussion of Ibsen and tragedy, for the subject badly lacks focus. This thesis hopes to contribute a sustained discussion within clearly defined parameters.

If the critical response to the issue of tragedy has been patchy, the *lykke* problem has been woefully neglected. No book-length study has been attempted, and the number of articles which have concerned themselves with the issue is indecently modest. Edvard Beyer's 1946 survey "Livsgleden som problem i Henrik Ibsen's Diktning" was a highly promising beginning but unfortunately failed to inspire further studies.²⁹ Michael Goldman's *Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear* devotes a chapter to "Lykke and Tro", which he sees as intimately connected.³⁰

1.3.1 Ethical Criticism

The present study can be said to represent a sub-section of Supertextual criticism which can be defined as ethical criticism. With the term 'ethical criticism', I allude to the secondary literature which tries to evince ethical problems as central to Ibsen's drama. I do not include the moralistic reactions, mostly contained in early theatre notices denouncing his work as rebarbative.³¹

I will link this to the broader field of what is known as ‘ethical criticism’ as an orientation within critical practice, but first I will introduce a useful distinction set up by Denis Donoghue between ‘epi-reading’ and ‘graphi-reading’.³²

Epi-reading is “predicated on the desire to hear [...] the absent person”. Epi-readings regard language as an unproblematic transparent mode, a window onto “the shared realm of intention and reference”. It is a nostalgia for presence, for the human. Graphi-reading, on the other hand, privileges the written word over any assumed world that may exist behind it, suspicious of any attempt to invoke an author or voice inside the text. Deconstruction and its variants are graphi-readings.³³ Obviously it is difficult to see how graphi-reading can accommodate an ethical reading within the broad sweep of its dehumanising gestures.³⁴

‘Ethical’ is an ambiguous and not always well-chosen term; for some, like J. Hillis Miller, it points to the act of reading as an ethical act (and thus could be recast as an ethics of criticism). Those who identify the act of reading as an ethical act speak from within a deep-seated humanism, a humanism which they seek to insulate against the dehumanising ravages of non-ethical deconstructive theories and critical practice: Literature is an essential, human practice of ethical utility. As Tobin Siebers puts it, “living and choosing in the human world are the only true subjects of literature [...]. The finally human is literature”.³⁵ Literary texts are valued for what they can tell us about ourselves and for their insights into how we can live. This critical stance takes an averredly didactic view of literature, at least as old as Aristotle. Its detractors

fault it for its lack of a clear theoretical and methodological base and for its nostalgia for presence.

For others, ethical criticism denotes a critical strategy which seeks to locate the ethical centre of a text and to analyse the ethical issues raised by it. A key advocate of contemporary ethical criticism today is the classicist and philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum. Nussbaum came to literary criticism with an already finely developed neo-Aristotelian ethical theory. She eschews any rigid distinction between ethical philosophy and literature, as for her, ethical questioning is the central activity of both - they are complementary activities. She assesses literature's potential within an ethically more coherent society, foreseeing:

a future in which our talk about literature will return increasingly, to a concern with the practical - to the ethical and social questions that give literature its high importance in our lives [...] a future in pursuit of the question 'how should one live?'³⁶

Nussbaum has generalised her position on tragedy and philosophy into a theory of literary interpretation, and of ethical readings of literature. She has extended this practice to the novel, particularly the novels of Henry James. Her critics have faulted her neo-Aristotelianism for not allowing for the *aesthetic* distinction between literary and philosophical texts and for refusing to confront the problem of language. Finally, they argue that her critical practice cannot extend itself beyond a limited range of texts.

There can be no question that an ethical reading will not always be the appropriate response to all texts: Imagist poetry immediately suggests itself in this context as a particularly unyielding literary mode. However, I do not

intend to enter this debate, or consider the effectiveness of Nussbaum's interpretative strategies beyond her work on Attic tragedy and philosophy, for tragedy is my present concern, and it seems to me that the ethical is so deeply ingrained in the tragic as to be constitutive of it.

1.3.2 Tragedy and Philosophy

The question of the continuity or rather the discontinuity between tragedy and philosophy has its roots in Plato's famous stance against the poets in the *Republic* (607d).³⁷ Prior to Plato there was no strict conceptual delimitation of the literary and the philosophical, certainly not as we know it today. As Nussbaum explains:

For them there were human lives and problems, and various genres in both prose and poetry in which one could reflect about those problems. Indeed, epic and tragic poets were widely assumed to be the central ethical thinkers and teachers of Greece; nobody thought of their work as less serious, less aimed at truth, than the speculative prose treatises of historians and philosophers.³⁸

Plato's desire to banish the poets from the republic arose not from an inherent distaste for poetry and tragedy, but rested partly on his objection to tragedy's appeal to the emotions. He considered the emotions to fall outside the range of rational ethical enquiry. It also rested on the fact that tragedy had a clearly didactic function during Plato's time, and in his view, it was teaching the wrong lessons: for Plato and all who embraced the Socratic belief in the self-sufficiency and invulnerability of the good man, the concept of the tragic reversal, the *peripeteia*, through which the good man could come to grief, was at best morally suspect, at worst, abhorrent. Platonic ethics posits a world in

which the virtuous man would not come to grief, and it was seen as the task of the poets to reflect this.³⁹ And tragedy, with its unrelenting re-enactment of reversals insists that they are profoundly important. Moreover, tragedy conveys a consciousness that there is a sphere that is greater than rational self-sufficiency, a sphere of uncontrolled events, and it demonstrates time and time again that this sphere can be decisive in the story of a life.

Bernard Williams sees immense potential in tragic texts as valid areas of philosophical enquiry by situating them within the terms of the debate over contingency and rational self-sufficiency:

A deeper sense of exposure to fortune is expressed [...] above all in tragedy. There the repeated references to the insecurity of happiness get their force from the fact that the characters are displayed as having responsibilities, or pride, or obsessions, or needs, on a scale which lays them open to disaster in corresponding measure, and that they encounter those disasters in full consciousness.⁴⁰

Nussbaum concurs with Williams in this but would take it further. She argues that recourse to tragic texts can complement the study of philosophical texts but she cautions against merely plundering tragic texts to exemplify philosophical arguments. She urges that they be read whole and not abstracted from their poetic complexity because “tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters to be similarly active. Interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example”.⁴¹

Williams and Nussbaum both argue persuasively for the relevance of literary texts to philosophical enquiry; the opposite, the argument for the

applicability of philosophical texts to literary enquiry depends on a parallel conception of complementarity. Indeed, as Laurence S. Lockridge points out in his study of the ethics of Romanticism, the “ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers is played out in the very enterprise of a philosophical reading of literary texts”.⁴² I would argue, moreover, that these divisions are both unhelpful and unnecessary as all texts born of creative thinking interpret experience and can thus enter legitimate dialogue with one another. This thesis will demonstrate that the application of philosophical contexts, concepts and terminology to Ibsen’s dramatic texts can provide a grammar which makes us more articulate on certain crucial aspects of his works, aspects which would otherwise remain elusive. It is perhaps this segregation of academic activity which has led to the dearth of interest in *lykke* hitherto.

1.4.1 *Lykke*

Before turning to an examination of the Greek concepts to be considered, it is necessary to introduce *lykke*. The etymology given for *lykke* in the *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* (1932) shows that *lykke* comes from the Old Norse via the Old Middle German (*ge*)*lucke*, and refers simply to the “maade, hvorpaa noget lukker sig, falder ud”. The English ‘luck’ clearly derives from this, but the verb ‘happen’ is closer to the original sense.⁴³

The dictionary gives cross-references to *Held* for its primary definition, followed by sense:

2) som udtr. for (en magt, der bestemmer) begivenheders ell. tildragelsers af menneskenes indgriben uafhængige udviklingsgang og de derved fremkaldte tilskikkelser; (en

for menneskenes vilkaar raadende) skæbne; (en menneskene tildelt) livsskæbne; (beskikket) lod.

The multiple glosses provided for *lykke* as denoting a realm beyond individual control (fate; circumstances and personifications of these notions, including *Lykke* as the translated name of the goddess Fortuna) suggest that *lykke* in the sense of 'happiness' accrued to the word later, as a logical consequence of a benign fate: "indbegreb af omstændigheder ell. forhold, der udgør ell. er betingelsen for ens velfærd, gunstige skæbne..." Intimately related to this is affect of such favourable circumstances set out here:

tilstand ell. forhold som fremkalder en stærk, dyb glæde over ell. en trygg følelse af visse (paa de som de væsentlige følte omraader) gode ell. fuldkomne vilkaar ell. forhold, visse indre (aandelige) rigdomme, sjælelig harmoni olgn Lyksalighed.⁴⁴

Although consulting the dictionary in this manner may seem like laborious spade work, it is crucial, for it establishes the range and force of a deceptively every-day word, something Ibsen was extremely alert to. But of more interest than this early twentieth century multi-volume dictionary is Molbech's Danish dictionary, the standard reference work at the time Ibsen was writing.⁴⁵ Molbech defines *Lykke* thus:

Held, heldig Tilskikkelse eller Skjebne; heldig Forening af saadane Tilfælde og Omstændigheder, *der ei staar i vor Magt*, og hvorved det attraaede Gode, det, vi holder for ønskeligt opnaaes eller det Onde afværges. (Italics mine.)

The semantic field of *lykke* is thus very wide, bounded by chance and even full-blown divinities on the one hand and 'happiness' on the other. But it is clear from the dictionaries cited that the sense of 'happiness' is secondary to the sense of contingency. *Lykke* nevertheless remains a thorny translation

problem, for where Ibsen can be deliberately ambiguous, the English translator has to declare his hand: 'happiness' or 'contingency', for the chance at the root of the English word 'happiness' is no longer audible.

1.4.2 Aristotle: *tuche*, *eudaimonia*, and *hamartia*

Tuche, *eudaimonia* and *hamartia* all have very vexed interpretative histories, and are thus notoriously resistant to translation. It is now almost established practice to leave them untranslated. In this section I will begin by introducing *tuche* and its cognates and *eudaimonia* and then discuss the role they play in Aristotelian tragic theory, before going on to introduce *hamartia* in the context of the tragic plot.

Tuche is often thought to convey the sense of random, unmotivated events. However, on closer inspection, it emerges that the matter is not quite so simple. As Nussbaum explains, *tuche* "does not imply randomness or absence of causal connections. Its basic meaning is 'what just happens'; it is the element of human existence that humans do not control".⁴⁶ This simple formulation belies the fact that *tuche* ranges over senses as diverse as: chance, a general sense of fortune (good or bad), success, unforeseen occurrences and fate, and later evolved into *Tuche* personified as a supernatural agency with the power to alter the course of a person's life.⁴⁷

Liddell and Scott show that *tuche* derived from the verb τυγχάνω, which in Homer meant simply 'hitting a target'. Later it acquired the sense of 'meeting by chance', and 'befalling'.⁴⁸ What is immediately striking in the context of the Danish dictionaries consulted above is the near-equivalence of *lykke* and *tuche*:

they share a sense of something “der ei i vor Magt staar”; or of fate and fortune (personified or not), and of unforeseeable outcomes.

The Danish sense of happiness-*lykke* is clearly grounded in a sense of ‘going well’, of being fortunate. But even in this the Greek is not too remote: *tuche* is the stem of the *eutuchia*, literally, ‘good luck, success, prosperity’, coming close to what we think of as ‘happiness’ and is, moreover, the modern Greek word for ‘happiness’. *Lykke* also supports the meaning of *eutuchia*, though unmodified by affixation.

The standard translation for *eudaimonia* used to be ‘happiness’, but this was problematic as the ethical range of *eudaimonia* was both more distinct and more porous than the English ‘happiness’. John Cooper agrees that the pursuit of a transparent English translation is chimerical, and suggests ‘human flourishing’ as a more appropriate rendering.⁴⁹ Cooper explains that:

The traditional English rendering, ‘happiness’, derives from the mediaeval Latin translation, *felicitas*. But it is not a good choice, since ‘happiness’ tends to be taken as referring exclusively to a subjective psychological state, and indeed one that is often temporary and recurrent. Hence much that Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* manifestly fails to hold true of happiness as ordinarily understood.⁵⁰

Examples of the mis-fit between happiness and *eudaimonia* include Aristotle’s insistence on *eudaimonia* covering a whole life, rather than merely capturing a moment in that life. It is therefore more readily applicable to the old rather than the young, and can also be stretched to accommodate the sense of fulfilling potential.

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, *eudaimonia* plays a dominant role as the supreme good. Aristotle defines it as the perfect exercise of virtue in which

virtues and vices are aligned with pleasure and pain. Plato sought to extract a commitment from the tragedians to affirm this balance (*Republic* 363e ff), but in the *Poetics* Aristotle resists this enjoiner, seeing in tragedy the potential for a dislocation within the attempt to balance virtue and good fortune, which makes the attainment of perfect *eudaimonia* so elusive: Plato sought to eliminate this dislocation from the ethical life.

Although *eudaimonia* pervades the *Ethics*, it barely features in the *Poetics* beyond the assertion of the ethical importance of the genre of tragedy in Chapter VI:

Happiness (*eudaimonia*) and unhappiness (*kakodaimonia*) both consist in activity, and the goal [of life] is a certain kind of activity, not a state; and while it is in their characters that people are of a certain sort, it is through their actions that they achieve or fail to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*). (50a 17-20)

Below is Ledsaak's Norwegian translation of the same passage:

For tragedien er etterlingning, ikke av mennesker, men av handling og liv, og lykke (*eudaimonia*) og ulykke (*kakodaimonia*), for også lykke og ulykke er handling, og målet er en handling, ikke en egenskap. I kraft av karakterene er menneskene slik og slik, men i kraft av handlingene er menneskene lykkelige (*eudaimonia*) eller det motsatte.⁵¹

This is a restatement of the ends of life from the *Nicomachean Ethics* cited above and it is thus clear that Aristotle is positioning tragedy within the scope of ethics. As Amélie Oksenberg Rorty points out, "accepting Aristotle's *Poetics* entails accepting a good deal of his psychology and ethics too".⁵²

The *Poetics* does, however, make repeated reference to a related concept,

eutuchia 'good fortune' (and 'dus-tuchia', 'bad fortune'), which seem to range over the areas of experience which have chance *tuche* at their root. But *eutuchia* is not synonymous with *eudaimonia*. While *eudaimonia* is intimately related to virtue, *eutuchia* is not an ethical category. It describes what Aristotle refers to as 'external goods'. Aristotle enumerates good birth, wealth, status, friends, physical beauty, power and honour as external goods and argues that they fall outside the ambit of moral control of the individual. They stand in a subordinate yet critical relationship to *eudaimonia*: "Nevertheless, it seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods...for it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources".⁵³ This is not to say that they cannot be affected by character and nature, and they are connected in some tragedies with the gods.⁵⁴ Stephen Halliwell concludes that "Aristotle's theory does not commit tragedy to the dramatisation of the crude and disconnected vicissitudes of life, even though it locates the genre's essential material in the transformations of fortune which affect those external goods that are the secondary conditions of happiness".⁵⁵ External goods, as Aristotle makes perfectly plain in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, do fall under chance.

Halliwell explains that "the accentuation on the *eutuchia-dustuchia* dichotomy in the treatise" means that Aristotle's theory "commits tragedy not directly to an engagement with the ethical centre of happiness, but with the external conditions or circumstances in which the quest for happiness takes place." He observes further, that there is no necessary entailment between virtue and happiness in tragedy (hence Plato's objection).⁵⁶ So, on the one hand, Aristotle seems to resist the Platonic insistence upon the entailment of

happiness and virtue, yet, on the other he seems to be equally resistant to unmotivated action as propulsive of a change in fortune.⁵⁷

We will now turn to the elements of tragic plotting, and consider them in relation to concepts of contingency, and attend to *hamartia*.

1.4.3 *The Tragic Plot*

In Chapter VII of the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents his model for the most effective kind of tragic plot. He insists that the tragic action range between the poles of good and bad fortune (*eutuchia/dustuchia*) and that the sequence of events is so plotted as to admit of a transformation of fortune (*metabole*): “[...] not to good fortune [*eutuchia*] from bad [*dustuchia*], but on the contrary from good to bad.”

Halliwell stresses the centrality of these concepts to the work as a whole, with the scope for reversal of fortune being a cardinal requirement. But another cardinal requirement is conformity to the laws of probability and necessity. The reversal cannot be occasioned by the random events, the haphazard or the unmotivated but must be organised “strictly in accordance with the laws of probability and necessity” (1451a13f).

Chapter IX repeats this desideratum: Aristotle cautions that even when surprising events occur, they must have at least the *air* of design about them since they are less effective when they occur by themselves or by chance (*tuche*). He then insists that reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) arise as a *necessary* or *probable* result of the preceding action.⁵⁸

Indeed, the standard of the necessary and the probable pervades this text, and chance is not allowed to impinge on the integrity of the causally-intelligible complex plot.⁵⁹

This may, *prima facie*, seem counter-intuitive: is tragedy not the genre *par excellence* which lays bare the vicissitudes of fortune and chance, concepts tangential to and often signifying a specifically *divine* causation? Is it not tragedy that demonstrates how significant these forces can be in the story of a life, of which the accident at the crossroads would be emblematic? So how can we resolve this apparent tension?

Halliwell has argued that this intelligibility requirement reveals how “Aristotle’s whole theory of the genre requires and presupposes the exclusion of chance from the dramatic action”.⁶⁰ He explains that in its place Aristotle positions an unspecified, undefined *hamartia*, human error or fallibility (or as the *Nichomachean Ethics* puts it, simply a ‘going wrong’) at the heart of the tragic *lusis*.⁶¹

1.4.4 *Hamartia* and the Secularisation of Tragedy

Almost as much critical ink has been spilled trying to produce a definitive analysis of *hamartia* as has been on tragedy. Halliwell cautions against attempts to eke out a theory of *hamartia*: “It is [...] somewhere in the space between guilt and vulnerability to arbitrary misfortune that *hamartia* ought to be located [...] it is not, as much scholarship has presupposed, a discrete, technical term”.⁶² He prefers to read *hamartia* as ‘error’: “not all errors are crimes or sins, but any crime or sin can be called error.” Aristotle leaves it

deliberately vague in this work, referring to *tina hamartia* – “some kind of *hamartia*.” This caveat concerning over-theorising the notion is well-founded. Not only is *tina hamartia* doggedly indeterminate in itself, but it also makes ambiguous alliances. Aristotle does not allow it to espouse ‘villainy’; yet he explicitly locates *hamartia* in the character of the hero. The issue is further deepened a few lines further down, when Aristotle expresses his preference for the family tragedy, and shifts in and out of active and passive structures.

To sum up – *metabole* is occasioned not by chance, but according to the laws of probability and necessity. It is not the result of villainy, but it is the outcome of some kind of error in the hero’s character. Heroes are drawn from a few families, for example Oedipus and Orestes and “others who have done or suffered something terrible” [1453a22]: ‘suffered’ – passive; ‘done’ – active.

Therefore, with his emphasis on *hamartia*, Aristotle is able to resolve the contradiction between tragic vulnerability and human culpability: the hero is now actively implicated in his own reversal of fortune, thus straddling the gap between a flies-to-wanton-boys interpretation of the operations of the tragic and full-blown moral guilt. “Contrary to the practice of the major tragedians themselves, this fallibility is to be dramatised and made intelligible within a purely human framework of ethical intention and action.”⁶³

The elimination of the unknowable and the supernatural from tragedy requires the secularisation of the genre. This goes some way to placating the Platonic camp, because outrageous fortunes befalling the hero are not merely arbitrary strokes of fate, but embrace the morally salient. However, Aristotle only goes so far. He is not willing to sacrifice tragedy to moralistic

rationalisation, because there is still an important sphere of human life which makes human flourishing vulnerable to contingency.

1.4.5 Ibsen and the Secularisation of Tragedy

Familiarity with Aristotle's dual agenda in the *Poetics*, to restore tragedy to philosophy through secularising it by removing the arbitrary and the unknowable from its core, and at the same time seeking to locate its dramatic interest in transformations of fortune, is central for an appreciation of Ibsen as a developing writer of tragedies. This thesis will show how Ibsen effects a similar operation of secularisation on his own tragic works, starting out with dramas replete with appeals to extra-human agencies, deities, fate (named or abstract) and contingency-*lykke*, only to return to them in the later plays. Timothy Schiff is one of few critics who underlines the extent to which Ibsen's dramas presuppose a supernatural dimension.⁶⁴

While it seems an almost natural reflex to accept the presence of the divine and the extra human in Greek tragedy, in the case of Ibsen, a great number of commentators talk very happily about him without the least reference to external agencies. Robert Parker, discussing the emergence of the divine in Sophocles, observes, "Struggle against it though one may, it is hard in the end to talk about Sophocles without talking about his gods".⁶⁵ Parker develops a scheme through which it is possible to trace the emergence of the divine in Sophocles. As I will demonstrate, this scheme can be applied with very little modification to Ibsen's tragedies too. I have adapted it here to take in the ways that the huge range of extra-human agencies in Ibsen emerge, and do

not restrict it, as Parker does, to a strict notion of the divine. Its application shows just how pervasive these elements are in Ibsen.

In Parker's scheme, first level representation involves the physical appearance of gods on stage. We get something approaching this in the Voice at the end of *Brand*. The second level is through divination, oracle and signs – e.g. the comets in *Kongsemnerne*; Maximos in *Kejser og Galilæer*; Gerd in *Brand*. This level cannot function, clearly, without the presence of characters who are temperamentally disposed to accepting the authority of oracles. *Kejser og Galilæer* is full of such characters. There is another form of divination which Parker calls “backward-facing divination” which detects past causes of present ills (this is effectively what Fru Alving is effecting through her image of *gengangere*). Characters themselves can also make explicit reference to the involvement of gods, other supernatural agencies and chance in human affairs, for example, (Julian on Fortuna; Ørnulf in *Hærmændene på Helgeland* on the norms; Skule on God in *Kongsemnerne*; Solness on God and his helpers and servants). Ill-omened dreams and visions often play an important role, as they do in the case of Catilina and Julian. Furthermore, the recurrent idea of the familial curse re-emerges in Ibsen in various casts such as inherited sin. There is yet another level which I would like to add which complements this list, and that is that of ‘intermediary characters’ who are neither fully human nor fully divine or supernatural. These include Furia, Gerd, Maximos, Brendel, the ghost in *Catilina*, and Solness's army of helpers and servants, as well as Rottejomfruen in *Lille Eyolf*.

Ibsen's tragic oeuvre falls into three more or less distinct phases. The first phase consists of dramas which were very much an attempt to write tragedy in the mode of 'high tragedy', and thus his first tragedy, *Catilina* is replete with appeals to unknowable forces, especially fate. However, these forces are gradually absorbed into a more sophisticated questioning of contingency-*lykke*, and an increasing engagement with the terms of happiness-*lykke*, devoid of any divinity or semi-divinity, forces which, after *Kejser og Galilæer* are disabled by naturalism.

By the time Ibsen starts writing in the naturalistic-realist mode, the idea of fate has been subsumed into a deterministic philosophy and appeals to extrinsic forces are mainly for rhetorical effect, where they occur at all.

However, during his last phase of dramatic production, from *Bygmester Solness* on, there is a discernible return to the realm of the supernatural and a re-focus on contingency. This is not the result of dramaturgic nostalgia. Rather it is a questioning of the capacity of the rational individual to function independently of the categories that he has fought so hard to subdue: contingency, fate and divinity.

This thesis traces the most important developments of happiness and contingency over these three phases.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Kejser og Galilæer II* (HU VII.3.243), in *Henrik Ibsen: Hundreårsutgave* vol. VII, ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, Didrik Arup Seip, Oslo, 1929. All quotations from Ibsen's works are taken from this edition (1928-1957), and will be indicated in parenthesis in the text. The first time a particular volume is referred to in a chapter, reference to the volume number will be given in Roman numerals, thereafter the quotation will be followed only by act number (where appropriate) and page number, in Arabic numerals, in parenthesis.
- ² See "happiness" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, Oxford, 1996.
- ³ *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, S. H. Butcher trans., New York, 1951. Hereafter *Poet.* followed by line number.
- ⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics - The Nichomachean Ethics*, J. A. K. Thompson trans., Harmondsworth, 1986 (hereafter *EN* followed by line reference) and *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, London, 1921 (hereafter *EE* followed by line reference).
- ⁵ "There is something, which for lack of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it a whole conception of life itself and of the universe, a whole philosophy formulated, more or less conscious." See Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, J. E. Crawford Fritch trans., New York, 1954, p. 17.
- ⁶ Interview given in 1898, quoted in Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: Mellem evne og higen*, Oslo, 1996, p. 441.
- ⁷ Contemporary voices, of Ibsen's translator-champions Edmund Gosse and William Archer, as well as the Socialist and Fabian responses of e.g. the Marx-Avelings, and of most enduring significance, George Bernard Shaw.
- ⁸ Virginia Woolf, Henry James, and James Joyce.
- ⁹ Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud, and later James Hurt and Hermann Weigand, who turned the psycho-analytic method onto Ibsen himself, and encouraged a plethora of biographical readings of the plays.
- ¹⁰ Critics who see Ibsen as "*theatre-poet*, extending the resources of language through stagecraft, through the semiotics of gesture, and through performance" (Durbach, p. 242). Durbach identifies a long line of critics, starting with Ibsen himself, then Halvdan Koht, Muriel Bradbrook, John Northam, Eric Bentley and Inga-Stina Ewbank.
- ¹¹ Most notably Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art*, Cambridge, 1981, and Freddie Rokem, *Theatrical Space in Ibsen, Checkov and Strindberg: Public Forms of Privacy*, Ann Arbor, 1986. See also *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VII*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1991 - the focus of this volume on Ibsen is on performance.
- ¹² Brian Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, Pennsylvania, 1989.
- ¹³ Errol Durbach, "A Century of Ibsen Criticism" in James McFarlane ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 244.

¹⁴ Rolf Fjelde, "Peer Gynt, Naturalism, and the Dissolving Self", *The Drama Review* 13, 2, 1968; Richard Hornby's Kierkegaardian reading of Ibsen in his *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays*, Lewisburg, 1981; Errol Durbach's *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, London, 1982.

¹⁵ Josef Faaland, *Henrik Ibsen og Antikken*, Oslo, 1943.

¹⁶ Brian Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, Cambridge, 1946.

¹⁷ See Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken*, Boston, 1975 (revised edition 1992); *To the Third Empire: Ibsen's Early Drama*, Minneapolis, 1980; *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, Pennsylvania, 1989. Errol Durbach's criticism of Johnston is to the point: "[...] it remains quite clear that the form shaping [Ibsen's] thought was Hegel's dialectical method: one stage of human consciousness colliding with another in a process of continuous historical transformation. My only reservation about applying a thoroughgoing Hegelian model to Ibsen's drama is its failure to admit a fallible human identity to these incarnated intellectual absolutes". See Errol Durbach, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*, Boston, 1991, p. 6.

¹⁸ See above, n. 14.

¹⁹ See Theoharis C. Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, London, 1996.

²⁰ See Egil Wyller, *Henrik Ibsen: et enhetssyn*, Oslo, 1999.

²¹ See Tom Eide, *Ibsen's Dialogkunst*, Oslo, 2001.

²² Hjalmar Brenel, *Etiske motiv i Henrik Ibsens dramatiska diktning*, Stockholm, 1941, p. 4.

²³ For a detailed discussion of this early criticism, see Eide 2001, pp. 74-81. Timothy Schiff argues for a return to some of this early criticism in his "Providence and Dispensation in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*", *Scandinavian Studies* 51, 1979, pp. 376-77 and p. 388 n. 5.

²⁴ Brenel 1941, p. 305. There has been little theological interest in Ibsen since Brenel, but a Christian reading of Ibsen can be found in two books by Finn Thorn: (*Henrik Ibsens "Peer Gynt": Et drama om kristen identitet*, Oslo, 1971 and *Lov og Evangelium: Tanker om Henrik Ibsens "Brand"*, Oslo, 1981) and articles by Charles Leland, notably "'The Irresistible Calling': The Idea of Vocation in Ibsen", *Modern Drama* 29, 2, 1986 and "'Å gå den samme veien som Beate gikk': Another look at *Rosmersholm*", in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VII*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1991.

²⁵ Daniel Haakonsen, "Ethical Implication in Ibsen's Drama", in *Ibsenårbok, 1968-1969*, ed. Daniel Haakonsen et al., Oslo, 1969, pp. 7-21.

²⁶ I do not include articles that focus on the tragic in isolated works. What follows is a list of some of the most important articles on the subject, all dealing with the oeuvre or groups of plays: Sverre Arestad, "Ibsen's Concept of Tragedy", *PMLA* 74, 1959; Michael Robinson, "Ibsen and the Possibility of Tragedy", *Scandinavica* 20, 2, 1981; Vigdis Ystad, "Tragedy in Ibsen's Art", in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VI*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1988; Thomas F. Van Laan, "Openings for Tragedy in Ibsen's 'Social Problem Plays'", in *Ibsen at the Centre for Advanced Study*, ed. Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1997; Errol Durbach, "Ibsen's Euripidean Heroines and the Dialectics of Erotic Tragedy"; Andrew Kennedy, "A Choice of Death? Logic, Symbol and Form in Ibsen's Modern Tragedy"; Marie Wells, "Rescuing Ibsen for Tragedy";

Vigdis Ystad, "Sacrifice, Suicide and Tragedy in Ibsen's Drama", all published in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Ibsen Conference*, ed. Pål Bjørby and Asbjørn Aarseth, Bergen, 2001.

²⁷ Thomas F. Van Laan, "Ibsen's Transformation in the Aristotelian Tragic Pattern of Action in *The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder*", in Maria Deppermann et al. ed., *Ibsen im europäischen Spannungsfeld zwischen Naturalismus und Symbolismus. Kongreßakten der 8. Internationalen Ibsen-Konferenz*, Frankfurt, 1998, p. 367. Van Laan does not, however, argue for Ibsen as a strict Aristotelian because his version of the pattern involves some transformations.

²⁸ Atle Kittang, *Ibsens Heroisme: Frå Brand til Når vi døde vågner*, Oslo, 2002.

²⁹ Edvard Beyer, "Livsgleden som problem i Henrik Ibsens Diktning", *Edda*, 1948. Beyer's study embraces several senses of happiness, and does not restrict itself to the compound *livsgleden* of his title.

³⁰ Michael Goldman, *Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear*, New York, 1999.

³¹ An impressive collection of such notices has been edited by Michael Egan in *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1972.

³² Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets*, London, 1981.

³³ This account of epi- and graphi- reading is taken from Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas*, Edinburgh, 1997, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ J. Hillis Miller attempted to do just that. For a summary and criticism of his endeavour, see Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, ch. 3. 'Reading (:): the Ethics of Deconstructive Criticism pp. 61-97.

³⁵ Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism*, London, 1988, p. 13.

³⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford, 1990, p. 162.

³⁷ Plato's views are contained chiefly in *Republic*, Book X. See Plato, *Republic VI-X*, trans. Paul Shorey, London, 1989.

³⁸ Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 12.

³⁹ Miss Prism's literary efforts display an admirable response to this: "The good end happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means", Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Harmondsworth, 1985, (Act II). Tom Stoppard allows a more Aristotelian position: "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means". *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, London, 1968, (Act II).

⁴⁰ Bernard Williams, "Philosophy" in *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal*, ed. M. I. Finlay, Oxford, 1981, p. 253.

⁴¹ Nussbaum 1986, p. 14.

⁴² Laurence S. Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 139.

⁴³ Verner Dahlerup, *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, vol. XIII, København, 1932.

⁴⁴ *Lyksalighed* will be discussed in Chapter VI, in the context of *Rosmersholm*.

⁴⁵ C. Molbech, *Dansk Ordbog*, København, 1859.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum 1986, p. 89 n.

⁴⁷ Vasiliki Giannopoulou points out that “We have no clear evidence of Tyche raised above the level of poetic personification or corresponding to a cultic reality before the fourth century BC, and even then only Agathe Tyche (good fortune or good luck) was worshipped”. See Vasiliki Giannopoulou, “Divine Agency and Tyche in Euripides’ *Ion*: Ambiguity and Shifting Perspectives, *Illinois Classical Studies* 24-25, 1999-2000, p. 258.

⁴⁸ See the entry for τυγχάνω in Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, 1992.

⁴⁹ John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Indianapolis, 1975.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 89-90 n.

⁵¹ Important though it is to be aware of the recalcitrance of *eudaimonia* and the associations which attach to it, the debate concerning its precise definition is not our main concern here. Conscious of the problems concerning the ‘happiness’ gloss, I shall nevertheless use it, however advisedly, if only for the reason that all translations of Aristotle into Norwegian translate *eudaimonia* as *lykke*: ‘happiness’, and thus any encounter Ibsen and his readers would have had in translation with Aristotle would have been via *lykke*. See S. Ledsaak trans., *Aristoteles: Om diktekunsten*, Oslo, 1989.

⁵² Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Introduction”, *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, A. O. Rorty ed., Oxford, 1992, p. 3.

⁵³ Aristotle, *EN* 1099a32-b24.

⁵⁴ See for example, Aeschylus in the *Libation Bearers*, 59f and *EN* 1179b22f; *EE* 1247a-8a.

⁵⁵ Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, London, 1988, p. 210.

⁵⁶ Halliwell 1988, p. 207.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Poet.* IX 1452a12f.

⁵⁹ *Poet.* VIII 1451a27f.; IX 1451a3; 1451b9; X1 1452a22f *et passim*.

⁶⁰ Halliwell 1998, p. 208.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp. 215-220; *EN* 1106b28f.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 220.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 1998, p. 233-34.

⁶⁴ Schiff 1979.

⁶⁵ Robert Parker, "Through a Glass Darkly: Sophocles and the Divine", in *Sophocles Revisited*, ed. Jasper Griffin, Oxford, 1999, p. 11.

[...] der er en hemmelighedsfuld magt udenfor os, og [...] denne i væsentlig grad råder for udfaldet af de menneskelige foretagender - *Kejser Julian*

Chapter II

Early Historical Tragedy and *der göttliche Gegensatz*

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will show how the secularising gesture of the *Poetics* finds a parallel gesture within Ibsen's own tragic corpus, and establish an affinity between Aristotelian theory and Ibsenian practice in this respect. It will then be possible to see how Ibsen's response to these problems cleared the way for the development of modern tragedy. I will present four early plays: *Catilina*; *Fru Inger til Østråt*; *Hærmændene på Helgeland*; *Kongsemnerne* and *Kejser og Galilæer*.

These early dramas are the result of experimentation with historical and national-historical tragedy and do not presage the level of subtlety to which Ibsen was to take the problems of luck and happiness in his later works. Nevertheless, when uncoiled from this perspective, these plays are especially illuminating in that they show that Ibsen gradually abandoned traditional representations of contingency and happiness (especially that of fate) to evolve the complex moral matrix which was sustaining of his tragic vision.

By tracing the role and the definition of what Friedrich Hebbel referred to as *der göttliche Gegensatz*, 'the divine antagonist', to denote "a power, a force, an influence, something to be reckoned with that is supra-individual,"¹ we can appreciate the extent to which Ibsen was dependent both conceptually and

dramaturgically on notions of the supernatural and contingency in the early stages of his dramatic career.

In an important yet rarely cited article Timothy Schiff comments that:

Although the concept of an active Providence is not a new one to Ibsen criticism, it is a relatively neglected one [...] little attention is now paid to the fact that virtually half of Ibsen's oeuvre assumes the existence of a supernatural realm with supernatural powers that may intervene in human affairs.²

But what is more arresting is that even in these fate-laden works, there is an embryonic engagement with aspects of *lykke*, which will come to replace these personifications.

2.2 *Catilina*

Ibsen bases his first tragedy, *Catilina*, on the career of the eponymous Roman rebel. Brian Johnston defines this play as "historical fate-tragedy", as it presents a hero whose pursuit of his perceived calling to raise Rome out of decadence to its former glory is derailed by personal ambition, and falls foul of fate. But like the majority of critics, Johnston does not identify the seeds of the dramatic power of Ibsen's subsequent work in it:

The drama seems at once conventional and fumbling as it attempts, with painfully inadequate artistry, to fulfil the terms of the German fate-tragedy and of the Romantic, i.e. Byronic, drama (in the manner of *Manfred*) of the lonely, blasted hero bringing himself to destruction.³

Although Ibsen was justified in providing a religious and mythological context, he over-indulges the notion of external agency; the countless appeals

to unspecified "høie Guder" seem to have been included only for rhetorical effect and the twenty-one occurrences of *Skæbne* (fate) are wearying as they do not accrue nuance or refinement through repetition as key concepts in the later plays do. Here we have what Thomas Van Laan criticises for being a "clumsy attempt to signify an agency for the tragic action".⁴ Indeed, an examination of *Skæbne* in the play reveals a schematic function. It is interesting that although Ibsen names a recognisable deity, Nemesis, to represent vengeance he resists substituting the idea of fate, *Skæbne*, for Fortuna, who is not invoked by name until *Kejser og Galilæer*.⁵

For Catilina *Skæbne* is the force that directs his goals as well as being the force that inhibits and frustrates the realization of these very goals. Catilina opens the Ibsen canon with the words "Jeg maa! Jeg maa! Så byder mig en Stemme i Sjælens Dyb" (HU I.1.43). This voice is later identified explicitly as *Skæbne*: "Jeg maa! Jeg maa! Min Skæbne driver mig!" (2.71). Frequent reference is made to "hva Skæbnen vil" (2.73), "om Skæbnen har det saa bestemt" (3.90), "hva Skæbnen har besluttet" (3.95). Fate is "umild" (2.77), twice referred to as "fiendtligsindet" (1.57; 2.88) and is seen in unequivocally dark terms in alliance with baleful spirits: " - Hvad Skæbnen vil, hvad Mørkets Aander bestemmer, see vi lyde maa - " (2.73).

Furia is directly associated with, if not an actual personification of Nemesis. Hesiod accounts for Nemesis as one of the children of Night, and representative of retribution.⁶ When it is revealed that Catilina and the man who violated Furia's sister (a crime which Catilina ironically has sworn to

avenge) are one and the same, she gives thanks to the deity for making it possible for her to avenge the rape which led to her sister's suicide: "[...] Tullias Forfører / Ha, saa har Nemesis jo hørt min Bøn" (1.54). Furia herself clearly evokes the Furies, the Greek Erinyes (originally the angry, vengeful soul of a murdered man)⁷. Catilina describes Furia as "vildt som en Hævngudindes Flammeblikk" (1.56). After her escape from death, he comments "Man siger jo, at Furierne stiger / fra Underverden frem for at / forfølge den Dødelige" (2.83). As the action progresses, the identification of Furia and Nemesis becomes so close that the distinction between the two is ultimately blurred.

In Act II Furia persuades Catilina that after her near-death experience in the dungeon, with her thirst for revenge abated, her ambition now is to join forces with him in a quest for power. He identifies a demonic power in her: "Du smiler fælt; - ha, saadan har jeg tænkt / mig Nemesis - ". Furia replies that she is nothing more than an image of his own soul, and of the realm of darkness that they both inhabit. Catilina accepts this image and embraces it: "Skjønne Nemesis! / min Genius, Du Billed af min Sjæl!" (2.74), and joins hands with Furia in a symbolic pact with darkness.

Furia/Nemesis thus receives further definition as Catilina's 'Genius' or *daimon* in its Greek form. The *daimon*, according to Plato is the spirit that comes into existence at the same time as a man and accompanies him throughout his life. The *daimon*:

[...] comes near to standing for the idea of Fate; in particular it emphasizes what is external to a man's will,

what he does in passion or infatuation; indeed the adjective *daimonios* is regularly used of what is incomprehensible or blameworthy. [...] It is more often a *theos* who disperses favors, and (the) *daimon* who, if not neutral, exerts a baleful influence.⁸

Nemesis and Furia set up the light/dark, good/evil opposition with Aurelia around which the action is organised, reaching its culmination at the end of the play in Catilina's words to the dying Aurelia: "Nei, Aurelia! Du svæver mod den lyse Evighed, - / Nemesis mig fører imod Mørket ned" (3.113). By this stage, Furia has become so abstracted as to lose dramatic force, and thus Catilina's words make the play too schematic.

Nevertheless, it is only through the Furia/Nemesis identification that the notion of fate assumes any contours at all. But what is interesting about Ibsen's treatment of these 'divine' forces, Hebbel's *göttliche Gegensatz*, is that fate, which traditionally represents that which is *external* to a man's will, has been narrowed down to a perhaps over-determined sense of evil and Nemesis, with excessive insistence on the identification with Furia. This not only deprives Catilina's psychomachy of any real tension and power but also takes the focus away from his perceived political calling to the retribution for the crime against Tullia and his involvement with Furia. Nemesis, executive power of revenge, centres the interest on crime and retribution, which is, unlike the workings of fate, transparent to the perpetrator.

Chester Clayton Long's analysis of the role of Nemesis in O'Neill's drama divides the functions of Nemesis into four distinct areas, explaining that "Nemesis is the personification of an idea, the idea of justice. [...] It may

also contain within itself significance in relation to distributive, retributive, divine and tragic justice.”⁹ Retributive justice refers to the eye for an eye version of justice; distributive justice points to a more social conception; divine justice to violations of divine law and tragic justice to the potential for good and evil in the hero. However, Furia so unequivocally represents the first kind of justice, and the fact that Catilina joins forces with her, automatically deprives the narrative of his calling of vitality.

The representation of fate and the unknowable in this play is thus heavily reductive. Named Fate is two-dimensional, and the element of retribution is so dominant as to entail an *a priori* foreclosure of happiness. Happiness stands in antithetical relation to fate, and is figured by Aurelia, and notions of good and light and innocence:

[...] har Du forglemt vort lille Landsted, hvor
min Vugge stod, og hvor vi siden glade
og *lykkelige* i en salig Ro
har levet mange muntre Sommerdage.
[...] Dit flygte vi og vie ind vort Liv
til landlig Rolighed, til *stille Glæde*. (1.60 – italics mine)

Here Aurelia is trying to persuade Catilina to abandon the corrupt world of Rome and his pursuit of power for a life of peaceful seclusion in the countryside of Gaul. He is briefly tempted by this bucolic idyll in which he, free of power and passion, would exchange sword for spade, but Furia/Nemesis pits her strength against Aurelia’s benign influence and leads him back into the tragedy with her taunting contempt for the obscurity he seems ready to embrace in defiance of his fate.

Schiff's discussion of providence in these early plays emphasizes the providentially blessed and guided individuals who carry these dramas. His analysis recalls that of Hebbel's analysis of the *göttliche Gegensatz*. These characters are chosen by a highly selective force, be it the gods, Fate, a 'verdensvilje' or God Himself, and are guided in their fulfilment of that calling.

Catilina is rather an exception to this, for it is difficult to define any calling beyond his personal ambition, and the only sense the play gives of his having been singled out for a special calling is muted by the retribution theme, and the source of the 'voice' guiding him is left vague.

In Ibsen's next experiment in tragedy, *Fru Inger til Østråt*, an active providence is unambiguously at work.¹⁰

2.3 *Fru Inger til Østråt*

Fru Inger til Østråt was published in 1854, four years after *Catilina*, and is a more finely nuanced work, one which, moreover, responded to the contemporary appetite for national subjects. Van Laan argues that by now "Ibsen had acquired a more sophisticated sense of what 'writing tragedy' might mean in actual practice."¹¹ Ibsen himself referred to the work as "et historisk Drama eller, om man vil, en Tragedie," (HU II.113-14) showing that he saw little difference between the two.

This is in large part due to the overt influence of the theatrical handbook Ibsen read while abroad in 1852, namely Hettner's *Das moderne*

Drama. In this work, Hettner, offering advice to budding dramatists on composing tragic drama, denounces fate-drama and Scribean constructs. He emphasised the rich resources available to the dramatist in history, but cautions that the choice of subject should be relevant to contemporary audiences. Hettner also recommends that the dramatist, even when drawing characters and events from history, must present them in a psychologically coherent manner, within a plot which adheres to the rules of necessity.

There are far fewer references to fate in this play than in *Catilina*. Nevertheless, there are similarities in its function and its importance for the heroes of the respective plays, and, as we shall see, the plot relies heavily on chance, so much so that Asbjørn Aarseth has defined the play as “pre-eminently a study in the effects of chance encounters in an action which lacks any rigorous structure.”¹²

Both *Catilina* and *Fru Inger* respond to their calling, but in the case of *Fru Inger* the audience or reader does not question the validity of the source of the calling - God. Both are tempted to abandon their calling in favour of more earthly versions of happiness.

Fru Inger is set in 1528, when Norway's fortunes were at a low. Henrik Jæger describes the early part of the sixteenth century as “the midnight hour of the four hundred year night” of Danish subjugation.¹³ *Fru Inger* has spent the thirty years since she made a pledge to fight for Norway's freedom deferring her response to her calling, which she both acknowledges and resists: “Hvor sælsomt, hvor sælsomt! Skjæbnen har dannet mig til Kvinde og

har dog læsset en Mandsdaad paa mine Skuldre. Mit Folks Velfærd er lagt i mine Hænder" (HU II.1.145). Her conception of *Skjæbne* appears to cover an aspect of her Christian faith in which God appoints people to distinct tasks: "Jeg følte Herrens Kraft i mit Bryst" (1.145) is how she experiences the revelation of her calling.

But torn between her political calling to lead her people and her private identity as a woman, she fails to act. She resents this "Mandsdaad" she has been burdened with and cannot let go of her female self, a self that falls in love and has children, because being true to this self deflects from an adequate response to her duty to safeguard the fate of her country. She feels excluded from female experience: "[...] Kvindens sædvanlige Lod var jo ikke min" (4.198). Steen Sture, the Swede with whom she had fallen passionately in love in the past, had opened up the area of the erotic in her, and this encounter resulted in a child: "han var min Kjærligheds Barn, det Eneste, der Mindede mig om den Tid, da jeg var Kvinde i Aand og Sandhed" (4.200).

Her attachment to her femininity through her son and her neglect of her daughters (fruits of another, passionless union) whose happiness she willingly sacrifices, causes her to swerve from her calling. The political implications of this are dire for Norway, and those who once looked to her for leadership have lost faith. Like Catilina, Fru Inger refers to her calling as a curse, and laments the isolation of being chosen by God, a condition which brings with it a loss of essential freedom and conflicts with personal happiness:

Den, der er kaaret til at være Himlens Værktøi, tør Intet
eie, der er hende kjært; ikke Mage eller Barn, ikke

Frænder eller Hjem, og deri, seer I, - deri ligger
Forbandelsen ved at være kaaret til en berømmelig
Daad. (4.198)

The fate/happiness conflict is infinitely more nuanced in *Fru Inger* than in *Catilina*, for the competing claims of the two are more keenly felt. In the former play, happiness, represented by Aurelia was too idealised, schematic and passionless. For Catilina it never represented much more than withdrawal and escape, whereas for Fru Inger a vivid nostalgia for happiness colours her entire experience. The question of personal happiness is much more richly embedded in this play and has ramifications for all levels of action, and is mirrored in the fate of her daughter.

When Eline, definable by her dogged determination to avenge her sister's disgrace and death, falls in love with Niels Lykke, the man responsible for her sister's undoing, her project is suddenly and utterly derailed, and the only mode she can live in is that of love. The irony of this situation recalls the Tullia-Furia-Catilina connection, but there is no hint in the former play of the possibility of transformation. There Nemesis is intractable. Eline is the polar opposite of Furia; even after her mother has revealed Lykke's true identity to her as the man she has sworn vengeance on, there is no going back for her. Fru Inger then questions the wisdom of her decision to deprive Eline of her illusion:

Hvorfor kunde jeg ikke tiet med Hemmeligheden?
Havde hun Intet vidst, saa var hun bleven *lykkelig* - paa
en Maade. - Men det er min *Skjæbne*, det staar skrevet
deroppe, at jeg skal bryde den ene grønne Green efter
den anden, inntil Stammen staar bladløs tilbage! (5:219 -
italics mine)

Fru Inger's consideration of Eline's happiness here is Ibsen's earliest presentation of the concept of *livsløgnen* so central to *Vildanden*. It prefigures the central dilemma of that later work: is happiness based on ignorance any the less valid, and what is the moral position of those who arrogate the right to dispel the deluded happiness of others, often leaving corpses in the wake of truth? This problematic is only presented, not explored, in this play. But what remains is the image of a fate directly hostile to life and inimical to happiness. Whoever is driven by this fate will inevitably incur some collateral damage.

Fru Inger feels an acute sense of guilt over neglecting her calling, and senses that her misery is God's punishment. When Niels Lykke tells her that he knows of the whereabouts of her illegitimate son and how close he is to the throne, he plants the idea of *Kongemoder* in her mind, an idea which comes to dominate her thoughts and rule her action. She sees her salvation in this idea, for in it she can combine the personal and the political: secure a future for Norway and be a mother to her precious son at the same time. But this putative harmonizing of *Skjæbne* and *Lykke* is elusive. Fru Inger is in bad faith because ambition is at the heart of this vision, not only ambition for status but a desire to circumvent, if not directly compete with God: "Ha, ha! Hvem seirer, Gud eller jeg?" (5.227).

Nevertheless, Fru Inger's real undoing does belong unequivocally to an area beyond her control. She has her son killed in the mistaken belief that he is Sture's legitimate son, in a genuine attempt to protect him. *Kongemoder* turned *Kongemorder*: giving life and taking life. This is a case of tragic irony and tragic

error in the most classical sense, the truest kind of *peripeteia*, accompanied by the most basic kind of *anagnorisis*, by which Fru Inger is made aware of the identity of her son by the old device of the ring he wore round his neck.

Poetics Chapter XI is followed almost to the letter by Ibsen in this scene:

Reversal of the Situation (*peripeteia*) is a change by which the action veers round to the opposite, subject always to our rule of probability and necessity. [...] The recognition (*anagnorisis*) which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is [...] the recognition of persons [...] Moreover, it is upon such situations that the issues of good and bad fortune will depend. (*Poet.* XI 1452a22-1452b2)

Van Laan argues that because *peripeteia* almost coincides with *anagnorisis* here it should not have been left to the end of Act V, just prior to the final curtain. Ibsen fails Fru Inger in deferring recognition and not giving her any room to process it; Francis Fergusson's charge that the ending of *Ghosts* is "brutally truncated" is perhaps more applicable to *Fru Inger*.¹⁴

Although in many ways an advance on *Catilina*, *Fru Inger* is ultimately unsuccessful, both for the reason of the mishandling of tragic recognition, and on account of the overburdened plot. This somewhat creaky plot is in violation of Aristotle's demand for the exclusion of chance from the plot, and as a result, the tragic loses focus.¹⁵ The events leading up to the murder of Niels are brought about by such painful contortions of coincidence that they strain the credibility of even the most suspended disbelief. This is totally counter to the spirit of Aristotelian sequentiality, and probably the influence of Scribean plotting. Ibsen still had a long way to go before he separated out

the idea of chance as a dramaturgic tool and chance as an abstract concept belonging to the extended family of divine antagonists.

However, it is a further sign of Ibsen's increasing subtlety that he is moving away from personification and standard tropes to a deeper appreciation of the tonalities of fate and happiness. Indeed, in the revised edition of *Fru Inger* of 1874, Ibsen reduces the presence of fate even more, by removing it from Fru Inger's Act I speech and replacing it with "Gud Herren" (1.256). This serves to emphasize the fact that Inger's calling is God-given and that she rebels against God directly in not responding to her calling. It also underscores God's active agency in the final act. This does not mean however, that Ibsen wants to replace the idea of fate with the idea of God. Although *Skjæbne* is also discarded from her Act V speech, reference is made to the stars instead, which retains a pagan sense of fate rather than overwriting it with a purely Christian cosmology. Eline in the revised version makes no mentions of fate, but Niels Lykke retains his references to it.¹⁶

Despite its technical shortcomings, *Fru Inger* shows a marked development from *Catilina*, and this owes something to the sharpening of the concept of supra-individual agency (God) and the establishment of a clear sense of the source of the heroine's calling. That she resists her calling, ignores the signs and ultimately falls foul of historical necessity, makes her an infinitely more complex character than *Catilina*.

2.4 *Hærmændene på Helgeland*

Hærmændene på Helgeland (1858) is a further drama in the national historical mode. It signals a definite development from *Fru Inger* as its tragic focus is clearer and its plot less creaky, though it is still by no means determined by Aristotelian necessity.

Ibsen himself considered the play to be a tragedy. In his preface to the revised edition of *Gildet paa Solhaug* Ibsen explains that whereas he had deliberately reduced *Gildet paa Solhaug* from tragedy to drama, *Hærmændene paa Helgeland* was definitely to be a tragedy. Some of the ideas he had for *Hærmændene* ended up in *Gildet paa Solhaug*:

De to kvindeskikkelser, plejesøstrene Hjørdis og Dagny i den påtænkte tragedie blev til søstre Margit og Signe i den fuldførte lyriske drama. [...] Slægtsligheden er umiskendelig. Tragediens den gang kun løst planlagte helt, den vidt berejste og ved fremmede kongehoffer vel modtagne høvding, vikingen Sigurd, omformede sig til riddersmanden og sangeren Gudmund Alfsøn [...]. Hans stilling mellem de to søstre blev ændret ...; men begge søstrenes stilling lige over for ham forblev væsentlig den samme, som i den oprindelig påtænkte og senere fuldførte tragedie. (HU III.33-4)

The dramatic focus of *Hærmændene* is a conflict of values and instead of centring the problem so squarely on how to respond to one's calling, it emerges from the conflicts produced by two incompatible value systems and honour codes: Hjørdis's pagan and Sigurd's Christian, and the incommensurability of two kinds of love, *philia* and *eros*.

If *Fru Inger* can be seen as a first, tentative attempt to demobilise the battalion of supra-individual agencies (and the revisions to the second edition

seem to bear this interpretation out), *Hærmændene*, although more deeply embedded in myth, shows a growing commitment to this approach. Ibsen can be seen to be experimenting further with the idea of fate; he largely abandons *Skjæbne* in this play - there are only two occurrences, at 3.77 and 4.93, compared to the twenty-one in *Catilina*. But Ibsen still retains a notion of an area of life that is outside the control of the individual, expressed predominantly through the mythological personification of the Norns: Urd, Verdande, and Skuld - Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos's Nordic cousins.¹⁷

In common with the Greek *Moirai* the Norns are the manifestations of spinners and weavers, and are baleful figures. They also share a property with the *daimon* who, we recall was present at a child's birth and intimately connected with the apportioning of man's lot; it was believed that all children were assigned a Norn at birth.¹⁸ Ibsen builds up a fairly involved mythology, consistent with the historical setting, but there is a detectable development in this play. The range of *lykke* in its designation of happiness is extended, and, for the first time, Ibsen experiments with its bivalence and capacity for pointing to the area beyond individual control.

The sense of *lykke* as fate is established in Act I. Ørnulf, Hjørdis's reluctant foster-father, has come from Iceland to Helgeland to extract compensation from Sigurd and Gunnar respectively for the abduction of his daughter Dagny and his foster-daughter Hjørdis. A peaceful settlement seems possible but Hjørdis denounces this as cowardly: "*Lykken* råder for livet. Lad times hvad der vil; men heller vil jeg falde, end frelles ved fejgt forlig" (HU

IV.1.39 – italics mine). This statement articulates a sense of ineluctable destiny on the one hand, but also a belief in an area of self-determination within that destiny. In other words, Hjørdis believes that fate cannot be circumvented but the question of *how* one gauges one's response to it does lie within the control of the individual, and this also entails the freedom to assert selfhood in the choice of death, which Hjørdis exemplifies in her suicide.

Sigurd evokes a similar area of freedom when he attempts to persuade Ørnulf of his undying love for his blood-brother Gunnar: "Både i strid og i fredsomme kår har vi fristet *lykken* tilhobe; og han er mig kærest af alle mænd" (1.42-3 – italics mine). Ørnulf, however, feels the slight he has suffered too great to allow for a peaceful, however generous settlement. He decides he has no choice but to fight Gunnar, whatever the outcome: "Nej, siger jeg! Selv må jeg fremme min ret; lad så *lykken* råde" (1.43 – italics mine). Here he is echoing Hjørdis's sentiment in reverse: she argues that fate will decide and then one can act appropriately; Ørnulf demands appropriate action and then fate will decide.

Happiness is suggested as the quality residing in personal relationships. Sigurd tells Ørnulf that if he leads an attack against Gunnar, he will never be happy again. Hjørdis and Sigurd both see their emotional lives as wasted; he because he put Gunnar's happiness above his own in relinquishing Hjørdis, and she because she was deprived of the man she loved. Sigurd on the other hand lives under the sign of graceful disappointment. He is loyal to the choice he made for Gunnar, but recognises

the violence he has done himself and Hjørdis, and ultimately Gunnar and Dagny too.

Act II directly wrestles with the question of happiness. Dagny is unable to understand how Hjørdis can be dissatisfied with life as she lives so well, and moreover has a child. But Hjørdis is no Fru Inger. She does not hanker after domestic bliss - "Kvindens sædvanlige Lod". Even when she comes face to face with death she still rejects the life of obscure wedlock, even with the man she loved: "Ingen magt kan ændre vor skæbne nu! O, ja - det er også bedre så, end om du havde fæstet mig hernede i livet; end om jeg havde siddet på din gård for at væve lin og uld og føde dig afkom, - fy! fy!" (4.93).

Hjørdis thirsts for action, freedom and passion, and tells Dagny that captivity is captivity no matter how luxurious the material conditions. She also laments her son's lack of manliness. The only physical passion she has ever felt was her first night with Sigurd disguised as Gunnar. Act II ends in a dual crisis when Gunnar kills Ørnulf's son Thorolf in the belief that Ørnulf has gone south to kill Egil, when the opposite is the case, and Dagny reveals the truth to Hjørdis of the identity of the man who killed the bear with the strength of twenty men to win her. Hjørdis resolves that either she or Sigurd will die as a result of this deception.

In Act III, the sphere of life beyond individual control is clearly marked as the territory governed by the Norns. Gunnar and Hjørdis are in Gunnar's hall, and Hjørdis is attending to a bowstring. There are obvious parallels between Hjørdis and the power of the Norns, which reminds us of Furia,

whose identity is suspended somewhere between the human and the chthonic. Gunnar explains that she has a special power and could make him do anything. But when he fails to untie the knot in her bow, she refers to an even higher power: "Nornenes spind er kunstigere" (3.70). Gunnar submits to this power: when he sets out his plans to recover his lost honour, honour that he sacrificed for prizing her above all things, he comments, "Ugrundeligt er nornens råd; Sigurd skulde blevet din husbond" (3.71). Gunnar had interfered with the course of fate by fixing the competition for Hjørdis. But neither he nor Hjørdis is aware of Sigurd's passion for her.

Sigurd seeks Hjørdis out with the intention of confessing his love for her. She reproaches him for having destroyed her life, for having humiliated her and making off with Dagny. He demurs explaining "Mangt værk mægter mænds vilje at fremme; men de store gerninger styres af skæbnen, - så er det gået med os to". Here Sigurd is alluding to the fact that his love for Gunnar was so intense that it demanded this great sacrifice. The value he had allied himself to, the love of his friend, defined his fate. Hjørdis agrees: "Vel sandt; onde norner råder over verden; men deres magt er ringe, ifald de ikke finder hjælpere i vort eget bryst. *Lykken* times den, der er stærk nok til at stævne i strid mod nornen; - det er *det* jeg nu vil gøre" (3.77-italics mine).

In this speech Hjørdis is extending her conception of individual choice and self-determination within a pre-ordained scheme, essentially the workings of a baleful providence. She also introduces the concept of "hjelperer", something which resides in the hearts of men which can ally

themselves with the Norns and assist their workings. This reminds us of the *daimon*, the intermediary entity between character and fate, and also prefigures Solness's helpers and servers. Happiness can only come to those who resist and fight the Norns. Hjørdis reiterates this position that happiness can only be gained in valiant defiance of fate: "*Lykken* er vel en stordåd værd; vi er begge fri, når vi selv vil det, og så er legen vunden" (3.81 – italics mine). Hjørdis gradually persuades herself of the fact that she and Sigurd were destined to be together, and in a sudden inversion of her view that happiness can only be won by challenging the Norns, she argues: "Det er nornens råd at vi to skal holde sammen; Det *kan* ej ændres" (3.82). And Hjørdis is determined to prove "nornen voksen" (3.77-78).

This passage demonstrates the instability of the meanings invested in the concept of the Norns. They represent something so protean that they can stand for anything from an inscrutable, merciless, intractable fate to a direct challenge to men to assert personal happiness in defiance of the misery they bring down, to the legislators of a happy and fulfilling life. This gestures dimly towards the relationship between Solness and *lykke* over forty years later.

But Sigurd's ethics and honour code do not permit him to join Hjørdis in her desire to unite their lives. He resists Hjørdis, and in his determination not to desert his integrity, challenges Gunnar to a duel, ostensibly to avenge Thorolf's murder. Gunnar appreciates the scale of this second sacrifice:

“Sigurd, min bolde broder, nu først forstår jeg dig! Du vover nu livet for min hæder, som du fordum voved det for min *lykke*” (3.85 – italics mine).

Catilina and *Fru Inger* had posited the radical incompatibility of calling and personal happiness. This notion pervades in *Hermændene* but in the form of competing values. But again personal happiness is the victim. Dagny’s love for Sigurd is so deep that the fact that he is with her is enough, even though she realises that with her he has learned to live with “en ringere *lykke*” (3.75 – italics mine); and that their plan to withdraw to a peaceful life in Iceland (reminiscent of Aurelia’s plans for *Catilina*) in no way constitutes happiness for Sigurd. Sigurd’s loyalty to Dagny is bred of his unwillingness to humiliate her in recognition of her devotion. Gunnar’s passion for Hjørdis is even more extreme. At the beginning of Act III when Hjørdis tries to persuade Gunnar to kill Sigurd, she does so by tempting him with a vision of a marital life defined by passion and devotion, the negative image of the indifference she mainly feels for him (which even extends to her contempt for the son she bore him). Gunnar prefers to live an unhappy lie rather than renounce the woman he loves. He sacrifices his honour for love, his version of happiness. Sigurd sacrificed love, his happiness, for honour and his blood brother.

Ørnulf provides some of the most powerful moments in the play. At first he appears to be a pretext for action and a vehicle for pushing the plot forward. However, at the end of the feast, he appears bearing the young Egil for whom he has sacrificed six of his own sons. Unbeknownst to Ørnulf, his youngest son, who was to sustain him in his loss of his other sons, has also

been killed. When he finds out about Thorolf's death, he rails against the workings of the Norns. Alone in old age and bereft of his sons, his *lykke*, Ørnulf seeks revenge on the supernatural. He derives comfort from his skaldic powers, the gift of Brage, the only thing he has that stands inviolate before the norns:

Harmfuld norne hærged
hårdt mig verdens veje
listed *lykken* fra mig
ødte Ørnulf's eje.
[...]

Nidsyg norne nødig
nægted mig sit eje, -
dryssed smertens rigdom
over Ørnulfs veje

Vegt er visst mit væрге
Fik jeg guders evne
en da blev min idræt:
nornens færd at hævne.

En da blev min gærning:
nornens fald at friste, -
hun, som har mig røvet
alt - og du det sidste! (3.88-9 - italics mine)

What emerges beneath Ørnulf's grief is a tension within his belief in the Norns: they are at once intransigent and indomitable forces, and possible objects of revenge.

In this final act Hjørdis in full armour, dressed as the Valkyrie she longs to be to Sigurd, tries to stage a *Liebestod*. She tells Sigurd how she has experienced intimations of death through three sightings of her *fylgje*, the mythological guardian spirit in the form of an animal. P. A. Munch explains that the *fylgjer* were related to the Norns. They were creatures with animal

forms, who led or preceded the person they attached themselves to, - it was believed that everybody had at least one. There was normally a close fit between the animal and the individual, so that brave, strong chieftains would have a bear *fylgje*. Hjørdis's *fylgje* naturally takes the form of a wolf.¹⁹ She resolves to create the conditions for Sigurd and herself to be together in the afterlife, to see Sigurd on the throne of heaven with her sitting by his side. But the most significant part of her vision is her statement of Sigurd's error: a defiance of fate, happiness and ultimately life itself. This speech rewards quoting at length, for it sets out Hjørdis's views on fate, love and responsibility:

Ilde handled du dengang! Alle gode gaver kan manden give til sin fuldtro ven, - alt, kun ikke den kvinde han har kær; thi gør han det, da bryder nornens lønlige spind og to liv forspildes. Det er en usvigelig røst i mig, som siger at jeg blev til, for at mit stærke sind skulde løfte og bære dig i de tunge tider, og at du fødtes, for at jeg i *en* mand kunde finde alt det, der tyktes mig stort og ypperligt; thi det ved jeg, Sigurd, - havde vi to holdt sammen, da var du bleven navnkundigere og jeg lykkeligere end alle andre! (4.93)

Sigurd insists on the ineluctability of his choice; a life devoid of happiness and love. Hjørdis conjures up a stampede of dead warriors to come and take them off to glory, but Sigurd resists. She is so consumed by her vision that she fails to notice this resistance, deriving comfort from the fact that their new life will be even more glorious than an earthly life together, which would probably have subjected her to domesticity and childbearing. The news of her home, husband and child burning cannot bring her back to the here and now. "Ingen magt kan ændre vor skæbne nu!", she declares,

rejecting a changing world in which the approaching White God of the Christians is enfeebling the spiritual vitality of the old gods. But this fate is exclusively hers. There is no *Liebestod*.

Sigurd does admit to the magnitude and destructive nature of his betrayal of love. But he is a Christian and refuses to ride with the old order, and instead embraces the White God. Thereafter Ørnulf, Dagny and Gunnar, having survived the fire, make peace, Gunnar believing that Hjørdis killed Sigurd out of love for him.

This last short act undercuts the tragedy with Sigurd's 'sting in the tail' confession of conversion to Christianity. The ending weakens the play considerably, as it is unmotivated, and contrary to the spirit of probability and necessity. Sigurd's conduct stems from a code of honour which is not obviously Christian, and, moreover, he subscribes just as much to the fatalism of the old order as Hjørdis, Gunnar and Ørnulf. It is difficult to argue the case for this play as successful tragedy, but it certainly shows a refinement in Ibsen's conception of happiness and fate. One important nineteenth-century Ibsen critic concludes that Sigurd's death at Hjørdis's hands in this "is the result of his heroic renunciation of her; and he thus becomes a kind of anticipation of the tragedy of sacrifice which reaches its sublimest note in *Brand*".²⁰

2.5 *Kongsemnerne*

The next work to be considered is another drama to derive its material from Norwegian history. *Kongsemnerne* (1863) is widely held to be Ibsen's first really great work. It is based on the thirteenth-century political and civil upheavals that scarred the country on its path to nationhood. However, despite its success in creating a mediaeval atmosphere and its historical plausibility, the true power of the work lies in its the psychological portraiture of the Machiavellian Biskop Nikolas and its hero, Skule Jarl. The progress of the man who would be king's misguided ambition to occupy the throne is traced minutely over a course of twenty years

As Bjørn Hemmer points out, this play is unique in the corpus in that its hero is neither following a great calling, nor defying his calling, nor sacrificing incommensurable goods in the name of his calling.²¹

Skule, despite his talents and intelligence, has no real calling. He is driven by a deep-seated worldly ambition and a debilitating lust for power. His spiritual activity ranges between two poles, that of the demonic Biskop Nikolas, who lives to confound the nation in a permanent state of strife and warfare through his principle of *perpetuum mobile*, and Håkon Håkonsson with his unassailable sense of purpose and faith in his great *kongstanke*: "Norge var et rige; det skal blive et folk" (HU V.3.89, 4.101). Utterly lacking a calling of his own, Skule resorts to stealing his rival's inspiration. As Hemmer points out, "Skule er blitt nektet retten både til det som står for ham som livets lykke og til en stor kongstanke".

Perhaps because this play is set in post-conversion Norway, and much of the action is centred around churches, shrines and the great Nidaros cathedral, itself the Christian centre of Norway, Ibsen was at liberty to dispense with the mythologizing of spheres beyond human of previous plays. Gone are the fates, furies and Norns; even *skæbne* in the abstract has disappeared from the set. The “Norges *Skjæbne*” of *Fru Inger* has been replaced with “landets *lykke*” and “Norges *lykke*” in this work (3.79, 3.81).

Once again Ibsen focuses on an earthly anonymous *lykke* available through love: erotic (Ingebjørg); uxorial (Margrethe and Ragnhild); maternal (Inga and Margrethe); paternal (Håkon and Skule) and filial (Margrethe and Peter). No other levels of relationship are explored; there are no reliable political alliances or friendships asserted of the kind represented by Sigurd and Gunnar. Skule derives great spiritual strength from the *lykke* of love during the agony of his *anagnorisis*: “Jeg søgte efter *lykken* ude i det fremmede, og agtede aldrig på, at jeg havde et hjem, hvor jeg kunde fundet den. Jeg jog efter kærlighed gennem synd og brøde, og vidste aldrig, at jeg ejede den i kraft af Guds og menneskenes lov” (5.143).

But for the preceding four acts it is clear that Skule is denied happiness and Håkon is not. Ibsen’s statement in his preface to the second edition of *Catilina* can hardly be applied to Håkon: “[...] modsigelsen mellem evne og higen, mellem vilje og mulighed, menneskehetens og individets tragedie og komedie på engang” (I.123). Håkon has the great *kongstanke*, and, it seems, the purpose of mind and ability to see it to fruition. These factors automatically

debar Håkon from the tragic role; he is far too settled a character to accommodate tragic conflict.

The greatest development in the *lykke* nexus is the highlighting of the concept as straddling success and happiness. This occurs mainly in Act II in the confessional scene between Skule and the amoral Bishop. Nikolas has just asked Skule for his definition of the 'greatest' man. Skule replies that the greatest man is the most courageous. The Bishop's reply rewards quoting at length:

Så siger høvdingen. En prest vilde sige, det er den mest troende, - en vismand, at det er den kyndigste. Men det er ingen af dem, jarl. Den *lykkeligste* mand er den største mand. De *lykkeligste* er det; som gør de største gerninger, *han*, hvem tidens krav kommer over ligesom i brynde, avler tanker, dem han ikke selv fatter, og som peger for ham på den vej, han ikke selv ved hvor bær hen, men som han dog går og må gå, til han hører folket skrige i glæde, og han ser sig om, med spilte øjne og undrer sig og skønner, at han har gjort et storværk [...] det er *det* som Romerne kaldte *ingenium*. (2.47-8)

Skule develops a portrait of Håkon, the man of destiny, whom *lykke* - fortune smiles on, detailing his easy victories and how his path to the throne was always eased by circumstances. This conception of the *lykkeligste* is consistent with the notion of 'constitutive luck'. Constitutive luck refers to the capacities and talents one is born with, such as intelligence and beauty.²² He asks Nikolas if "Håkon skulde være skabt af et andet stof end jeg? Være af de lykkelige?"²³ Nikolas develops this idea further by arguing that Håkon has the right because he is blessed by fortune: "Han har retten, fordi han er den lykkelige, - *den største lykken er den, at have retten*" (3.49 - italics mine). This

argument has an inescapable circularity, but it does point to an uneven distribution. Aristotle himself was undecided over the question of whether the *eudaimon* man was aided and supported by good fortune. Of course his rationalist ethics resisted the notion, but an identifiable equivocation persists in his thinking.²⁴ Moreover, the entire text of *Kongsemnerne* emphasises Håkon's connection with the divine and the supernatural, and Skule is only expressing a commonly held view when he asks:

Føjer ikke alting sig til det bedste, når det gælder ham?
Selve bonden mærker det; han siger, at træerne bær
togange frugt, og fuglene ruger æg togange hver
sommer, mens Håkon er konge. [...] Det er som blodet
og asken gødsler, der Håkon farer frem i hærferd; det er
som Herren dækker over med grøde, hvad Håkon
tramper ned; det er som de hellige magter skynder sig at
slette ud hver skyld efter ham. Og hvor let gik han ikke
til at blive konge! (5.49)

Everything that has gone well for Håkon has gone badly for Skule, even on the personal level. He sacrificed the woman he loved to make a marriage that would provide him with sons, but he got only daughters. Håkon on the other hand married Skule's daughter Margarethe, not out of love but out of political expediency, yet Skule is sure that he will come to love her, and that she will inevitably produce a male heir.

The bishop returns to the question of the authority vested in Håkon and urges Skule to resist this uneven distribution:

Og I, I vil lade jer jage fredløs fra lykken alt jeders liv
igjennem! Er I da blind? Ser I ikke, at det er en stærkere
magt end Birkebejnerflokkens, som står bagved Håkon og
fremmer al hans gerning? Han får hjælpen deroppefra,

fra dem, - dem som står eder imod - fra dem som var
eders avindsmænd fra fødselen af! (2.50)

But for Skule, Håkon's unshakable belief in his legitimacy is insurmountable. He argues that faith is the greater part of success: "*det meste af lykken*" (2.53 - italics mine). Skule is haunted by the sense of Håkon's indomitable luck even when he has become king of half the country, following an unexpected victory over Håkon at Låka. He recalls his pretence of appearing "smilende fremad, som om jeg var så uryggelig viss på retten og sejren og lykken". The taste of victory is bitter and terrifying as he senses its illegitimacy. Ever since Håkon uttered the kingly thought, Skule has seen him as the rightful king: "Om der glimtede et Guds kald i disse sælsomme ord? Om Gud havde siddet inde med tanken til nu, og vil strø det ud - og har kåret Håkon til såmand?" (4.101). It is faith that he lacks, and faith is unavailable to him, as he has no calling of his own.

The supernatural element of the play is underscored by the appearance of the comet at Nidaros which opens Act V. The comet resembles a flaming sword to the terrified observers, and they have to interpret its message, in the manner of the ancient omen. Skule's followers read it as a sign that a great leader is about to die, and are not all agreed that it refers to Håkon, as Skule is ill and his followers are suffering from low morale. The comet reappears to Skule just prior to his encounter with the ghost of Biskop Nikolas, who has visited him to cement his resolve to kill Håkon's heir and establish Peter's ascendancy. It is his concern for his son Peter's soul that enables him to resist Nikolas, and clear the way to his *anagnorisis*.

Skule's *anagnorisis* is precipitated by his growing inability to proceed without faith. Circumstances conspire to defeat him on a military level, but more importantly, he recognises the palpably corrupting effect believing in a stolen vision is having on Peter. Peter resorts to stealing from the church and preparing to murder Håkon's heir at all costs, even if this means killing him in his mother's arms. Peter has become the manifestation of the kind of man that the bishop was tempting Skule to become, and his misplaced faith in his father has had an invidious, corrupting influence on him.

Skule's insight, prompted by Peter's excesses, forces him to accept his fate. The kingly thought may not have been his, but he recognizes its value and as such is willing to die for it, recognising that Norway's future demands this sacrifice. He and Peter give themselves up to God: "Gud, jeg er en fattig mand, jeg har kun mit liv at give; men tag det, og berg Håkons store kongstanke" (5.199).

In his death there is "the annihilation of tragic conflict".²⁵ Håkon's final judgement on Skule is one that we must accept: "Skule Bardssøn var Guds stedbarn på jorden; det var gåden ved ham" (5.150). Bjørn Hemmmer argues that we have no reason not to take this judgement on trust as these are words spoken by Skule's arch-enemy. The image of the step-child is a rich one, for like many step-children, Skule receives harsh treatment. It also summarises Skule's life:

Den betydning Håkon legger i uttryket, er [...] at Skules skjebne var *som* et stebarns: Han har fått - for et menneskes blick - en hard og ublid behandling av Vårherre. Skule er blitt nektet retten både til det som står

for ham som livets lykke og til en stor og kongelig idé.
Han har vært tjener for en plan som ikke gjaldt hans
egen jordiske tilværelse.²⁶

In *Kongsemnerne*, Ibsen presents a coherent picture of the realm beyond human control. In this work, the focus is on the calling, and a fate determined by God/historical necessity. Contingency as such does not contribute so much to the plot (beyond the unexpected appearance of Skule's illegitimate son), but is extrapolated by Skule through comparison with Håkon as a constitutive good which derives from being chosen by God.

Happiness is given clear definition and value. It comes through deep, familial attachment and love, and is not, in this play a site of conflict as it will be in *Brand*. By narrowing the focus of super-human agency in this work, Ibsen succeeding in developing significantly more powerful characters and conflicts than in the other plays we have considered thus far.

2.6 *Kejser og Galilæer*

Kongsemnerne was followed by only one further history play. After *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* Ibsen finally completed his monumental world-historical two-part, ten-act drama, *Kejser og Galilæer*. In this drama the intensity of *Brand* is lost to the grander design, and Julian Apostata, although undoubtedly a more significant historical figure than Skule, must look to the duke, not Brand, for his dramatic pedigree. Like Skule he unwittingly bolsters that which he would tear down (in this case Christianity, an entire moral, social and political order, in contrast to Skule's more local, *ad hominem* struggle). His sense of

competition with the Galilean recalls Skule's jealous impotence at the unstoppable success of Håkon, and like Skule he is finally corrupted by ambition. However, the ending of *Kejser Julian* is much more equivocal and the tragedy much less insistent. It is true that Julian undergoes several *peripeteia* but they are never accompanied by the *anagnorisis* Aristotle recommended as the outcome of reversal.

The scope of the work is tremendous, not simply for the chronological and geographic range of the action, and the impressive ten-act structure, but also for the philosophy that it embraces through Julian's pursuit of wisdom. Atle Kittang sees the (stronger) first part as "eit lærdoms - eller erkjenningsdrama: eit drama om trangen etter kunnskap og sanning. Såleis har det visse likskaper med den såkalla 'lærdomstragedien' i første del av Goethe's *Faust*". Part II, conversely, is a parallel unravelling of the search for enlightenment.²⁷

Once again, Ibsen was consciously writing in the tragic mode, but in this case he was undertaking a radical questioning of the genre, as he explained in this letter to William Archer:

...stykket er ... anlagt i den mest realistiske form; den illusion, jeg vilde frembringe, var virkelighedens; jeg vilde på læseren frembringe det indtryk at det, han læste, var noget virkelig passeret. Skulde jeg ha' brugt verset, så havde jeg derved modarbejdet mig egen hensigt og den opgave jeg havde stillet mig. [...] Vi lever ikke længere i Shakespeares tid, og mellem billedhuggerne begynder man allerede at tale om at bemale statuerne med naturlige farver. [...] I det hele taget må den sproglige form rette sig efter den grad af idealitet, som er udbredt over fremstillingen. Mit nye skuespil er ingen tragedie i den ældre tids betydning;

hvad jeg vilde skildre er mennesker og just derfor har jeg ikke villet lade dem tale "gudernes tungemål." (XVII 122-123)

Julian is a young man living in uncertain times, on the cusp between two orders, a passing paganism and emergent Christianity, much like the historical moment encapsulated in Act V of *Hærmændene på Helgeland*. *Kejsers Frafald* traces his fortunes and crises as he abandons the stifling and corrupt Christianity of the court to restore a vital and joyful paganism to the world.

In Act I two basic elements familiar from previous works discussed are in place: the calling and the notion of being singled out to pursue the calling. But what is immediately arresting in view of Ibsen's insistence that this play was not to be a tragedy in the old mould, and would be written in prose to reinforce the realism of the drama, is the highly charged sense of the supernatural.

Act I is replete with references to such forces. Over the solemn Easter vigil in Constantinople and the choir singing of the victory of the Lamb of God over evil, can be heard the discordant voices of social and religious division in the streets. The imperial procession enters and the atmosphere of suspicion and tension is extended. Emperor Konstanzios, though ostensibly a Christian, makes immediate and serious reference to the judgement of an oracle, which appals the young Julian.

When his old friend Agathon seeks him out, it is to apprise him of a vision. At this point Julian sees his first falling star, and refers to the dream his mother had before she gave birth to him, namely that she was giving birth to

Achilles. He goes on to explain to Agathon that Constantinople has become a dangerous hotbed of sin, and the arrival of the pagan philosopher Libanius is seen as an index of the spiritual decay of the imperial city. His arrival was predicted by signs. Julian is horrified by these pagan abominations; only a miracle can save them.

Agathon explains that a vision, a divine revelation, has brought him to Constantinople. It is the substance of this revelation which convinces Julian that he has been singled out for great things: he has been chosen to wrestle with the lions. Julian interprets this as a revelation: "En åbenbaring; et bud til mig -; jeg skulde være under udvælgelsen" (HUVII 1: 1.53).

When Konstanzius declares Julian's brother Gallus his successor, it is to placate the eleven shades, representing the eleven members of Julian's family he has killed. Julian is happy at not having to assume imperial office. Declaring himself free, he prepares to leave incognito for Athens, to discover the root of wisdom through learning. He tells Konstanzius that he has a divine calling to follow: "Gud Herren har råbt på mig med høj røst. Lig Daniel går jeg trygg og glad ind i løvehulen" (1: 1.60). This image juxtaposed with his valedictory image establishes the terms of his subsequent spiritual struggle: "God bør, du vingede løve, Akilleus følger dig i kølvandet" (1: 1.63). Daniel or Achilles? Prophet or warrior? Julian's sighting of another falling star, on which the act closes, point towards his death on the battlefield.

But Athens leaves Julian similarly disillusioned concerning the potential for reaching wisdom through the academy. He refuses to be co-opted

by either side. Willing neither to defend Christianity against the corrupt centres of power nor to be used to defend rational logic against the mystic Maximos, Julian abandons Athens for Ephesus on a spiritual quest that cannot be conducted in the terms of either the old beauty of Hellas or the new truth of the Galilean.

Act III makes it clear that the Act I instances of appeals to supernatural forces and signs were not merely an exercise in local colour and historical flavour. The act opens with Basilios and Gregor arriving in Ephesus astonished to find that Julian has been expecting them, when no-one knew of their intentions to journey there. Julian explains that he saw them in a vision the night before, at the precise moment they were talking about him. Brian Johnston has emphasised the importance of this scene: Ibsen evidently wanted it to be experienced as a piece of realist theatre by resisting the easier option of organising all the supernatural experience of the play into soliloquies.

Julian has become an ascetic, and much of his time is spent contemplating the very signs and mysteries he so despised in Act I. He declares himself to be “jordens lykkeligste søn” (1: 3.88). Julian’s version of happiness here comes close to the Aristotelian definition of the *eudaimon* man as he who devotes his life to philosophical contemplation.²⁸ (This notion will be discussed later in the context of *Rosmersholm*). However, Julian’s method of contemplation is becoming increasingly reliant on signs and dreams, and on Maximos to interpret them. He tells his friends that he sees no reason to resist this method as many signs and portents have been fulfilled.

Julian is waiting for Maximos to interpret the great riddle of life for him. For Julian, Maximos is the greatest man for he aims to restore our likeness to the deity. He believes that through him the pure spirit of Adam can be reborn as a new race, generated by him and the pure woman. He will journey to the Euphrates and establish the new race, the empire of the spirit.

The scene immediately following this, when Julian has alienated his Christian friends with his blasphemous prophecies, establishes the crucial importance of the supernatural elements in the play. Ibsen could very easily have reworked the contents of the symposium with the spirits into a narration of a dream, but instead he took the risk of staging it within a realist framework. And this was a momentous decision as the scene is a turning-point in the play as it marks the beginning of Julian's decline and disintegration, even though he experiences it as his moment of glory.

In an alarming sequence of apparitions, Julian is addressed by disembodied voices who suggest themselves as Cain and Judas Iscariot "frigivne under nødvendigheden" (1: 3.102) - great helpers in denial, both delivering enigmatic answers to Julian's questions. The riddles they speak not only reflect Julian's preoccupations, but persist throughout Ibsen's tragic oeuvre.

The first voice instructs Julian that he was born to serve the spirit; his calling is to establish *the* empire by way of freedom, that is by way of necessity, by the power of willing, willing the necessary. Maximos interprets this as a reference to three empires: the one founded on the tree of knowledge;

the second on the tree of the cross and the third a synthesis of the two. When Cain reveals himself to Julian, Julian interrogates him about his past life instead of trying to find the key to his own future. His purpose in life had been to sin, and this had simply fallen out by birth – by the fact that he was not his brother. He willed what he had to because he was himself. His sin produced life and the ground of life is death. The ground of death is the great mystery. The second willing slave at the great turning point in history, Judas Iscariot, helped the world turn to glory because it was his will and he willed what he had to, chosen by the Master. For him the riddle is whether the master could foretell when he chose. Maximos fails to call up the third as he is not dead yet. He interprets the voice in the light as a clear message to Julian to establish the third empire, but Julian resists defiantly, closing the sequence with the categorical “Jeg trødser nødvendigheden! Jeg vil ikke tjene den! Jeg er fri, fri, fri!” (1: 3.102).

This scene is a clear statement of the major tragic themes that preoccupy not only Julian but many subsequent heroes. The messages of the voices function in the same way as the oracle functioned in the ancient world and in drama, and misinterpretation could be central to tragedy. Maximos is a Tiresias figure, somewhere between human and spirit. As strong as the sense that a calling is grounded in some higher power or ideal is the close association of freedom and necessity on the one hand, and of willing and constraint on the other. These function together in an ineluctable circularity that is only temporarily ruptured at the moment of death. In Julian’s case the

ground of his calling suggests not a specific deity or personifiable fate, but the wider pull of a romantic conception of history. History is engaged in an upward progress, and is as intractable a force as Nemesis, Fate, the Norns and God.

When news arrives that his brother Gallus has died and Konstanzius has named Julian Caesar, Julian greets this as fulfilment of the words of the voices and an earlier dream of Apollinarius's. When he reads the letter from Konstanzius instructing him to marry his sister Helena, Julian reads the union with the 'pure woman' into this. Maximos, Basilios and Gregor all advise him against establishing Konstanzius's empire – Maximos's unease springs from conflicting signs "tegn imod tegn", whereas his Christian friends see Julian as unable to resist temptation.

Act IV presents Julian as a military leader whose significant successes in combat have been erased from record by his Emperor's revisionist propaganda. Julian appears to be a modest and serious ruler. He asks his general Florentius what Caesar could need to make him happy, and decrees that knowledge of the truth is essential to his happiness. For the remainder of the act, truth is under great pressure: Helena is poisoned by the fruit sent by the Emperor to congratulate Julian on a successful campaign. In her delirium it emerges that she is anything but the 'pure woman' of Julian's vision. The despair and impotence he feels at Konstanzius's constant erosion of his power and autonomy is transmuted into a radiant confidence in his belief in the necessity for assuming the reins of Empire.

He ends the act buoyed up by the confidence of his soldiers and his faith in *lykke*: “Vær med mig, *du lykke*, som har aldrig svigtet mig før!” (1: 4.142 – my italics). Julian is indeed, like Håkon a *lykkebarn*. Little goes wrong for him, even in military campaigns, which are not the natural realm of success for the philosopher. Helena, Maximos and Basilios all make reference to this. Basilios remarks that Julian has been attended by good fortune to such a degree that he has often been mistaken for Christ himself. Basilios’s evaluation, without necessarily representing a personal position, represents a line of thought traceable to at least as far back as Aristotle, who wrestles with the question of the role of *luck* in *eudaimonia* and whether or not it is abetted by divine dispensation.²⁹

The appeal is to an unspecified fortune, but what is arresting about it in the context of the symposium of spirits of the previous act is that it follows a declaration that in leading a rebellion against Konstanzius “Jeg bøjer mig for det uundgæelige” (1: 4.142). Julian here is effectively withdrawing his statement from the end of the previous act when he rejects necessity and declares himself free. Now he is embracing the inevitable and investing his future in a benign providence.

When Julian asks Sallust how he could bring himself to break his oath to Zeus and Apollo, Sallust replies that his gods are far away. Julian sees this as an index of freedom: “Lykkelig du, hvis guder er langt borte” (1: 5.149). This communicates a resentment at the extent to which religion controls one’s life, thought, and action. Unlike the Christian God, the gods of the Pantheon

“hemmer ingen”, leaving “en mand rum omkring sig til at handle. O, denne græske lykke, at føle sig fri!” (1: 5.149). Here happiness is delimited as a freedom that obtains from a lack of divine control: freedom *from* God; freedom *to* act.

This freedom seems to extend to a freedom from ethics too. When considering the justification for a pre-emptive strike against Konstanzius, Julian invokes the authority of Plato to support his stand. But Sallust merely questions the right of Julian’s enemies to life. Maximus is unable to interpret the omens on account of the fact that they have been drowned out by the voices from the church singing hymns, in itself an omen. Maximus cautions Julian to “Tag din skæbne i egne hænder” and bury the “furie-piskede synder” (1: 5.153). The crisis comes to a head when the body of Helena is reported to perform miracles.

Part I closes with Julian emerging into the light from the catacombs having performed a sacrifice to the god Helios. In counterpoint to the choir singing the Lord’s Prayer, Julian proclaims the Kingdom his.

In Part I, as Julian gradually distances himself from his Christian faith, there is an observable parallel movement towards *lykke* denoting fortune. His intellectual and spiritual transformation is accompanied by a concomitant deepening of the notional field of chance and happiness and more worldly concerns.

Part II returns us to Constantinople, and takes us slowly eastward to the Tigris, where Julian had envisaged the establishment of a new race.

Konstanzios is dead and Julian is Emperor. He has introduced religious freedom, but this is a principle very easily eroded.

Julian's faith in *lykke* gradually becomes formalised and systematised into an asserted belief in an alliance with the old religion. He tells the orator Themistius that:

Hvad mig angår, så drister jeg mig ikke til at bygge mit håb på en gud der hidtil har vært mig fiendtlig i alle foretagender. Jeg har sikre tegn og varsler for at al den fremgang, jeg vant på Galliens grænser, den skylder jeg hine andre guddomme der begunstiget Alexander på en noget lignende måde. Under disse gudommes skærm og skjold slap jeg *lykkeligt* gennem alle farer; og navnlig var det dem der førte mig frem på min rejse hid med en så vidunderlig hurtighed og *lykke* at jeg her i gadene har hørt tilrob som tyder på at man holder mig for et guddommeligt menneske, - (2: 1.172 - my italics)

Julian now locates his success in the dispensation of the old gods, and this entails sacrifices to the goddess Tuche, whom Ibsen Latinised as Fortuna. His original apostrophe to *lykke* in 1: 4.142 has evolved into formalised worship. Julian is involved in a project of temple restoration and of reinstating ancient ritual largely forgotten by the adherents of the old religion. This systematisation of old religious practice provides Julian with an interpretative position from which to rationalise his opposition to the imperatives of the Galilean. It should be noted that Julian's position has not hitherto been consistently pagan - prior to his sacrifice to Helios, his position was more atheist than pagan - he yearned for the freedom of the gods who were far away.

This act witnesses Julian rebuilding the old religion. There are six references to Fortuna in this act alone. He explains how he had to consult old books to get accurate representations of sacrificial procedures, and even expresses a wish to officiate himself. The ceremony proclaims the power of the old gods Apollo and Dionysus, restoring them to their former status. Much emphasis has been given to the Dionysian and Apollonian elements of Julian's religion, but little mention is made of his reliance on and reverence for Tuche, Fortuna. He sends up this tribute to her:

....o Fortuna! Sto jeg vel her uden din bistand! Visselig ved jeg at du ikke længere selv lader dig til syne, således som tilfældet var i den gyldne tidsalder, hvorom hin uforlignelige blinde sanger har fortalt oss. Men det ved jeg dog – og deri er alle andre visdomsvenner enige med mig – at det er dig som har væsentlig andel i valget av den ledsagende ånd, god eller fordervelig, som skal følge ethvert menneske på hans livs-gang. Jeg har ingen årsak til at klage over dig, o Fortuna! (2: 1.175)

Julian attributes his smooth rise to the imperial throne to the benign ministries of Fortuna, who has guided him through the vagaries of the Byzantine power structure, corrupt allies and enemies to the helm of a great power. He has been served by a friendly *daimon* appointed by Fortuna at his birth. Here we have Ibsen's clearest statement hitherto of the structure of a belief in the realm beyond the human.

This is the first time that these forces are presented as positive forces. In *Catilina* they were irredeemably dark, and almost coextensive with the forces of evil; in *Fru Inger*, fate again was seen as a powerful force, but if crossed, demanded the downfall of the elect. In *Hærmændene på Helgeland* fate and the

Norns were again irresistible and vengeful, yet an alternative was available. *Kongsemnerne* took the question of fate into a distinctly Christian framework while still deliberating the consequences of crossing her or God – the distinction is not clear. All the above point to the syncretism discernible in the plays. Julian brings us back to the question of whether the lucky man is aided by the divine, and at this stage his response is unequivocal.

Julian's preoccupation with a divinely organised and representative *lykke* shows the beginning of his disintegration and collapse. He feels cradled in the company of immortals, which is accompanied by a gradual fading of the distinction between the human and the divine in his person. His stated end is no longer the search for truth but experienced through the worship of Dionysus. He organises a festive procession through the streets, which he claims will distinguish the pure from the impure and the true believers from the unbelievers and the result will be the release of pure joy. "Liv, liv, liv i skønhed" (2: 1.188).

But the procession is a travesty of these ideals. Julian himself appears with wine-leaves in his hair, riding an ass (a visual reference to Jesus) wearing the god Dionysus' signature panther skin, surrounded by drunkards dressed as fauns and satyrs.

Var der skønhed i dette? - - *Hvor var* oldingerne med det hvide skæg? *Hvor var* de rene jomfruer med bånd om panden, med sømmelige lader, tugtige midt i dansens glæde? Tvi eder i skøger! - - (*han river panterhuden af og kaster den tilsiden.*)
Hvor er skønheden bleven af? Kan ikke kejseren
Byde den stå op igjen, og så står den op?
Tvi over denne stinkende utugt— -

Hvilke ansigter! Alle laster skreg ud af disse forstyrrede
drag.
Kroppens og sjælens bylder.
Fy, Fy! (Tjenere i palatset) Et bad, Agilo! Stanken kvæler
mig. (2: 1.193 – italics mine)

Insight strains towards the surface melancholy of Julian's *ubi sunt*, yet his deepening vanity ensures that his question remains rhetorical. Julian cannot revive the old religion, and his refusal to acknowledge this contorts his personality into a tyrant of the first order, and retards *anagnorisis*.

Julian's reliance on external signs and the supernatural becomes excessive. In part this had been an indication of an open and receptive mind, closed neither to the arguments in books, philosophical debate, nor the supernatural. Now Julian relies only on signs and Fortuna for guidance and success. This recalls Aristotle's dictum: "Where there is more insight and reason, there is least luck; and where there is the most luck there is the least insight".³⁰

The second part of the play moves from local man-to-man disagreements in the street to full-scale bloodshed on the battlefield. Julian dies at the hands of Agathon, his childhood friend, whom he himself had converted to Christianity. His dream of restoring what was noble, beautiful and life-affirming about the old religion resulted in personal corruption and decadence. The religion he established was, as we have seen, a rickety and finally oppressive construct, not a restoration but a re-creation, largely in Julian's own image, for the old religion had already passed away. Where Julian's religion sought to be open and inclusive, it became hostile and

exclusive, where it preached tolerance it practised hatred, leaving its founder near-delirious for interpreting the signs.

But Julian dies unrepentant, having built nothing, in the words of Halvard Solness : “ingenting bygd”. His destructive vanity has only served to bolster the Galilean. But Ibsen clearly was not seeking to dramatise the fall of a vain and failed man. *Kejser og Galilæer* is also Ibsen’s farewell to historical tragedy, which in the person of Julian is taken to its limits. The freedom indistinguishable from necessity that Julian is fighting is nothing less than history itself – Julian’s nemesis, and the old gods are no match for the forces of history.

His dying words recalling his earlier beautiful earth speech closes on the apostrophe to Helios, borrowing Christ’s formation: “O sol, sol, hvi bedrog du mig!” (2: 5.334). But it is Makrina, the true ‘pure woman’ of the play who has the final word, seeing Julian’s death in the context of history, which she is certain will judge him kindly under the sign of necessity:

Vildfarende menneskesjæl, - *måtte* du fare vild, da skal det visselig regnes dig til gode på hin store dag, når de vældige kommer i skyen for at sige dommen over de levende døde og over de døde levende. (2: 5.336)

In *Brand*, which we now turn to, belief in contingency-*lykke* is displaced by a discipline of spirit which proves as inimical to happiness-*lykke* and insight as Julian’s reliance on signs and Fortuna.

Endnotes

¹ T. M. Campbell, *Hebbel, Ibsen and the Analytic Exposition*, Heidelberg, 1922, p. 21.

² Timothy Schiff, "Providence and Dispensation in Henry Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*", *Scandinavian Studies* 51, 1979, p. 376.

³ Brian Johnston, *To the Third Empire: Ibsen's Early Drama*, Minneapolis, 1980, p. 29.

⁴ Thomas F. Van Laan, "Lady Inger as Tragedy", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VIII*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1994, p. 34.

⁵ The figure of Nemesis proved to be of abiding fascination for Ibsen. Christian Collin was one early critic to respond to this. "From *Catiline* to *When We Dead Awaken* there is one dramatic motif that Henrik Ibsen never tired of using [...]. I believe one gains the clearest picture of Ibsen's greatness as a stage dramatist by observing the exceptional skill by which he makes this ancient dramatic motif of the erinyes and nemesis his own." See C. Collin, "Henrik Ibsen's Dramatic Construction Technique" in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IX*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1997, p. 209.

⁶ See William Chase Greene, *Moirai: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought*, New York and Evanston, 1963, p. 54.

⁷ They were originally the instruments of vengeance for *kindred* murders. This is why they pursue Orestes for murdering his mother, but not Clytemnestra for her murder of Agamemnon, as this was not a blood tie.

⁸ Of course *daimon* is etymologically at the root of the word 'demon'. Its own etymology can be traced to the verbs 'deō' and 'dateōmai' meaning to 'share', 'apportion'. See Greene 1963, 12-13 and Appendix 3.

⁹ Chester Clayton Long, *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Works by Eugene O'Neill*, The Hague and Paris, 1968, p. 13.

¹⁰ Schiff, 1979, p. 326.

¹¹ Van Laan 1994, p. 26.

¹² Asbjørn Aarseth, "Ibsen's Dramatic Apprenticeship", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Cambridge, ed. James McFarlane, 1994, p. 7.

¹³ Henrik Jaeger, quoted in James McFarlane ed., *The Oxford Ibsen I*, 1970, p. 17.

¹⁴ Van Laan 1994, p. 39.

¹⁵ See James McFarlane in his introduction to the play in *The Oxford Ibsen I*, p. 18-19: "Improbability follows implausibility in wilful, relentless progression. The characters are herded towards their contrived fate by misunderstandings of almost unbelievable artificiality."

¹⁶ These changes have been traced by Van Laan 1994, p. 44, n. 5.

¹⁷ Hesiod names the Fates: Clotho, "Spinner", Lachesis, "Dispenser of Lots", and Atropos, "She who cannot be turned". See Greene 1963, p. 16.

¹⁸ P. A. Munch defines the Norns as "skjebnens gudinner". Urd, Verdande and Skuld are named in *Voluspå*, and the name Urd is equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon *wurth*, meaning 'fate'. They lived under Yggdrasil, and decide the fate of both humans and the gods. No one could live a day longer than the norns intended. Norns could be both benign and baleful forces. Their names suggest past, present and future, and it is thought that the triad was derived from the Latin *parcae* from the Greek *Moirai*- allotters of a new-born child's portion in life. Holtsmark adds that belief in the norns survived well into post-conversion Norway. See P. A. Munch, *Norrøne gude - og heltesagn*, ed. Anne Holtsmark, Oslo 1967, p. 65 and 65n.

¹⁹ Munch also mentions the *hamingjer* in this context. Similar to the *fylgjer*, these were invisible creatures in female form who controlled the fate of the individual. "Hvert menneske hadde sin *hamingja* som søkte å bringe ham hell (derfor *hamingja* også brukt i betydningen *lykke*)."
See Munch, *Norrøne Gude - og heltesagn*, p. 66. Else Mundal refers to *dyrefylgjer* and *kvinnefylgjer*, defining them as 'dobbelgjengar' and 'hjelpeånd' respectively. See Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur*, Oslo, 1974, p. 11.

²⁰ C. H. Herford, "Ibsen's Earlier Work", *Lippincott's Magazine*, Philadelphia, March 1892, p. 356.

²¹ Bjørn Hemmer, *Brand, Kongsemnerne, Peer Gynt*, Oslo, 1972, p. 100.

²² See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 20.

²³ *EE* 1214a15-17: "But we must consider first what the good life consists in and how it is obtained – whether all of those who receive the designation "happy" acquire happiness by nature...".

²⁴ *EE* 1214a17-27 – the passage quoted above, n. 24, continues thus: "[...] or [acquire happiness] by study, which would imply that there is a science of happiness, or by some form of training. [...] Or does happiness come in none of these ways, but either by a sort of elevation of mind inspired by some divine power, as in the case of persons possessed by a nymph or a god, or, alternatively, by fortune (*dia tin tuche*). For many people identify happiness (*eudaimonia*) with good fortune (*eutuchia*)."

²⁵ Atle Kittang, "The Pretenders: Historical Vision or Psychological Tragedy?", in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen III*, ed. H. Noreng et al., Oslo, 1977, p. 81.

²⁶ Hemmer 1972, p 101. Note also that Håkon never underestimates Skule's talents.

²⁷ Atle Kittang, *Ibsens Heroisme*, Oslo, 2002, p. 84.

²⁸ See *EN X*, where Aristotle argues that happiness has to be chosen for itself because it is self-sufficient (1176a30f), and later goes on to explain that intellectual activity or contemplation is a higher activity than warfare or politics as these are always chosen with a specific end in mind and not for themselves. Contemplation is "the perfect happiness for man" (1177b13ff).

²⁹ *EE* 1214a17-27.

³⁰ *EE* 1207a4-6.

Man feels in himself a powerful counterweight to the commands of duty - the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, whose total satisfaction he grasps under the name of happiness - Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.

Gid dit liv må føje sig som et digt om den store forsoning mellem *lykke* og *pligt* - Ibsen, dedication in a copy of *Brand*, 28. 04. 1896.

It is inevitable for human nature that one should wish for and seek happiness - Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

Chapter III

*Brand: Mellem Lykke og Pligt*¹

3. 1 Introduction

On the fly-leaf of a copy of *Brand* presented to a little girl on her first birthday, Ibsen wrote the following dedication: "Gid dit liv må føje sig som et digt / om den store forsoning mellem *lykke* og *pligt*" (HU XIV.463 - my italics). This dedication gathers several seminal questions to itself, and the mere fact that it was written in 1896 shows that even with the benefit of thirty years' hindsight, Ibsen regarded these two elements, happiness and duty, to stand as a motto for the play. Furthermore, it implies that tragedy lurks in the life that fails to effect this reconciliation.

This chapter will argue that the range of conflicts and tensions on which *Brand* is predicated is collapsable into the problem of the putative harmonising of happiness and duty. It will read Brand as a hero whose agonistic struggle takes place between the two poles of *lykke* and *pligt*.

The yoking of happiness and duty as opposed to happiness and fortune in this play shows a clear departure from form. This work pays scant attention to the question of the *göttliche Gegensatz*. It could not be otherwise: Brand is a man so deeply committed to his calling, a calling which expresses itself in a formalism so rigid that it leaves no room for even the weakest account of contingency. He brings to mind Aristotle's contrast between luck and insight: "Where there is most insight and reason, there is the least luck;

and where there is the most luck there is the least insight".² This is a logical outcome for Brand's doctrine of the will, the executive power of his inner legislature, which leaves nothing to chance, although it constantly takes chances. In this play the *göttliche Gegensatz* is no longer plural and fickle but becomes capitalised and singular. He is God.³ Nevertheless, Ibsen has not completely cleared the stage of supernatural and external agencies; there is a residual tension in this work, which I will consider briefly before discussing the *lykke-pligt* disequilibrium further.

This is Ibsen's first non-historical attempt at writing tragedy. One effect of the contemporary setting is for the supernatural to recede. All reference to Brand's calling, all apostrophising to God is absorbed into a surface realism: we are observing a religious man, rather than someone obviously alien and other. However, the Messiah of All or Nothing is flanked by trolls, has visions of the dead and hears voices and heavenly choirs. He dies in the company of a mad half-gypsy Cassandra-figure, also prone to visions. Nature itself is endowed with a natural supernaturalism. The fact that these elements, with the obvious exception of the Voice which accompanies the avalanche at the close of the play, are often passed over by critics, owes as much to the compelling portrait of the protagonist as it does to the fact that this is a dramatic poem, not a realist play. I will return to some of these supernatural aspects as they occur.

One of the important issues the verse dedication confronts rests in its implication that a reconciliation between happiness and duty is not only a

desirable but also an *achievable* end: Ibsen wishes a life lived and not a death died in such harmony, so it is clear that we are not dealing with a vision of perfection deferred to another world, such as the various versions of paradise or the Kantian notion of bliss.⁴ However, the evidence that Ibsen's vision could not in fact accommodate such a reconciliation is consistent. Happiness and duty are notions which in the moral scenography of his stage are in perpetual collision, and they do very separate moral work. Aline Solness comes to mind as testimony to the radical incompatibility of the two values⁵, and we recall Pastor Manders's admonition to Fru Alving in *Gengangere*: "Det er just den rette oprørsånd at kræve *lykken* her i livet. Hvad ret har vi mennesker til lykken? Nej, vi skal gøre *vår pligt*, frue!" (HU IX.1.77 - italics mine). The opposition between happiness and duty which these characters express is familiar territory in Ibsen, but we can find no corresponding reconciliation in these plays or in any other.

Pastor Manders's formulation not only signals the dissonance between the two terms, but seeks to vanish happiness from morality altogether. And as the narrative of the Alving family tragedy shows, an ethics which gives no account of happiness other than as something outside morality, is not one which can be lived by.

3.1.2 The Failure of the Enlightenment Project

Before taking this discussion any further, it is necessary to pause to consider the contours of the moral space which these characters inhabit, a

space where happiness and duty provide the moral matrix for their attempts to discover how to live. Walter Benjamin warned against trying to develop a philosophy of tragedy as “a theory of the moral order of the world, without any reference to its historical content, in a system of generalised sentiments” with no more than the logical support of a few key concepts to sustain it.⁶ It is my contention that any attempt to define this moral space in these terms will arrest the moment in the history of ethics famously termed by Alasdair MacIntyre as “the failure of the Enlightenment project”.

Historically we can locate the moral space in which Brand’s tragedy is played out as belonging to the Enlightenment Project, the period in the history of ethics which according to Alasdair MacIntyre ran from 1630-1850 and which accorded morality its own cultural space, independent of legal, theological and aesthetic constraints.⁷ It was a period in which “the project of an independent, rational justification of morality becomes not merely the concern of individual thinkers, but central to Northern European culture”.⁸ This project can be broadly defined as the overarching impulse to isolate morality from both theology and teleology, and to define it independently of facts about human nature or any order external to it, and to ground it exclusively in rationality. MacIntyre makes the important point that this project was not the preserve of professional thinkers, but penetrated the *Weltanschauung* of Northern Europe. And perhaps no other thinker of the period had such a profound effect on the structure of common morality as Kant did, although how possible, or even how desirable it is to chart the

wider influence of his ethical thought independently of Lutheran fideism is unclear. If Kant was the moral philosopher *par excellence* of the Enlightenment Project, then no-one in drama better exemplifies its failures than Brand.

3.1.3 Kant: The Pure Will and Duty

At this point it is necessary to rehearse those features of Kant's ethics, which, shored up by a pervasive Protestant ideology, discernibly provide the terms for the ethical collisions in *Brand*. While the question of the possible influence of Kierkegaard's *Enten Eller* on this play has been debated since the play was published, few have pointed to the more ready comparison with Kant. Croce constitutes a rare exception when he writes of "Brand, obsessed by the idea of duty, duty for duty's sake, of this ultra-Kantian duty so pitiless and cruel to the very man who exercises it..."⁹

The first chapter of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785) begins with the assertion that "Nothing in the world - indeed nothing even beyond the world - can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will".¹⁰ One basic distinction which this axiom entails is that between actions performed out of respect for the moral law, and those motivated either by the pursuit of a specific end, or out of inclination. Not only do moral evaluations turn on this motivational distinction, but moral worth is sought in the quality of the will informing a given action, and not in the outcome of that action:

The good will is not good because of what it effects [...] it is good [...] in itself. [...] Even, if by some special disfavour of destiny or by the niggardly endowment of step-motherly nature, this will is entirely lacking in power to carry out its intentions, [...] it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake...¹¹

In a non-consequentialist scheme such as this, happiness is necessarily decentred. Its pursuit is subordinated to the duty to follow the moral law. It is seen as unsatisfactory for the purposes of morality in many ways: Firstly it is too indeterminate and shifting a concept in which to ground morality; secondly, if posited as the end of an action, it would automatically define the status of the rule it expressed as holding only *conditionally* and not *categorically*; finally, as inclination, it compromises the moral purity of duty, whereby even the pleasure the agent may derive from seeing that his action is productive of human happiness, “still has no genuine moral worth [...] for its maxim lacks moral content, namely the performance of such actions not from inclination but from duty”.¹²

3.1.4 Kant: Happiness

Kant's account of happiness is much more nuanced than generally allowed. This is understandable in view of the fact that Kant gave no explicit, systematised account of it. The popular understanding of the relationship between Kant and happiness can be faulted not for what it says about Kant's views on happiness, but for what it does not say.

Indeed, one could go so far as to say that the popular understanding of Kant's position on happiness is broadly representative of Pastor

Manders's view of what constitutes moral action. But first, let us consider some aspects of the presentation of happiness in Kant.¹³

The most important point about happiness for Kant is that he does not reject it - on the contrary, he acknowledges it as a natural end for human beings. Secondly, he does not offer a single definition of it, neither does he consistently use the same term (*Glückseligkeit*). There are two basic senses in which he understands happiness: 1) as a "sensible state" and 2) as an "intelligible state". Happiness as sensible state covers ideas such as pleasure, well-being and the satisfaction of inclinations. He sometimes refers to this kind of happiness as "physical happiness" and in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) he states his belief that humans cannot be expected to renounce this kind of happiness, because they are sensible beings. Sometimes Kant adds a satisfaction requirement: it is not enough to be happy - you have to know it too. Physical happiness, then, is a description of a state of being in the natural world and is clearly a goal that can be achieved in this world. But this happiness is separate from morality.

The second category of happiness, happiness as an intelligible state, differs from the happiness as a sensible state in that it is seen as a mental state, rather than as a physical state, and it describes a person's conception of himself as a moral agent. Alternatively, it can be a deferred state, i.e. something which can only take place in another world. Kant's mental state versions of happiness describes "moral-" or "self-contentment" [*Zufriedenheit*] and finally "bliss" [*Seligkeit*].

“Self-contentment” is the satisfaction a person has when he knows he has acted virtuously. Kant remarked that happiness is not possible without this sense of contentment. He did not posit that the two things were identical. Self-contentment is distinct from happiness in that it is a negative satisfaction, as it does not involve direct participation and gratification as sensible happiness does. Self-contentment arises from the satisfaction with one’s condition “when one is conscious of needing nothing” and having conquered inclination.

Therefore, it is not pure happiness, but an *analogue* of happiness. It is the contentment the agent feels in the knowledge that he has acted virtuously in freedom. This is an intellectual contentment, which stands apart from sensuous contentment.

Bliss, the final version of happiness Kant deals with, is again, not identifiable with happiness, but an analogue of it. It resembles self-contentment in that involves freedom from inclination, but in the case of the former, this freedom is partial, in the case of bliss, it is total. It is not attainable in this world because human beings are by nature too dissatisfied to attain it. It will occur in the next world, as it is the result of progress away from the sensible realm.

In sum, only the first type of happiness, sensible happiness can be accepted as genuine happiness, because only this kind of happiness takes place in the sensible world. The other kind is too closely allied to morality or

too otherworldly to qualify. This explains why Kant saw the pursuit of happiness as a natural, but not a moral end.

However, this separation of sensible and intelligible happiness, or participatory and negative happiness, of physical and moral happiness, did not mean that happiness stood outside morality. Kant was very clear on one point: Human beings have an indirect duty to be happy, because well-being reduces the temptation to err, to commit a theft for example. The other point about happiness which Kant emphasised is that it is part of the highest good, the happiness that crowns virtue.

These refinements on the idea of happiness and its analogues will enable us to appreciate both Brand's tragic failure and Agnes's transformation.

3.1.5 Kant and Aristotle

Another point central to Kant's moral philosophy is the emphasis he placed on the *dignity* of the rational agent. This dignity consists in the agent's freedom and self-determination, in his capacity not only for rule-governed behaviour but also his ability to generate the rules which he lives by. In this scheme man in his rationality is an end in himself, and his special status in nature carries with it a duty to be equal to the dignity of that status by obeying the moral law. The agent can test whether a maxim falls within the moral law by asking if he can "at the same time will that it should become universal law"; if he can, the maxim will be binding on all rational agents.¹⁴

In contrast to this scheme stands Aristotelian virtue ethics which recognises moral worth not as a quality of will, but in the degree of success with which man performs a certain role (e.g. farmer, soldier) through the exercising of a clearly defined set of virtues (e.g. courage, justice), and which, as we have seen, posits *eudaimonia* as the end of human life: "Happiness [...] is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed."¹⁵ Ibsen brings out this contrast very clearly with his portrayal of so many community figures in direct conflict with Brand, from the humane doctor to the cynical mayor. But with the Enlightenment the functional notion of man has vanished into a formalist ethics which refuses to derive ethical principles from facts about human nature and is absorbed by a modernity which thinks of man first and foremost as an individual and not in terms of specific roles.¹⁶

Arguably no other post-Enlightenment drama has produced as many 'individuals' in this sense as Ibsen's. But these individuals from Brand on are not presented as paradigms of rational optimism, but rather show how this particular version of anthropocentrism cannot teach them how to live: Peer Gynt, Halvard Solness, and John Gabriel Borkman, are all involved in an ultimately debilitating struggle to be sovereign in moral authority. They attempt to free themselves from the bondage of inherited modes of ethical thought, but are finally deconstructed by its concepts.

The internal inconsistencies of the project of providing a rational justification for morality is too vast an area to chart here.¹⁷ But what we see

on Ibsen's stage is the agony of individuals who are most fully themselves when they realise that they cannot ultimately sustain a conception of the autotelic self and that the formalism that requires such a self can only issue directives and form policies, and is no reliable guide to what to value in life. The tragedy is at its keenest when the heroes are forced to confront the question of the legitimacy of their personal moralities, which they finally begin to acknowledge as having no status beyond that of creations of the will.

It is noteworthy that even as brief a consideration of Kant as this opens up several of the conflicts in *Brand* and affords insight into the structure of these conflicts. In the following section we will consider the wider dramatic context for understanding the various versions of duty in this drama.

3.1.6. Necessary Identities

In *Shame and Necessity* where he analyses the ethical structure behind decision-making in Greek tragedy, Bernard Williams takes up arms against a sea of Kantians, arguing that the necessity expressed by, for example, Oedipus and Ajax in their deontic formulation "I must" do not fit either version of the Kantian story, that is they express neither the categorical nor the hypothetical *if*-based imperatives.¹⁸ Williams finds the argument that these imperatives radiate from an *if* pitifully reductive of the heroic dimension of the responses of these characters, while the categorical

imperative was, of course, outside the moral experience of the post-Homeric age. Williams concludes instead that these imperatives radiate from the protagonists' acceptance of the heroic code.¹⁹

The heroic code not only animates various key choices made by these characters but also grounds the identities of those who chose to live by it. Shame in the ancient world mediated the hero's relationship to both himself and the community in which he lived. Failure to live up to the code signalled not only a loss of face in the community but also a rupture in the hero's identity. When the hero's identity to a great extent determines the choices that he makes, Williams terms it a "necessary identity", an identity which is "internal, grounded in the *ethos*, the projects, the individual nature of the agent and the way he conceives the relation of his life to other people's".²⁰

The heroic is clearly light years away from the bourgeois Protestant ethic that will henceforth colour Ibsen's stage world: shame has made way for the more private guilt and the concept of divine necessity has been replaced by either a rational humanism or melancholic fumbings in a space vacated by a *deus absconditus*. But the modality of the heroes' expression remains insistently deontic throughout the canon, which the eponymous Catilina opens with a programmatic "Jeg maa! Jeg maa! / Så byder mig en Stemme i Sjælens Dyb" (HU I.1.43). It is this same self-addressed injunction which ricochets off the walls of Catilina's Rome through Brand's winter landscapes into the desolate comfort of Fru Alving's parlour; it is what

pushes Solness up the steeple to his death, precipitates Hedda Gabler's double suicide and forces John Gabriel Borkman into the confrontation with the icy hand that is to take his life. And in both cases, the ancient and the Ibsenian, a response to this perceived duty can require the death of the protagonist. But despite Williams's demonstration that the Kantian story cannot number Ajax and his contemporaries among its audience, there are compelling reasons for asking whether it can claim Ibsen's heroes.

An analogous perception emerges in Ibsen's correspondence with Brandes concerning *Kejser og Galilæer*. Brandes faulted the play for its excessive determinism, which he concludes is of a religious nature:

Ved den mest gennemførte Determinisme ses Alt, hvad Helten gør, som Begrebet Ansvar og dermed til en vis Grad ogsaa Lidenhed og Storhed. Hedningen Maximos og Kristinden Makrina stemmer overens i den Tro, at Julian *maatte* handle, som han har handlet [...]. [...] Kun Forsynstroen, ikke Videnskaben kan føre til en Determinisme af denne Natur. Den religiøse Forsynstro alene kan pumpe Individet i den Grad læns for Selvbestemmelse; den videnskabelige Lovantagelse derimod aabner Individualiteten et Spillerum.²¹

Ibsen's response to this criticism is instructive:

[J]eg finder nogen indre modsigelse i Deres dom om den i min bog indeholdte nødvendighedslære, når jeg sammenholder Deres misbilligelse heraf med Deres godkendelse af noget lignende i P. Heyses *Kinder der Welt*. Thi efter min mening kommer det omtrent ud på et, enten jeg om en persons karakter siger 'det ligger i blodet' eller jeg siger 'han er fri - under nødvendigheden - '. (30.01.1875, Dresden - HU XVII.160)²²

It is with *Brand* that Ibsen makes his first full exploration not only of the calling but of the structure of the calling and the authority of its origin: Is it the expression of a strict Kantian formalism, or is it simply the extraordinary assertion of an ego playing God, as suggested by Solness's "Jeg er nu engang slig, som jeg er! Og jeg kan da ikke skabe mig om heller!" (HU XII.1.39)?²³ Is there anything external to the agent which gives content to this imperative, which we ask of Borkman's "Menneskene skønner ikke at jeg måtte det, fordi jeg var mig selv, - fordi jeg var John Gabriel Borkman, - og ikke nogen anden" (HU XIII.3.97)? As we shall see, part of the struggle that these characters are caught up in involves their addressing this very question of defining the nature of the ground in virtue of which these imperatives obtain their authority, and in *Brand*, this questioning takes the form of death.

3. 2. *Brand*: "Helt og Holdent Kallets Mann"

Brand is Ibsen's clearest dramatic expression of the problems produced by the calling. As we have seen, the sense of a calling is active in almost all the early historical tragedies, but nowhere is the distinction between character and calling so blurred. In contrast to *Catilina* and *Fru Inger*, *Brand* does not resist his calling; in contrast to *Skule* there is no doubt that he *has* a calling; like *Håkon* his commitment to his calling is absolute, but unlike *Håkon* he undergoes almost intolerable suffering for its sake. He

is thus an interesting inversion of the heroic pattern so far established. He is, in Edvard Beyer's words, "helt og holdent kallets man".²⁴

The eponymous Brand, perhaps more than any other of Ibsen's creations, lives by imperatives. For this charismatic diocesan curate, the sovereignty of his self-made moral code of "intet eller alt" is absolute. As in *Catilina*, the first sequence of *Brand* establishes a calling. Where Catilina speaks of a voice inside him driving him on, Brand immediately identifies his duty as a divine injunction, an injunction which defines his relationship to life and death. The play opens with Brand leading a peasant and his son across the mountains in hazardous conditions to give comfort to the peasant's daughter on her death-bed. But the peasant loses heart, and decides in the interest of their own safety and of the rest of his family to turn back:

BONDEN. Det evener ingen Mandemagt.
Kjend; - her er Grunden hul og sprød -
Stands, Mand! Det gælder Liv og Død.
BRAND. Jeg *maa*; jeg gaar en Stormands Bud.
BONDEN. Hvad heder han?
BRAND. Han heder Gud. (HU V.1.178-179)

Brand asks the father how much he would be prepared to give to ensure that his daughter could die happy (*salig*). The peasant declares that he would give everything, but stops short of his life. This is where the principle of *intet eller alt* first asserts itself, with Brand writing the peasant off spiritually. As the first act progresses, this calling receives sharper definition: Brand identifies his task as the resurrection of the kindly old God emasculated by the state church, and the transformation of this God into the

vengeful virile Lord of the Old Testament. But Brand's stated end, to see God great and very strong, requires a corresponding resurrection in his fellow men, and he isolates a triple alliance of the "Lettsind", "Slappsind" and "Vildsind" (1. 201-2) which must be vanquished in order that the ultimate end of human life can be achieved: the demonstration of its dignity before God. This end, as we saw above, is clearly inscribable within Kantian morality:

Haand om Hakken, som om Sverdet,
enes kan med Mandeværdet;
et er Maalet, - det at blive
Tavler, hvorpaa Gud kan skrive. (2. 229)

Brand goes on to locate human dignity in the quality of the will, and for him the will is the only absolute good, prized as something much greater than simply being the faculty of ends:

Ingen bramfuld Storværkshandling
løfter Slægten til Forvandling;
Vækkelsen af rige Evner
Bøder ej dens Sjælerevner.
Det er *Viljen*, som det gjælder!
Viljen frigjør eller fælder,
Viljen, hel, i alt det spredte
i det tunge som det lette. - (2.228-9)

The scope of Brand's project is immense for it involves the recreation of both God and man. But just as the benign and merciful father figure was created in response to the needs of the people in the valley, so is the intransigent Jehovah a reflex of Brand's need for something uncompromising in which to anchor his own moral code. It is important to distinguish Brand's calling from his official position of priest - his success, or

not, *qua* priest, is not for him at issue, and, moreover, despite his assertion at the beginning of the play that his duty is a divine injunction, not until the end of the play does he make any direct appeals to God, and he even confesses to a certain hesitation at calling himself a Christian. His only appeals are to the strong, autonomous will; his only yardstick his self-made dogma of All or Nothing. (It should be stressed here, in the context of the question whether *Brand* was a religious play or not, that Brand's doctrine is more immediately describable as a doctrine of duty rather than of faith.)

The insistence on the immutable essence of self, we noted, so dominant in later heroes occurs in an interesting variant in *Brand*. Brand has a much more limited sense of self than these characters do as he has made a total identification with his calling. The mere fact that he does not thunder his own name out in the manner of the later heroes, demonstrates this. The mere fact that his name is only spoken by others provides an instant contrast with the later plays. Brand does not insist on immutable human essences, he is after all, in the business of restoring mankind to dignity – to “skabe nytt og helt og rent” (2.216) – and thus necessarily believes in the spiritual potential of all for redemption.

3. 3 Agnes and Ejnar: Sensible Happiness

The encounter with the peasant ends with the most extreme scene shift in Ibsen. Nature shifts gear from avalanche to heady spring, responding to the various dramas played out on her. This change is brought about by

the arrival of the young lovers, Agnes and Ejnar, two children of happiness. The young lovers, the most undiluted presentation of *lykke* in Ibsen, represent the basic 'sensible happiness' that Kant describes. The couple is intoxicated by life, love and joy, so much so that they fail to observe the precipice directly beneath them.

The apparent harmony between man and nature is striking here. And the imagery used, the butterfly poem, for example, reinforces this sense. Ejnar sees himself as the child of a providential God, a God who gave him Agnes to wed. Agnes herself is almost a symbolic representation of this kind of contentment. She is Ejnar's masterpiece, "et Rosenbluss paa hendes Kind, / et Øjepar som lyste Lykke, / et Smil, som sang i Sjælen ind - " (1.187). The joy they are experiencing is one Ejnar believes will last a lifetime:

Et Bryllupsliv i Gammen,
som Drømmen stort, som Sagnet smukt;
thi vid at denne Søndagsmorgen,
skjønt midt paa Vidden, uden Prest,
vort Liv blev lyst i Fred for Sorgen
og viet till en Lykkefest. (1.189)

Brand berates Ejnar for his representation of God in his paintings as an enfeebled old man. He announces that it is this God he is on his way to bury, and in his place he will return moral stature both to the old God and the new people. This scene functions to establish the concept of basic happiness in the play, not as a moment in a life but as a chosen mode of living. Agnes and Ejnar live in harmony with each other and nature. They represent all aspects of Kantian 'sensible happiness' in that a) their desires

are being satisfied b) their well-being is obvious c) they are aware of their happiness and very much satisfied with their lives.

Ibsen does not undermine this portrait. The positive associations are too insistent, and even Brand responds to the sound of their song. The light and radiance that they bring lifts the fog of the previous scene in which Brand insists on the sanctity of duty, but this light is in turn eclipsed by the figure of Brand. Brand admonishes Ejnar that if he wants to lead an aesthetic life, he must be careful to do so completely and not live a little bit for happiness, a little bit for God, and a little bit for painting, like all those who acknowledge their duty but only give a very partial response to it:

Lad gaa at du er Glædens Træl, -
men vær det da fra Kveld till Kveld.
Vær ikke *et* idag, igaar,
og noget andet om et Aar.
Det, som du er, vær fuldt og helt,
og ikke stykkevis og delt. (1.191-2)

Ibsen does not allow the couple's radiance to undermine Brand either. While the contrast is powerful, it does not diminish him. Agnes, who is more or less silent throughout, feels the sun recede and the cold encroaching. After Brand leaves, she feels too tired for games, and the stage directions make it clear that she has been profoundly shaken by this encounter. She asks Ejnar if he too noticed how Brand "voخته, mens han talte!" (1.198).

3.4 *Ought and Can*

Brand's progress through the landscape and action of the play involves a series of trials; trials, however, which he experiences not as *his*

trials but as the trials of others. And the more difficult the situations that present themselves, the more intransigent he becomes, and the more he elevates the will above human experience.

At the beginning of the play he had condemned the peasant for abandoning the hazardous journey to his dying daughter. In Act II he condemns a mother for not joining him in the boat to reach her husband who had killed his youngest child because he could not bear to see him starve and then committed suicide. He sees these cases not as failures of ability, but of will. In the conviction that man has betrayed his original dignity and has fallen into spiritual decadence, Brand becomes more Kantian than Kant, rejecting Kant's position that "People do not have duties they are not able to carry out", loses sight of the crucial slippage between will and ability, a space in which a "disfavour of destiny or [...] the niggardly endowment of a stepmotherly nature" often plays a decisive role in preventing the agent from achieving the ends legislated by the moral law.²⁵ Agnes, now Brand's wife, who is finally killed by "Lovens grumme Høg og Falk" (4. 272) has to remind him of this basic tenet:

AGNES. O, men brug ej Strængheds Spore.

BRAND. Gjennem mig en større byder.

AGNES. En, om hvem du selv har sagt,

at han Viljen ej forskyder,

skjønt den savner Evnens Magt. (4.271)

Even after Agnes's death, Brand refuses to countenance any distance whatsoever between *ought* and *can*. In Act I he had criticised the aesthete Ejnar for separating life from dogma, but what Brand himself is doing is

forcing life into a dogma it cannot ultimately sustain. In Act V, during the final allegorical sequence which finds Brand at the top of the mountain, abandoned in his sublimer combat by all those of enfeebled will, he gives an account of compromised humanity, maintaining "... slægten vorden er et Folk, / som har glemt, at Viljens Pligter / ender ej hvor Evnen svigter!" (5. 353). In Brand's scheme anything can be made possible through a monumental exertion of the will; the will is not only autonomous but also omnipotent.

And if we return to the question of identity, we will recall the concept of the necessary identity which inhered in the projects of the agent and in his perception of how his life relates to other people. Although not an egotist in the way later heroes are, Brand has a clear sense of self, and his particular version of selfhood, which he equates with wholeness, is no less guiding and decisive for the choices he makes than it was for the ancients: "til at være helt sig selv / det er lovlig Rett for Manden, / og jeg kræver ingen anden!" (2.218). It is discontinuous with the necessary identities of the ancients in that it is not grounded in anything outside itself, either in the community, or in anything approximating the heroic code whose exigencies the lives of Ajax and others articulated. Brand's morality rejects all external authority; his own internal legislature is sovereign:

Indad; indad! Det er Ordet!
Did gaar Vejen. Der er Sporet.
Eget Hjerte, - *det* er Kloden,
nyskabt og for Gudsliv moden;
der skal Viljegribben dødes,
der den nye Adam fødes. (2. 218)

As we have already noted, All or Nothing is Brand's own invention which he uses to structure his formalism. James McFarlane comments "one commandment is universally applicable, eternally valid. It is a categorical imperative without feedback: the inner voice speaks, but with a one-track insistence. There is no dialogue within the soul, only endless reaffirmation of the sovereignty of the code."²⁶

Another basic difference between the 'identities' of the Attic heroes and Brand's is that in the case of the former, these identities are to a certain extent pre-given not only in that they are code-based but also in that their responses are mediated by a sense of what the community expects of them. However, in Brand's case, the opposite obtains: Brand in no sense responds to the expectations of the community. Although he was persuaded to abandon his original project of spreading the gospel of All or Nothing in the great world, and genuinely believes that his duty lies with his poverty-stricken congregation, he never really gets past his radical loathing of his fellow men, and is thus in an important sense as remote from community as the isolate hero of Ibsen's later works. Believing himself to be the herald of a new spiritual dispensation, he insists that the community live up to the stringent demands of *his* personal ethics.

Brand declares that his law is universally binding and knows no exceptions, and thus the same criterion applies both to his flock and in his family relationships, although it is through the Agnes-Alf nexus that he is at

his most vulnerable. His duty, defined as the duty of the messiah of All or Nothing abstracts from every other identifiable social role or duty: as son, as husband and as father. It is precisely when he engages with human beings rather than operating on the grander plane of mankind that his agony is shaped. While we appreciate the satire when the Mayor says “Jeg gjør bestandig og min Pligt, - / men altid indom mit Distrikt” (2.211) - ~~but~~ we have to concede that he does have a point, namely that involvement with human beings does entail very specific material duties. And as the community figures, however self-interested and corrupt they are, are at constant pains to impress upon Brand, this is an extremely needy congregation: unemployment, malnutrition, starvation. There are urgent issues of survival that question the relevance and humanity of Brand’s mission.

But when his congregation finally abandons him on his ascent to the Ice Church on the grounds that they have duties and responsibilities at home, Brand dismisses these duties as lame excuses used to cover up for deficiencies of the will. And it is this collision between the duties which attach to certain functions and roles and duty in the formalist sense that finally constitutes the terror he confronts and the tragedy he plays out.

3.5 Duty vs. Duties

Brand is able to talk of filial duty quite comfortably, for he conceives of his duty to his mother as one which begins when her life ends, in the

sense that he will honour her spiritual debts. Brand's mother conceives of her son's duty as a material duty not to dissipate her fortune, which in her view is as exacting a duty as is his demand for spiritual wholeness. After much negotiating, her final offer does not exceed renouncing nine-tenths of her worldly goods while Brand insists she go utterly naked to her grave. He sees his denial of her as she faces death as proof that his will has triumphed. But there is no real conflict here, for as Brand explains to Agnes there was never any love between him and his mother, and his childhood had been tainted by the enduring image of his mother plundering his father's death-bed.²⁷

In contrast to Brand, the doctor, out of no other motive than duty, the duty specific to his profession, goes to attend to the dying woman. He is not fond of the old woman, complains that she does not pay him adequately, and the journey to her house is a difficult one. However, the value of Brand's denial is questioned by the actions of the doctor, who forces Brand to acknowledge that his rigid formalism compromises the rights of others.

But when confronted with his duty *qua father*, All or Nothing becomes suddenly relativized and Brand nearly crumbles. The doctor urges him to take his son away to a healthier environment as the boy will perish if left in the sunless fjord. Here the relationship is of an entirely different order from that with his mother. Brand sees Agnes and Alf as the only two creatures who have been able to cultivate the capacity for love in him, and therefore the parental duty that the doctor enjoins on him is one that Brand can accept

as binding. The doctor points out that he must be a father entirely to Alf, for he is guilty of being neither All nor Nothing in his family relationships, as his wife and child have entered into a hierarchy in which Brand's calling automatically relativizes their claims on him.

Alf is not to be saved. The doctor points out to Brand that by taking his family away from the valley, he is indeed responding to his duty *qua father* but is not living up to the stringent demands he has made on his mother and his flock. The doctor mirrors an unpalatable truth; Brand remains in the valley and thus his duty literally to remove his son from the valley of death is contorted into a replay of the Abraham and Isaac story, by which he recasts the duty to save into the duty to sacrifice.

3. 6 Mellem Lykke og Pligt

The Doctor can argue with Brand on the level of duty and ethics. The Mayor tackles him on the level of common sense. He points out to Brand that he is indeed blessed. In a community stricken as much as this one by poverty, Brand's welfare is incontestable. The Mayor points out to Brand that he has all the good things in life, and if he does not leave the valley:

FOGDEN. [...] er Deres Jordliv ødslet bort.
De ejer alle Verdens Goder
er arving till en grundrig Moder,
De har et Barn at leve for,
en elsket Hustru; - Lykkens Kaar
blir rakkt Dem som af milde Hænder.

BRAND. Og hvis jeg endda Ryggen vænder
Till hvad De Lykkens Kaar har kaldt?
Ifald jeg *maa*? (3.252)

Here Brand makes a clear statement of the hierarchy of duties, and that his duty to his calling trumps all other considerations, and can even exact his entire life and all his happiness.

Brand loses his son and, after demanding Agnes's absolute dedication to his calling, loses his wife too. He forces the bereaved mother to relinquish everything that gives her comfort in her grief for her dead child, insisting that it is idolatrous to mourn him: Alf was a sacrifice to God, a sacrifice which if not made willingly has no moral worth. Even though Agnes stands firmly by Brand's side, even in this decision to jeopardise the health of their son, it is clear that she is broken with grief. A gypsy woman with a half-naked baby freezing to death sees the baby clothes and demands "Giv mig, giv mig, giv mig alt". Brand persuades Agnes to give Alf's every last garment: "Du ser din Pligt" (4.297).

To hold on to half, or even one keepsake would compromise the worth of the sacrifice as it would not constitute an absolute response to an absolute demand; it would be on the same level as his mother's offer of only nine tenths of her property - morally worthless. His instruction to give away the clothes, all the time emphasising that the value of the action does not inhere in the giving itself, but in the degree of willingness with which it is done:

BRAND. Si mig først om det var *villigt*
at du gik til Gavens Gru?

AGNES. *Nej.*

BRAND. Din Skjænk er slængt i Havet.
Over dig er endnu Kravet. (4.229)

This is an example of the Kantian distinction between the inner and the outer life of an action; both a moral and a non-moral man may perform the same action, but what transforms the action into a moral one in the case of the latter is the will to obey the moral law.²⁸

Agnes suddenly confesses to Brand that she has lied, having kept back Alf's christening cap, which she carries next to her heart. But just as quickly as Brand denounces this idolatry, Agnes relinquishes the cap, willingly, declaring her last connection with the world severed:

AGNES. ... siste Baand som bandt till Støvet!
*(staar en Stund ubevægelig stille; lidt efter lidt gaar
Udtrykket i hendes Ansigt over till høy straalende Glæde.
Brand kommer tilbage; hun flyver ham jublende imøde,
kaster sig om hans Hals og raaber):*
Jeg er fri! Brand, jeg er fri! (4.300)

Thus the astonishing transfiguration of Agnes takes place, from grieving mother stripped even of her last baby clothes into someone "straalende" and "jublende", who announces a radical freedom, a freedom from worldly bonds, and freedom from grief. She has attained "intelligible" happiness as she knows she acted morally in giving the gypsy mother Alf's clothes willingly. This is the non-participatory happiness Kant talks about, which we discussed above. But more arresting than this is Agnes's ecstatic announcement that she is free, because stripped completely naked, even of her grief, she can experience that variant of happiness which is the happiness derived from having overcome and from being free from inclination. This happiness, we remember, is an element of *Seligkeit*, and does not belong in the sensible world. Agnes has thus come full circle during

the course of the play, having lived through happiness on all levels Kant attends to.

Agnes's preparation for death comes across very clearly in that it is now she that talks to Brand about the demands of his calling and explains that he must choose her or his calling, and if he chooses his calling he has to stay true to it. Even before Agnes thanks Brand and bids him good night, it is clear that she is already dead. "Hver den, som ser Jehova, dør" (4.291). She has done her duty, given All. Agnes has gone from being Einar's masterpiece "som lyste Lykken" to Brand's masterpiece "med straalende glæde" – a version of happiness that beckons death.²⁹

Brand, however, finds it difficult to match her gift: Standing in the valley of choice he resists this final sacrifice, "Ve mig, hvilket lys du tænder! - / Nej! Og tusind Gange nej! / [...] Lad kun *alt* paa jorden glippe; / hver en Vinding kan jeg slippe, - / o, men aldrig, aldrig dig!" (4.301) – *lykke* and *pligt*. It is Agnes, who, like the doctor, reminds him of his calling and his duty, makes him confront the fact that within a moral scheme which turns on the capacity of the agent to address imperatives to himself and on his testing the integrity of these imperatives against the standard of universalisability, he finds it much easier to legislate to others than to himself, to universalise before he can personalise.

The central Kantian distinction between duty and inclination, and the moral distribution in which happiness always has to concede territory to duty defines Brand and Agnes's relationship from the outset. When Agnes

decides to leave Ejnar for Brand, Ejnar formulates her choice as the choice “imellem Storm og Stille! [...] *gaa* og *bliv* [...] Fryd og Sorgen, [...] Natt og Morgen [...] Død og Liv!” (1.230-1). While Brand recognises that Agnes has cultivated the capacity for love in him, he is to a great extent resistant to it for the reason that the happiness love brings is bound to conflict with duty. When the doctor tells him that while the account for his strength of will is in credit, his *conto caritatis* is empty, Brand launches into a diatribe against love as an evil snare and a veil to disguise weakness:

Ej noget Ord blev sølet ned
i Løgn som Ordet Kjærlighed;
Det lægger de med Satans List
som Slør udover Viljens Brist;
[...]
Er Stien trang og bratt og skred,
den knappes af - i Kjærlighed;
gaar en ad Syndegaden bred,
han har dog Haab - i Kjærlighed;
[...]
men *her*, mod Slægten slapp og lad,
ens bedste Kjærlighed er Had! (3.239)

Thus the only way his ethics can deal with what Kant calls “pathological love” and the happiness which can accompany it, is by distorting it into an evil and resting instead on “practical love”, “the attitude of concern that one can will oneself to have toward another human being, and which is, for that reason, a part of morality”.³⁰ This kind of will-governed love is exemplified by Brand’s dedication to his parishioners. Brand’s attempt to immunise the will from any possible threat from love involves a total sacrifice of the sensible to the rational. But it is not only his own happiness which is lost in this quest. One characteristic of Ibsen’s

heroes is that the battlefield on which the struggle to follow their calling takes place is strewn with corpses; but rarely enemy corpses. The irony is that although these characters proceed within the framework of a highly personal ethics, their choice to sacrifice personal happiness to perceived duty is one which inevitably requisitions the happiness of others.

However, it is an integral part of Brand's necessary identity that he does not abandon his quest, relocate and settle down to happy domesticity. Doing so would mean that he was no longer Brand, in the same way that Williams suggests that had Ajax not committed suicide after suffering dishonour, he would have renounced his identity. As Brian Johnston explains, "the claims of spiritual truth and freedom [...] override those of happiness, and only the great and authentic individuals such as Brand are capable of living at this tragic level".³¹

Brand stays on in the valley after Agnes's death, and eighteen months later he has completed his great building project - his church, which was to be the shrine of All. However, he is forced to see it for the shoddy compromise that it has become, and he realises as Solness is to realise, that he has betrayed his vocation in that his church has acquired the trappings of the state church, which now seeks to absorb him with honours and compromise. It is only after he leads the people up the mountain and is abandoned by them half way that he stands alone with the knowledge that his demands are too exacting for the average person to live by. The only two individuals who are steadfast are Gerd, the half-gypsy outcast, said to be

mad, and Ejnar *redux* who has turned his back on a life of vice to become a caricature of Brand. He is so extreme as to force Brand into normal discourse. Brand describes his life with Agnes as a mixture of happiness and sadness. Ejnar is only interested in the manner of Agnes's death, not the story of her life.

At the heart of the failure of Brand's project lies the fact that he was legislating a morality for his fellow men without feeling any real involvement in their community. He can no more participate in their fate than they in his. His final isolation at the top of the mountain (the spiritual dimension of Ibsen's landscape needs to be noted here) suggests how the legislature of the self needs something bigger than the self in which to ground itself, and to provide mankind with some kind of measure in order to prevent it from collapsing into arbitrariness, and universalising ultimately unattainable standards of morality.

The final sequence finds Brand exhausted and debilitated at the Ice Church at the top of the mountain, alone with Gerd. Brand is the archetype pariah, or in tragic terms, the *apolis* rejected and ostracised by the community, his only companion a similarly reviled figure.

During this final ascent and test of will, Brand has seen visions and heard voices, which have driven him to the brink of madness. An invisible choir addresses him with the damning message that Brand can never be like Christ, and whether or not he chooses to serve Him, he is damned, and his life's work has been for nought. Brand cries out in agony to his dead child

and wife, acknowledging the unspeakable sacrifice he made: “Agnes, Alf, de lyse Dage, / Liv i Fred og Liv i Hvile, / bytted jeg mod Kamp og Klage, / rev mit Bryst med Offerpile, - / fælte dog ej Folkets Drage” (5.354). The choir reiterates, though in milder tones, its stern judgement, emphasising to Brand that he was created for life in this world, and it is life that he has been fighting all these years.

The judgement that his sacrifice has been meaningless, makes Brand reach out to his memories for strength and comfort, in precisely the same way that he forbade Agnes to do. The Figure, which Brand immediately takes to be Agnes, appears. His spiritual temptation is great. She offers him a chance to go back in time so that Alf and she would still be alive. In order to accomplish this he has to follow the Doctor’s diagnosis and purify his soul of ‘All or Nothing’. Brand resists the Figure, his hardest trial. But there is no sense that he is wrong to do so. His *anagnorisis* has been a slow process which will last the entire act. From the moment he rejects the new church to the final curtain, he is aware that he has to redefine himself not only in relation to his calling but also in relation to his *Jordliv*. But this is not an issue of changing, or willing a different course of action, even with the benefit of hindsight. Raymond Williams puts it aptly: “This is not ethical tragedy, where a different choice would have brought safety. The choice and fate admit no real alternatives”.³²

Gerd presents him with an image of himself as someone great, proud and strong, an image consonant with his own manifesto of resurrecting

Adam: "Du er Manden som er størst." She then examines his hands and sees stigmata wounds on them "Naglesaaret! / Blodets drypp jeg ser i Haaret, - / [...] Dig har Korsets Træ jo Baaret!" (5.360). She proceeds to fall at Brand's feet and worship him like Christ. Remote from life, light, community and love, Brand is finally able to appreciate the value of *Lykkens Kaar* and his only response is to weep. Gerd is deeply affected by the warmth of Brand's tears as they fall onto the winter landscape. Brand has learned humility from this sublime encounter with human value: "Jeg kan græde, / jeg kan knæle, - jeg kan bede!" (5.362). Gerd lifts up her rifle to shoot the falcon of compromise, *akkordens aand*, brings him down and precipitates the avalanche. Part of the function of these supernatural elements, and their concentration at the end of the play is to show the rigid hero in crisis, being more open to forces and guidance outside himself, and opening the way for his last lines.

Brand turns to God, outside himself to ask for guidance, "Svar mig, Gud, i Dødens Slug; - / gjælder ej et Frelsens Fnug / Mandeviljens *quantum satis* - !" ³³ His answer, (although given after he, and by implication the entire community, that is, his project has been buried in the avalanche) is simply "Han er *deus caritatis*" (5.362), showing that Brand's dogmatic formalism is too monolithic a guide to live by, only adequate for directing choices, and his measuring of human worth deeply flawed. This message shows Brand the way to break out of his deterministic angst over inherited sin. All or Nothing, far from being adequate to discern what is valuable in life, such as

love and happiness, is ultimately inimical to them. Croce's description of the "ultra-Kantian" is apt: even Kant acknowledged a subordinate role for happiness in morals on the grounds that it promotes moral conduct, and that its opposite encourages the opposite.³⁴

In contrast to Johnston's assessment stands Shaw's: "Brand dies a saint, having caused more intense suffering by his saintliness than the most talented sinner could possibly have done with twice his opportunities".³⁵ However, what Shaw fails to appreciate in his anti-idealist condemnation of Brand, is the verdict of the community: even though it abandons him, it realises, like Agnes did, that life will not be the same after Brand. For Ibsen what is defining of his great individuals is that for them, *being* is always at issue; as Brand complains in Act I "I skiller Liv fra Tro og Lære; for ingen gjælder det at *være*" (1.194). This line not only posits the democratisation of tragic potential, but will also prove to be axiomatic for the definition of the modern tragic hero. This is a modification of the search for truth definitive of tragic figures who find their pedigree in Oedipus. Ditmar Meidal was the first to point this out:

At Brands hele Kamp har en tragisk Karakter, ligger deri, at hans Vilje ikke alene er ren og ædel, men ogsaa rettet paa Sandheden, og at den alligevel maa knuses. Fejlen ligger først i hans Erkjendelse eller rettere Mangel paa Erkjendelse af Midlerne og Vejen, og dette fører omsider gennem Sønderdrivelsen af hans Indre til en Forvildelse af hans Begreb om Maalet.³⁶

However, the truly disturbing question raised by this tragedy is not that posed by Brand as the avalanche falls. Nor the fact that Brand does not

hear the answer: it was the asking that showed a profound *anagnorisis*, not the need to hear the answer. The question Brand's progress over five acts up the peak leaves us with is this: Is ethical action possible at all in this world, located as it is *mellem lykke og pligt*?

If the play leaves us with any answer at all, it is simply this, that the tragic constitutes the space between these poles. And as in Greek tragedy, it is the hero's very excellences that make him vulnerable to *hamartia*. Brand's *hamartia* is just as dispositional as Oedipus's, and this points to a theme which we see emerge again and again in Ibsen's tragedies: that there is a canker at the heart of human action, reaching though it might towards excellence.

Atle Kittang, who in his study of heroism in Ibsen gives special emphasis to *Brand*, argues against interpretations that read its hero as a moral sadist, or who would see him as a study in psychopathy. He writes:

nettopp fordi *Brand* truleg er det nærmaste Ibsen nokonsinne kom til å skrive ein tragedie, er den vanlege realistiske målestokken mindre relevant. Utfordringa blir å få tak i kva slags dramatisk *refleksjon over det å være menneske* Ibsen har gitt symbolsk gestalt i dette skodespelet om ein kompromisslaus, beundringsverdig og likevel djupt feilande ung prest.³⁷

In the following chapters, we will see how Ibsen develops a version of the tragic hero which can stand up to "den vanlege realistiske målestokken". I will examine the relationship of tragedy to realism and what implications Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem* and *Gengangere* have for the "death-of-tragedy" school of dramatic theory. Although Ibsen temporarily suspends his presentation of

the *kallstragedie* in these two works, his presentation of Brand bridges the aesthetic distance between the history plays and the contemporary tragedies, while retaining the Aristotelian demand for consequentiality. All the reversals in *Brand* are the results of decisions made by him, decisions which are the necessary outcome of his tragic character.

Endnotes

¹ A previous version of this chapter was published in *Angelaki: A Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3,1, 1998.

² Aristotle, *EE* 1207a4-6.

³ I do not wish to enter the debate, as old as the play itself, about whether or not *Brand* is a religious play. For an in-depth religious analysis see Finn Thorn, *Lov og Evangelium: Tanker om Henrik Ibsens Brand*, Oslo, 1981. Ibsen's pronouncement on the subject is perhaps an overstatement: "At Brand er prest, er igrunden uvæsentlig; fordringen intet eller alt, gælder på alle punkter i livet, i kærligheden, i kunsten o.s.v." (Letter to Peter Hansen, 28.10.1870 – HU XVI.318). But two things are clear: a) the context is incontrovertibly Christian and b) the use of a monotheistic system doubtless helped Ibsen structure Brand's rigidity. It is therefore wisest to see it as a secular play in religious clothing.

⁴ In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant talks of bliss [*Seligkeit*] which "stands under the name of happiness [*Glückseligkeit*] and is attainable only in eternity". (Quoted in Victoria Wikes, *Kant on Happiness in Ethics*, New York, 1994, p. 19).

⁵ Aline can be interpreted as a nightmare vision of Kantianism. I develop this point in Chapter VII.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, 1977, p. 101.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, 1977, p. 101.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 39.

⁹ Benedetto Croce, "Ibsen" in *Essays on Literature and Literary Criticism*, trans. M. E. Moss, New York, 1990, p. 158.

¹⁰ See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, in H. J. Paton trans., *The Moral Law*, London, 1948, p. 59.

¹¹ Kant 1948, p. 60.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 63.

¹³ This account of happiness has been distilled from the very thorough investigation of the subject in Wikes 1994, ch. 1.

¹⁴ Kant 1948, p. 84.

¹⁵ *EN* 1097b21.

¹⁶ MacIntyre 1981, p. 61.

¹⁷ For a full discussion, see MacIntyre 1981, ch. 5.

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 75.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 75-77.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 103.

²¹ "Henrik Ibsen: "Kejser og Galilæer - Et verdenshistorisk Skuespil", *Det nittende Aarhundrede*, København, 1874-1875, p. 81, quoted in Lisbeth Wærp, *Overgangens figurasjoner. En studie i Henrik Ibsens Kejser og Galilæer og Når vi døde vågner*, PhD thesis, Tromsø, 2000, p. 31.

²² *Ibid.* p. 33.

²³ His words recall God's to Moses "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14).

²⁴ Edvard Beyer, "Livsgleden som problem i Ibsens diktning", *Edda*, 1948, p. 117.

²⁵ In his Preface to the 1875 edition of *Catilina*, Ibsen defines the space between will and ability ("modsigelsen mellem evne og higen, mellem vilje og mulighed") as "menneskehedens og individets tragedie og komedie på engang" (HU 1. 123).

²⁶ James W. McFarlane, "Introduction" to *Brand* in *The Oxford Ibsen III*, 1972, p. 17.

²⁷ Brand's relationship with his mother yields an interesting perspective on "intet eller alt". His demand that she give all may be seen as a tactic for staving off inherited guilt through her penance - if she repents then the guilt would come to rest and he would escape the terror of the ineluctable. But her intransigence in her compromise constitutes a threat to Brand's wholeness: "Være helt sig selv? Men Vægten / af ens Arv og Gjæld fra Slægten?" (2.218). However, Act III when discussing his mother with the doctor, he throws up a contradiction in the concept of inherited guilt: "Som hendes Søn i Arv jeg tog / *frivillig* hendes Skyldnerbog" (3.237 - italics mine).

²⁸ Kant 1948, p. 63.

²⁹ Trond Berg Eriksen describes Agnes's happiness here as "en type lykke som man ellers bare finner på galehuset". See his "Ibsens *Brand* - en klassisk tragedie" in *Egne Vejer. Essays og foredrag*, Oslo, 1997, p. 82. However, interpreting Agnes's death as a collapse into madness reduces the substance of her sacrifice and of Brand's agony considerably.

³⁰ See Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge, Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford, 1990, p. 337.

³¹ Brian Johnston, *To the Third Empire: Ibsen's Early Drama*, Minneapolis, 1982, p. 160.

³² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, London, p. 98.

³³ Bjørn Hemmer draws attention to the fact that many critics base their interpretation of the play on their response to these closing words. He cautions against such an interpretation: "Brand bedømmes og dømmes utifra vanlige, menneskelige kriterier, men alt tyder på at det er nettopp det man ikke bør gjøre - ifølge Ibsen. Brand er ikke noe vanlige menneske."

Og litteraturforskeren kommer uvegerlig til å gjøre felles sak både med fogden og prosten: "Slett Søn, slett Faer, slett Ægtemand; - / mon værre Kristen gives kan!" See Bjørn Hemmer, *Brand, Kongs-emnerne, Peer Gynt: en studie i Ibsens romantiske diktning*, Oslo, 1972, p. 29.

³⁴ See Wikes 1994, p. 101.

³⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsen*, London, 1929, p. 47.

³⁶ Ditmar Meidal, *Aftenbladet*, April 7, 1866, quoted in Edvard Beyer, "The Reception of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VIII*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1994, p. 49.

³⁷ Kittang 2002, p. 38.

The tragic idea survived the
loss of the gods and it
survived the loss of the tragic
hero. – *Oscar Mandel*

Chapter IV

Optegnelser til nutids-tragedier

4.1 "The Death of Tragedy"

This chapter makes the case for the potential of realism to produce tragedy. It will begin with a brief discussion of the various main positions that deny realism's scope for tragedy and then question the terms of the denigration of the mode. It will then argue that two of the most realistic plays Ibsen wrote, *Et Dukkehjem* and *Gengangere*, succeed in evincing the tragic within realist conventions. Finally, I analyse *Et Dukkehjem* from this perspective. *Gengangere* will be considered separately in Chapter V.

George Steiner is by no means the latest contribution to the seemingly inexhaustible debate on tragedy. However, his opinions continue to dominate discussions of the genre, and are in this sense almost as unavoidable as Aristotle's. And since his views on Ibsen and tragedy have been immensely influential, it is wise to confront them.

In *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) Steiner, in dialogue with *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), provides closure for Nietzsche's genealogy, dating the demise of the genre with the passing of Racine. Steiner argues that "the natural setting of tragedy is the palace gate, the public square, or the court chamber" because these spaces represent the stable and manifest hierarchies of worldly power, be they in Athens, Elizabethan England or

Versailles.¹ He acknowledges Ibsen's importance in the history of theatre:

With Ibsen, the history of drama begins anew. This alone makes of him the most important playwright after Shakespeare and Racine. The modern theatre can be dated from *Pillars of Society* (1877).²

Nevertheless, Steiner attacks Ibsen, dismissing him as a "pedagogue", "reformer", and social philosopher - in short a producer of "tracts". Steiner is adamant that the plays from *Samfundets Støtter* to *En Folkefiende* do not qualify as tragedy because the problems they explore are all "secular dilemmas which may be resolved by rational innovation" and that there exist "specific remedies to the disasters which befall" the characters. Not tragedy, argues Steiner, but "dramatic rhetoric summoning us to action in the conviction that truth of conduct can be defined and that it will liberate society".³

The fact that Ibsen turned his back on royal courts and palaces, confining his characters to the bourgeois drawing room, and that he put the words of ordinary language into the mouths of ordinary men when "tragic drama [...] requires the shape of verse"⁴, was not in itself enough in Steiner's account to deprive modernity of tragedy. No, Steiner argues that the cause was extra-theatrical, and lies outside tragedy in history, more precisely in the weakening of the organic world view which was brought on by the "triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics." This was the "point of no return".⁵

The implication seems to be that with the passing of various world views constructed around cosmic orders of stable hierarchies in which each man played his recognisable part, or of a religious cosmology and an

accepted theodicy, tragedy loses its footing. The nineteenth century in particular was a century of great social, political, religious and intellectual upheaval. It also saw a substantial loss of faith in Christianity and a concomitant ascendancy of rationalism and scientificism. According to those whom Thomas Van Laan refers to as the purveyors of the “death of tragedy myth”, these factors made modernity impervious to tragedy.⁶

It is not difficult to register a certain amount of astonishment with Van Laan at tragedy’s many epitaph writers. For, as he argues, they do more to obfuscate than to illuminate, as this myth

stands in the way of any reasonably objective study of nineteenth and twentieth century plays and novels, of properly understanding and evaluating writers like Ibsen..., and of even properly defining tragedy (if one believes...that the canon of tragedy has been extended during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the nature of tragedy modified in the process).⁷

Indeed, Ibsen has been a recurrent thorn in the flesh of several autopsies. His presence disturbs, and is either met with vitriol (Dorothea Krook), or simply dismissed on account of his realism (a dirty word, apparently), which is in turn denigrated as an aesthetic form in order to sustain the attack (Peter Szondi).

As Van Laan points out, for many critics tragedy equals *Greek* tragedy, and they only concede Ibsen canonical status where he is seen dutifully to resemble Sophocles and reject him when he presumes to diverge. It is one thing to look for origins and family resemblances, quite another to insist on faithful reduplication, which, in view of historical change, is inappropriate.

If our earlier working-definition of tragedy as a genre which asks at the deepest level how we should live at moments of crisis and intense suffering holds, it does so regardless of whether the gods it engages with constitute an entire pantheon, a monotheistic divinity or even a *deus absconditus*, for the vacuum of the space vacated by the dead or departed god remains as tangible a presence and as formidable an opponent on Ibsen's realist stage as the living gods of stages past.⁸ And surely it is its generic modifications, its mutations, its responses to historical change, rather than an attempt to discipline it into a monolithic, nostalgic, abstract template based on a small selection of surviving Greek works and on just one theoretical text, the *Poetics*, which constitute the challenge of tragedy, not its death? Especially when the theoretical text at stake is the *Poetics*, which, as we have seen, gave the clarion call for the secularisation of the genre long before the advent of modern rationalism and scientific thinking.

The other factor that so disturbs Steiner is the absence of strict social hierarchies in modern tragedy. The demand for the hero of high birth and station carries with it the assumption that kings and princes represent so much more than themselves. In them, entire orders, religious and political, can rise and fall. Ibsen develops this notion most clearly in *Kejser og Galilæer*. But as we saw in *Brand*, obscure characters working in obscurity can carry equal dramatic force, and do not need the outward trappings of rank to have heroic stature. *Brand* is thus a pivotal hero. Moreover, it can be countered, as Arthur Miller does that, while ideas of hierarchy and social structures change,

what persists is the *modality* of tragedy, the question form: what we have to ask of a life that could have been different. Miller concedes that there is a

legitimate question of stature here, but none of rank, which is so often confused with it. So long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life, [...] he cannot be barred from the heroic role.⁹

This is clearly a more fruitful approach than the accusations that realism killed tragedy, or enfeebled it. To reiterate, my case is that tragedy involves human beings examining the question of how to live at moments of crisis, and in this examination, a notion of what it is to be human becomes distilled. Tragedy is no more stable a category than its subject, the human. It is historically determined and thus the ethical co-ordinates which structure the quest of the protagonist are too, of necessity, historically determined.

At this point it would be profitable to ask why Ibsen made this turn away from more conventional tragic matter and form in favour of bourgeois characters and settings and language, and to do so it will be necessary first to make a short detour via realism, both in art and philosophy.

4.1.2. Realism and Naturalism

Realism, unlike naturalism and many other so-called schools, does not have a coherent programmatic body of theoretical writing, but only a few scattered journals and musings by various writers and critics, most of them concentrating on the novel form. Unlike naturalism, realism did not constitute a particular philosophy. Nevertheless, the two terms are often used

almost interchangeably, though naturalism tends to be preferred “if a term of abuse is needed”.¹⁰

The basic grounds for the attack on naturalism seem to be its “denial of free will and a substitution of a mechanistic behaviourism and an essential pessimism as the basic tenets of experience.”¹¹ In addition to the belief that morality is largely determined by heredity and environment, there is also an “aesthetic divagation” which seeks out the ugly and the repellent in existence.

Although realism can accommodate this vision, it tends to extend beyond it. Realism is generally felt to have taken over the novel by the mid-eighteenth century, and to have arrived on stage more tardily. It seems that the term was first used in 1835 in the context of painting, to describe Rembrandt’s *verité humaine* as distinct from the *idéalité poétique* of neo-classical painting.¹² Moreover, when applied to Ibsen, as suggested above, the term usually communicates something limited and mean in his art, particularly when related to interrogations of that canonical aristocrat tragedy, which would sneer or even balk at the representation of the ‘low’ subjects, traditionally reserved for morality plays, comedy, farce and burlesque and *opera buffa* - there to reassert and not to question the existing order.

What Ibsen was doing when he broke with his own historical and epic verse dramas to embrace the quotidian was to make the audience feel that they were experiencing something that was actually happening, and that what was being presented on stage was the *gjennemlevd* - in Keatsian terms,

something proved upon the pulse, as opposed to the concrete experience of the *opplevd*. It was not to take a lurid excursion into a sordid anti-romanticism as his contemporaries suspected, but an attempt to represent a reality on a scale more accessible and familiar to his readers and audiences than the lives of the great men and women he had previously treated.¹³ And this turn from the stylised to the illusionist medium *par excellence* raises the question of why Ibsen felt it necessary to experiment, and what kind of truth or reality he was hoping to access that his previous formal modes had denied him.

I would argue that Ibsen, beginning with *Samfundets Støtter* by making such a radical break with his own method, by abandoning *idéalité poétique* in favour of *verité humaine*, was interrogating at the deepest level both the notion of reality and the theatre's potential for exploring it. And this leads to my second point: that Ibsen, whose self-appointed task "har været *Menneskeskildring*" (HU XV.417) and how *mennesker* should live,¹⁴ was responding to this task in relation to changing notions of ethics. That is to say, he was absorbing ethical realism with its disavowal of attempts to understand ethics in terms of divinity or mystery into his aesthetic realism. This raises questions very pertinent to our examination of the modern mutations of tragedy.

Therefore, although realism cannot be said to be a philosophy, it can, as already stated, accommodate a naturalist philosophy, and, moreover, does have its own theoretical base, which emerges most clearly in its rejection of Romantic idealism. It has a relentlessly critical, anti-traditionalist turn; it

seeks to free itself of old assumptions (ghosts); it lays emphasis on semantics - on the problem of the correspondence of words and reality; and above all it offers the demarcation of the area of inquiry as the reality experienced by the individual investigator, in all its subjectivity. The supernatural is seen as something that people might believe in, not as a substantial category in itself.

Charles Taylor identifies in modernity a definite shift in perspective regarding the nature of the self, with a rejection of the view of the human as part of a cosmic order as a participant in a divine history - what Steiner refers to as the "point of no return". Like MacIntyre, he views this as part of the enlightenment utilitarian thrust which militated against needless suffering inflicted on human beings in the name of larger orders: "I want to describe this as the affirmation of the ordinary life. This last is a term of art, meant roughly to designate the life of production and the family".¹⁵

Ordinary life in previous schemes had been the background to Aristotelian examinations of the good life and of the activities of the citizen, but not in itself worthy of ethical enquiry. The Reformation and the modernising and democratising impulse of its Christianity put the ordinary life into focus as the locus of the good life, and what was under examination now was *the manner* in which it was lived - the god-fearing lived through marriage and through calling. Higher forms and status ethics were dethroned and the élites that sustained the old cosmic orders were attacked. Underlying this turn is the emerging bourgeois self-consciousness, the Marxist apotheosis of man the producer, and a sense of the value of the unremarkable life:

The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of what were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilisation. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of the ordinary life therefore involves a polemical stance ... towards downgrading ordinary life, of failing to see that our destiny lies here in production and reproduction, and not in some alleged higher sphere, [towards] being blind to the dignity and worth of ordinary human desire and fulfilment.¹⁶

According to Taylor, this prompts a morality structured along three (very Kantian) axes: the first axis (paramount also in ancient Greek ethics) represents the dignity, that is, the respect I command from others. This axis incorporated without remainder the second axis: the good life. The third axis is the axis of modernity - respect for others. In this scheme, hierarchical orders are no longer capable of forming the horizon for the whole being in the West. These hierarchical structures were largely discredited by the Reformation and its contention that the ordinary man and the cleric had equal access to God, and that ordinary activities, such as work and family life, were as suffused with holiness as the sacrament. It was not what you did, but the spirit in which you did it that mattered, and therefore, distinctions of high/low were redundant.

Taylor explains how this democratisation of action and station was productive of enormous tensions and moral confusions:

We are as ambivalent about heroism as we are about the value of the workaday goals that it sacrifices. We struggle to hold on to a vision of the incomparably higher, while being true to the central modern insight about the value of ordinary life. We sympathise with

both the hero and the anti-hero; and we dream of a world in which one could be in the same act both.¹⁷

Having taken this detour through philosophical shifts, it is possible to get a clearer picture of why realism as a mode is so undervalued, and why it is seen by some as inimical to tragedy, traditionally seen as an aristocratic art form, reproducing and depending on hierarchies which organise the divine, the human, the social and ethical. Indeed, classical tragedy was seen as the affirmation of the extraordinary: kings, princes, demigods, not housewives, doctors, country clergymen and bankers. And it is a resistance to this shift that motivates Steiner's reductive analysis of Ibsen's realist plays as untragic "*secular dilemmas*" (italics mine).

The modernist ambivalence to the extra-ordinary is often seen to preclude the totalising effect of classical tragedy. This, in combination with the New Testament and utilitarian legacies of the reduction and the minimising of human suffering, together with a belief in meliorism, takes a humanist and humanitarian turn against the classical *agon*, both with its explorations of suffering as the ultimate human experience and its sense of the vulnerability of happiness and goodness.

Another defining aspect of the affirmation of the ordinary is its interiority. This inwardness, the characteristic inflection of the Reformation conception of the self with the Lutheran promotion of faith over good works, emerges on Ibsen's realist stage as the investigation of not only the outer public existence but also the far more important inner life of characters in the process of self-examination and self-transformation, coupled with the

awareness of the self as something which has to be sought to be realised, and moreover, something which in itself can be a vital source of moral energy and knowledge.

Two things are clear: firstly that Ibsen, dissatisfied with higher forms, was consciously effecting the belated entry of the theatre into this modern *Weltanschauung*; secondly, that he was consciously taking tragedy with him over the threshold of modernity, viz. the draft title of *Et Dukkehjem* as the modern tragedy (*nutids-tragedien*) and of *Gengangere* as a *familiedrama* by embracing the prosaic in both senses of the term.

It is my contention that, with *Et Dukkehjem* of 1879 and to an even greater extent in *Gengangere* in 1881, Ibsen was putting the ordinary under dramatic and ethical strain. Ibsen's awareness of the potential for the ordinary in drama had already declared itself by 1851 in a review of Karl Gutzkow's *Haarpidsk og Kaarde*. In it he compares the French theatre unfavourably with the German theatre, because the characters are too frequently "rene Abstraktioner". In contrast the Germans present "ikke blot Mennesker, men endog *trivielle Hverdagsmennesker, saaledes som vi daglig see og høre dem*". Ibsen continues with an aesthetic defence of his preference: "men *Hverdagsmenneskets* Charakter er fra et kunstnerisgt Standpunkt *ingenlunde triviel*: Som Reproduktion af Kunsten er den ligesaa interessant om enhver anden" (HU XV 48-49 – italics mine).

In Nora Helmer's and Helene Alving's quest for freedom we see this defence of the ordinary transformed into an embrace of the ordinary, not only

in his subjects, but in his aesthetic subtraction. The untheatricality¹⁸ of Helene's suffering breaks through and asserts itself over the conventions of the well-made play.

We will return to *Gengangere* in the following chapter. For the moment we will consider the equally well-constructed *dukkehjem* which Nora Helmer occupies, in which the conventions of the well-made play themselves become interpretative. After this it will be evident that rumours of the death of tragedy are greatly exaggerated.

4.2. *Et Dukkehjem*

With *Et Dukkehjem* (1879), we register a "decisive shift in tragic style from the antiquarian re-creation of an unverifiable past to the normative values of the everyday, from *Catiline* and *Vikings at Helgeland* to the tragedy of the lady next door".¹⁹ In this analysis, I will demonstrate that Ibsen, while remaining firmly within the bounds of this most - to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase - "counter-epiphanic" literature,²⁰ successfully makes a tragedy out of Nora's narrative.

Despite the play's unassuming subtitle of *skuespill*, it directly addresses the tragic genre, forcing dominant contemporary theatrical codes into a confrontation with it. Toril Moi makes a clear statement of the innovation of the work when she writes: "Nora åpner veien til et moderne teater. Nora er ikke bare Ibsens heltinne, hun er en figur for Ibsens dramatiske prosjekt"²¹.

Ibsen's *Optegnelser til Nutids-tragedien* of 1878 establish the divide along which Nora's experiences have to be organised: the male (articulated by law and authority) and the female (articulated as loving instinct and faith). This divide throws the gender issues which the play elaborates into relief, but it is Ibsen's final observations in these notes which point to the core of this and so many subsequent works: "Pludselig tilbagevendende angst og rædsel. Alt må bæres alene. Katastrofen nærmer sig ubønhørligt, uafvendeligt. Fortvivelse, kamp og undergang" (HU VIII. 368-369).

Fear, terror, the isolate hero, despair, struggle, defeat: a strangely classical combination, - elements all exploited in *Et Dukkehjem*. But the key to these contemporary tragedies is not the issues they adumbrate but the fact that the catastrophe is inexorable and inevitable, *ubønhørligt, uafvendeligt* - in true Aristotelian spirit. So what, then, is so 'contemporary' about this tragedy?

I would argue that beyond the technical innovation and the contemporary setting, Ibsen has made an enormous, daring break with tragic tradition, one that many of his detractors have still to forgive him for: the *göttliche Gegensatz* of his earlier plays has long since exited. In *Et Dukkehjem* the divine antagonist (whether a named divinity, a mythological triad, an abstraction of fate or chance in her many guises, or even God Himself) has not only been absorbed by a secular belief in an equally baleful determinism, but with Rank, the naturalistic dispensation has transformed the ancient familial curse into a debilitating, inherited disease, in a remorseless

anatomisation of sin and transgression. And if no curse has been set in motion, the social environment constitutes an equally implacable opponent.

It is this fatalism that allows Nora to live for so many years in a child-like state, uncritical of the status quo until the status quo questions her. It is this determinism which informs Torvald's belief that heredity and environment condition people morally and which leads him to the conclusion that Krogstad, morally degenerate as he is, has "forgiftet sine egne børn [...]." He explains that dishonesty "bringer smitte og sygdomsstof i et helt hujems liv" (1.307). His insistence that immorality is corrosive is complemented by the conviction that morality is genetically encoded resurfaces in his conclusion that Nora was inevitably corrupted by her father: "Alle din faders letsindige grundsætninger har du taget i arv. Ingen religion, ingen moral, ingen pligtfølelse - " (3.352). It is this belief that partly informs Nora's decision to leave. But her conviction that her presence will corrupt her children stems more from her recognition of her moral immaturity.

Moral inheritance can announce itself from within the sickly bodies of blameless offspring, as it does in the case of Rank's congenital disease visited on him by his father's profligacy, an idea which receives full treatment in *Gengangere*. This is a terrible instance of a baleful providence at work, and it points to an unjust distribution: "Med døden i hænderne? - Og således å bøde for en andens skyld. Er det retfærdighed i dette? Og i hver eneste familie råder der på en eller anden måde en slig ubønhørlig gengældelse - " (2.320). Here we encounter the long arm of Nemesis once more. The nanny Anne-

Marie does not even entertain questions of justice and injustice when contemplating her fate. Forced by society to give up her illegitimate child and to raise somebody else's child, she identifies good fortune in her misfortune: "Når jeg kunde få en så god plads? En fattig pige, som er kommen i ulykke, må være glad til" (2.310).

Only Krogstad and Kristine break out of this determinism, (which they recognise has hardened them and deprived them of happiness), to assert a commitment to exploiting whatever potential for happiness life may still have. The effect on Krogstad is clearly ennobling. He cancels the debt and returns the IOU, thus averting what Torvald considers to be *his* tragedy, and adding a further level of clarity to Nora's tragic insight.

Enmeshed in this dense deterministic fibre of heredity and environment is the individual who must realign himself in order to rend the fabric in an assertion of selfhood, however crudely perceived. The mode of this assertion is always painful and can ultimately destroy the protagonist, but not without positive remainder. In works such as *Et Dukkehjem* and *Gengangere* in which Ibsen strictly observes the axioms of sequentiality and inevitability, there is a discernible re-enactment of the Aristotelian gesture of secularization of tragedy.

Here Ibsen can be seen both to have brought tragedy round to a full secularisation within a realistic/naturalistic framework, and at the same time he turns this gesture of secularisation round to such an extent that there is no

material or dramatic difference between the role played by previous divine antagonists and naturalistic beliefs.

4.2.1 Lykke

In *Et Dukkehjem*, the focus is less on contingency-*lykke* denoting the area of human activity which lies beyond the control of the individual than on the *lykke* denoting happiness and its essential vulnerability. In the plays considered so far, a number of versions of happiness have been put forward: In *Catilina* there was the conflict posited between domestic bliss in obscurity and active participation in history; *Fru Inger til Østråt* emphasised the price of having a calling, which has to be paid for in personal happiness; *Hærmændene på Helgeland* focused on conflicting loyalties and sacrifices of and for love, and how happiness is irrecoverable. *Kongsemnerne* showed the happiness attendant upon good fortune and how happiness is denied those who live inauthentically. *Brand* threw the incommensurability of happiness and duty into relief, showing how the latter inexorably demands the sacrifice of the former. *Kejser og Galilæer* explored the quality of the radiant possibilities of restored *græske lykke*. But in *Et Dukkehjem* Ibsen considers the question of happiness from a new perspective.

Et Dukkehjem is one of the few Ibsen plays to open onto vistas of well-being. The opening sequences build on this impression of good cheer and harmony, the sense of a real home. Good news of a promotion and easier times ahead reinforce the image of a happy home, followed by a visit

involving a conversation where Nora will declare herself thoroughly contented.

Throughout Act I Nora reinforces the visual suggestions of well being established in the opening scene. Torvald's news of his new appointment, which Nora describes as *en stor lykke* - removes any financial worries they may have had. Nora declares herself to feel "let og lykkelig" (1.281). From her conversations with Helmer and then with Kristine Linde, Nora gives the impression that she identifies *lykke* with what Aristotle called "external goods": we recall that these include money, a good spouse, children and friends and she is also physically attractive and aware of it. Good fortune certainly seems to be in attendance. Rank even refers to her later as a *lykkebarn* (3.348). Nora insists on her happiness; the eight years since she and Kristine last met have been "en lykkelig tid" (1.279), and she twice exclaims that it is "vidunderlig deiligt at leve og være lykkelig" (1.283; 1.289).

Life for Kristine Linde has been less pleasant in the intervening eight years. She has had to take care of her ailing mother, two younger brothers, work extremely hard, and sacrifice personal happiness in response to these duties. She is blessed with none of the external goods that Nora has a sufficiency of. She is poor, has no family beyond her brothers (who no longer depend on her) few friends it seems and no children, and her looks have suffered as a result of these exertions. Nora's emphasis on happiness leads her to conclusions about luck, her main conclusion that without sufficient

money to get by, there is little happiness to be had from life, and that straightened circumstances can have a negative effect on character.

But there is more depth to Nora than her vocabulary of *vidunderlig* and *deilig* and *lykkelig* would suggest. Her sacrifice to save Torvald involved forging her father's signature to obtain an illegal loan, which she has been struggling hard in secret to pay off. This is an enormous source of pride and all of her self-esteem seems to be located in that action: "Hun har begået falsk, og det er hendes stolthed" (VIII.368). However, when Krogstad the moneylender comes to blackmail her with exposure unless she can save his job at the bank by using her influence on her husband, the entire edifice of her *lykke* is clearly at risk.

Act II finds Nora in an intense state of anxiety and agitation. From her perspective it is inconceivable that an action performed out of love to save her husband's life and protect her father could be used against her and be punishable under law. Her happiness, so insistently staked out in Act I, now confronts the classic tragic gap between doing good and living well.

Errol Durbach has written a compelling comparison of Nora and Antigone, reading both heroines as caught in a Hegelian conflict between two incompatible values where no *Aufhebung* is possible:

Antigone cares nothing for codified systems that violate her sense of decency and the primal sanctity of human connections; and the great choral odes on 'Man' and 'Love' define the life-affirming values for which she is prepared to die. [...] The dialectics of the *Antigone* are everywhere apparent in *A Doll's House* – from Torvald's condescending dismissal of Nora's feather-brained sense of how the law operates, to the great final

confrontation where his constellation of male 'duties' confronts her mode of moral conscience.²²

But as Durbach states, the opposition between two systems has already been set up in Act I when Krogstad comes to blackmail Nora. When Nora's unschooled instinct is confronted with the fact that the law takes no account of motive in cases of forgery, she responds with vehement outrage:

Da må det være nogen meget dårlige love [...]. En datter skulde ikke have ret til at skåne sin gamle dødssyge fader for ængstelser og bekymringer? Skulde ikke en hustru have ret til at redde sin mands liv? Jeg kender ikke lovene så nøje; men jeg er viss på, at der må stå etsteds i dem, at sådant er tilladt. (1.303)

But when she sees that not only the law but also her husband takes no account of motive, she is brought low.

In the *Antigone*, we are left in no doubt that the heroine acts in accordance with God's law. But in Ibsen's demythologised and secular universe there are no Gods to sanction Nora's value-system, no absolutes to grace the woman's 'criminal naiveté' and affirm decency and love as pre-legal imperatives for human conduct.²³

Nora makes no further references to *lykke* in Act II. The satisfaction she derives from these external goods recedes and this version of *lykke* modulates into a yearning for "*det vidunderlige som nu vil skje*". This miracle, which involves Helmer standing by her through this crisis fails dismally to materialise. This concept is one that she has recovered from her everyday discourse of the previous act, when she makes repeated use of it, usually collocated with *lykkelig* and *dejlig*. She is trying to dredge up some kind of value from the *lykke* she has been living with for the past eight years and which has sustained her. Durbach describes this turn of *vidunderlig* as Nora

straining “towards the heights of a Romantic wish-dream of heroic male sacrifice and wifely self-immolation”.²⁴

The shift in focus from well-being and happiness to waiting for the extraordinary to rise out of the ordinary has a strange effect on Nora. She becomes oddly fatalistic and tells Kristine that there is no point in her trying to intervene with Krogstad as she is powerless to avert the inevitable: “Det skulde du ladet være. Du skal ingenting forhindre. Det er dog igrunden en jubel, dette her, at gå og vente på det vidunderlige” (2.336). And this, just seconds before the countdown to her death.

Act III charts the painful process through which this Romantic vision of *det vidunderlige* recoils in on itself through the agency of Helmer’s legalistic, moralistic condemnation of Nora and his belittling of her motive of love. He tells her: “Nu har du ødelagt hele min lykke” (3.352). Helmer’s *lykke* can only be interpreted as located in his public image, and has no place for the domestic *lykke* that Nora cherishes and the *lykke* that knows no limits to the sacrifice it would make for loved ones. He further accuses her of destroying his future (neglecting the fact that had it not been for Nora’s crime, he would be dead). He agrees to keep her on at the doll house on sufferance, for the sake of appearances, but she is to have no access to the children. This arrangement will be devoid of any potential for happiness: “Herefterdags gælder det ikke længere lykken; det gælder bare at redde resterne, stumperne, skinnet” (3.353).

Nora attempted to find salvation by adding substance to her *lykke* and by transfiguring it into an object of almost religious faith. But a *lykke* compounded only of external goods cannot support such a burden, and Nora cannot will any deeper content into it. She is forced to accept that the *lykke* she had laid so much store by and under whose sign she had chosen to live, has no substance, and she mistook secondary goods for happiness itself. She is forced to recognize that she has been complicit in its frivolity by acquiescing so totally in her husband's trivialisation of her. There is no salvation in Nora's domestic *lykke*. As Helmer says, happiness is no longer relevant; what is urgent is salvaging the pieces of the wreckage, and Nora's most urgent project is her own moral and social education.

Durbach shrewdly highlights the different qualities of happiness explored in this play. He points to the *lykke* anatomised so carefully by Nora throughout Act I and contrasts it with a more elusive breed of *lykke* whose profile is hard to construct. Durbach locates this distinction at the heart of the process of tragic recognition, explaining that

... the heroic temperament is compelled to seek the terror out, to ask question after question even if the answers uproot the stability of the hero's very existence. During the tragic process the hero loses what Ibsen calls *lykke*, a term encompassing all of life's superficial and fleeting happiness, the entire panoply of everyday domestic gestures that Nora defines in Act I.²⁵

Durbach is drawing too rigid a line here. It is not *lykke* itself that is suspect, but implied is a condemnation of Nora's failure to supply it with any content weightier than 'secondary goods' of bourgeois comfort. Further along

in his argument, Durbach commends *glæde* ('happiness' in an unambiguous sense devoid of the dimensions implicit in *lykke*) as a more substantial value. *Glæde*, argues Durbach, is a "term encompassing the profound joy of clear-sightedness and insight". However, the text supports no such distinction. *Glæde* is used infrequently and casually, and never in contrast to *lykke*.²⁶

In another context, concerning the final sequence, Durbach seems to refute his own distinction. After Nora rejects Torvald's forgiveness as insufficient reason to stay on at the doll house, she has achieved such a level of clarity that she can see into the heart of her (un)happiness:

HELMER. Har du ikke været lykkelig her?
NORA. Nej, det har jeg aldrig været. Jeg trode det;
men jeg har aldrig været det.
HELMER. Ikke - ikke lykkelig!
NORA. Nej; bare lystig. (3.358)

Durbach argues that Nora has now gained such insight into her changed situation that she is able to distinguish between

authentic and inauthentic qualities of being, between 'love' and the ephemeral pleasures of merely being 'in love', between *lykke* and *lystighed*; joy as an indispensable condition of human relationships and 'happiness' as the sporadic pleasure that has replaced joy in their lives.²⁷

Here Durbach gives the impression of having restored *lykke* to a sign for substantial happiness in contrast to *lystighed* which clearly denotes a more superficial happiness, such as that he identified above in *lykke* when he opposed it to *glæde*. However, the whole point of the final sequence is that in order for values of any kind to be established, a radical and very painful reassessment has to take place; an ethical reassessment which will involve the

individual in an isolated confrontation with “resterne, stumperne”, but not “skinnet”. Nora has to assert herself at this basal level: “først og fremst et menneske” (3.359). Unless this level of maturity is attained, there can be no duties such as those Helmer enjoins on her, in however metaphysical a guise, and there can be no hope for *lykke* either.

What Nora’s experiences with Krogstad, the law and above all with Helmer, have afforded her is a general tragic insight into the vulnerability of happiness and the impossibility of insulating a life against reversal. Nora is unique among Ibsen’s tragic heroes in that her crime, the forgery, was an unequivocally selfless act, designed to save the life of the man she loved. She is forced to see that well-intentioned purposive action can demand transgressions of social, legal and moral laws, which can eclipse the language of love and sacrifice. In addition to this generalised insight into the tragic condition, she gains personal insight into the deluded life she leads and is confronted by “the merciless obligation to be oneself”.²⁸

4.2.2 My Station and Its Duties

With *Et Dukkehjem* Ibsen gives us the tragedy of the “lady next door” by extracting the tragic from the everyday. Durbach identifies the same operation of tragic recognition and the heroic attempt at realignment at work in the play as in *Oedipus*. Just as Oedipus embraces the terror of knowing, Nora likewise lives through “a willed and searing deconstruction of a false sense of self - [...] in the will to ‘reconstruct’ another being, ‘at blive en

anden'''.²⁹ The Oedipal quest for identity is clearly the spine of this tragedy, but another comparison from Greek tragedy also suggests itself here; Nora's career is a reverse image of Hecuba's.

Nora's rejection of the duties which had previously defined her (mother, wife) in response to her highest duty, to herself, shows that for Ibsen human identity is no longer strictly commensurate with social function in the Aristotelian sense. Nora *qua* mother and Nora *qua* wife do not equal Nora. Nora is an identity that has to be negotiated and chosen in the Kierkegaardian sense. Therefore, the contrast to Hecuba is arresting: Hecuba is stripped of her humanity as a result of having lived through unspeakable horrors including the murder of all but one of her children, social degradation from queen to slave and betrayal by a trusted friend. Hecuba is the most wretched of creatures, left *apolis* - without a city, and by extension, without an identity. Nora, conversely, in order to achieve her humanity, consciously abandons husband, hearth, children and social position. Whether her self-imposed exile on the margins of society will provide the conditions for her education is, of course, unknown. It is her moral courage that is of interest to Ibsen, not her subsequent narrative.

This Hecuba-Nora contrast illuminates very precisely the moral dilemma Nora has been pushing towards, and, which, once identified, allows no retreat. Nora does not reject 'duty' as a category like Peer Gynt does; neither does she position herself outside the pull of morality or invent her own morality like Julian and Brand. In an important sense, Nora locates

herself in the *pre-ethical*, arguing that in order to defer to any of her duties, she must first try to find an adequate response to being herself.

Just as Ibsen rejects the *deus ex machina* solution as a valid *lusis* in true Aristotelian spirit, so Nora rejects Torvald's change of heart, because the recognition which has arisen from her reversal leaves her no choice. She is now steered by an urgent sense of necessity: "NORA. ... Jeg ved bare, det blir nødvendigt for mig" (3.360). Torvald insists that in leaving him she is abandoning her holiest duties. Even though this is an unequivocally secular tragedy, whose heroine has declared herself an atheist, Nora hangs on to this religious-ethical vocabulary and uses it in all seriousness:

NORA. Jeg har andre ligeså hellige pligter.
HELMER. Det har du ikke. Hvilke pligter
skulde *det* være?
NORA. Pligterne imod mig selv.
HELMER. Du er først og fremst hustru og
moder.
NORA. Det tror jeg ikke længere på. Jeg tror
jeg er først og fremst et menneske, jeg, ligesåvel som
du, eller ialfald, at jeg skal forsøge på at bli' det.
(3.359)

Nora's decision is a departure from the tragic formulations hitherto explored by Ibsen. Hitherto the crises encountered by his heroes and heroines could crudely be reduced to the conflict between duty (to a calling) and a more earthly happiness (love, earthly renown, power), that is, a conflict between *duty* and *value*. These tragic divisions have in other words been plotted along *deontological* and *axiological* lines.

If, when instructed concerning what ought to be, I ask for reasons, the answer may be in terms of duties, obligations, rights, ideals (of justice, of goodness, of

fairness), or values (moral, aesthetic, religious). [...] Philosophers have divided the study of these reasons into two broad fields: *deontology* (theory of obligations; from the Greek *δεον*, that which is binding, needful, proper) and *axiology* (theory of values; from *αξιος*, *worth*, as in *worth more than*). The former deals with what ought to be because it is required by one's stations and its duties, by the web of obligations and commitments the past has spun. The latter deals with what ought to be because its being so would be good, or at least better than its alternatives.³⁰

Nora stands faced with a choice which is an interesting inversion of Brand's. He was forced to choose between his calling and serving his parishioners and his family. Nora is choosing between the duty to herself and her family. The basic difference is that Brand loved Agnes, and had her full support in his calling; Nora finds herself married to a man she finds she barely knows and who cannot conceive of her as having any duty that is not at least tangential to his own existence. "Alt må bæres alene". It is these specific duties that Nora rejects.

The English idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley published *Ethical Studies* in 1876, two years before *Et Dukkehjem*. Under the section "My Station and Its Duties" Bradley explains that each person has a specific place in society, broadly characterisable by the rights and the duties that attach to that position. All one's relationships, by blood, by marriage, by association, by indebtedness contribute to the definition of that position, and this position sets up definite moral requirements. To live morally is to live in accordance with the demand of one's station.³¹ But Bradley points to the tension within

morality that this produces, for it strains to accommodate ideals and the notion of freedom to pursue the goal of self-realisation and understanding.

The ideal of a life in freedom and love creates its own categorical imperative, but our station's duties may close off any possibility of response. It may seem that, in such a situation, there is a resolution, a morally correct resolution, of the conflict, namely revolution. But the revolutionary places himself in a role subject to a conflict of an exactly similar structure. The revolutionary himself proposes thus to sacrifice himself and if necessary his whole generation for the sake of the coming community that he serves.³²

According to Bradley, it is "through faith and through faith alone, [that] self suppression issues in a higher self-realisation."³³ Bradley's image of the revolutionary and the self-suppression leading to self-realisation captures exquisitely an important aspect of the Ibsenian *agon*, although it is only Julian and most obviously Brand who truly fits the profile of the rebel as herald of a new dispensation.

Nora has rejected not only her religion but also her station and its duties, but she has not lost a sense of value. Self-knowledge is for her the highest value— it is holy. She is looking at a pre-social sense of self which involves a choice and a process. She is unique among Ibsen heroes in that while rejecting established modes of thought, belief and behaviour, she does not try to legislate, or set herself up as a moral authority. She is not the intransigent hero; she wants to change. She must change, must *blive en anden*. She must, in short, pursue what is potentially valuable in her. In other words, Nora seeks to conflate the deontological with the axiological by locating value in her as yet unattained selfhood, and a duty in respect of that potential in the

here and now. A duty to what may become valuable in the future, rather than a set of obligations towards the past. The fact that Nora resisted suicide gave the play the openings for tragedy. Had she committed suicide, it would simply have been death in defeat and despair, and would not have fallen in the purview of the tragic, for it would not have raised crucial issues of identity and freedom. Ibsen gives full dramatic treatment to this in *Rosmersholm*.

Nora's tragedy shows that there is nothing pre-given about authentic identity. While it is true that society provides very clearly defined roles for people to step into, the individual is not locatable in these roles, as the ethics of Aristotle's functional view of man would argue. Nora slams the door on the functional view of man, leaving Torvald behind in his melodrama, exiting in tragedy's new clothes – a "simpel blå hverdags drakt".³⁴

What *Et Dukkehjem* demonstrates is realism's capacity for carrying tragedy. It gives us the suffering, isolate hero, whose experiences fall out in such a way that they cluster into an irreversible fate that pushes them inexorably towards a freedom which, once obtained, immediately assumes the contours of necessity. Far from precluding tragedy, Ibsen's realist stage takes what is paradigmatic of modernity and gives it the inflections of tragedy, all the time making it *vraie, simple, grand*, in accordance with Zola's aesthetics.

If *Et Dukkehjem* shifted the focus of tragedy onto the quotidian, *Gengangere* established the ordinary life as its locus, except that in this work,

technically much simpler but all the more powerful for it, only the inauthentic have the luxury of slamming doors. For Fru Alving, the confrontation with authenticity is internalised and the home, instead of representing a pre-ethical playroom/prison, becomes a metaphor for the self, from which there is no escape. *Gengangere* is Ibsen's *Huis Clos*. The conditions for the tragedy of the ordinary life and the centrality of *livsglæden* will be the mainstay of the discussion in Chapter V.

Endnotes

- ¹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, London, 1961, p. 194.
- ² *Ibid.* p. 290.
- ³ *Ibid.* p. 291.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* p. 246.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* p. 241. It is precisely this “triumph” that Ibsen questions. Where Steiner reads “triumph”, Alasdair MacIntyre reads the “failure of the Enlightenment project”. This more precisely defines the mode of Ibsen’s heroes than any triumphant rationalism. See Chapter III above, pp. 86-7.
- ⁶ There is as little consensus on the time of death as there is agreement as to whether or not the genre has died out. The various accounts of the time of death spans Western history almost in its entirety: Nietzsche dates its demise with Euripides (*The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, 1967); Steiner post-Racine, with Ibsen inducing severe *rigor mortis* and Walter Kaufmann with the Holocaust (*Tragedy and Philosophy*, Princeton, 1968).
- ⁷ Thomas F. Van Laan, “The Death-of-Tragedy Myth” in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 5, 2, 1991, p. 6.
- ⁸ See above, Chapter I, pp. 17-18.
- ⁹ Arthur Miller, “The Tragedy of the Common Man” (1958), reprinted in *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. R. Draper, London, 1980, pp. 164-68.
- ¹⁰ George J. Becker, *Realism in Modern Literature*, New York, 1980, p. 111.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 113.
- ¹² See *Realism*, Lillian Furst ed., London, 1992, ch. 10, p. 88. Edmond Duranty later used the term as the title of his journal. But the term is infinitely older than this nineteenth century usage. “Originally it referred to the reality of ideas, and the contrasting term *nominalism* was the one that denied such an ideal reality.” R. Wellek has noted Kant’s use of the term in its present meaning. See Becker 1980, p. 37.
- ¹³ The list of epithets to describe *Ghosts* in the English press is a well-known. But Clement Scott of the *Daily Telegraph* was not alone in his anti-Ibsen campaign. The actress Mrs Geneviève Ward condemned the play on the grounds that it was “a piece of moral vivisection - fit only for an audience of doctors and prostitutes”, quoted in Peter Whitebrook, *William Archer: A Biography*, London, 1993, p. 98.
- ¹⁴ Speech at Norwegian Society for Women’s Rights, 26.5. 1898 during which Ibsen made his famous move of collapsing the ‘women’s question’ into the ‘human’ question.
- ¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 13.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 23
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 24.

¹⁸ This was Archer's reaction after the Christiania premiere at Folketheatret 1883, the famous production with Lindberg playing Osvald. He stated that the "untheatricalness is the essence of the tragedy". See Whitebrook 1993, p. 69.

¹⁹ Errol Durbach, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*, Boston, 1991, p. 71.

²⁰ Taylor 1989, p. 431.

²¹ Toril Moi, "Det vidunderlige kommer ikke sånn til hverdags", in *Jubel: Nationaltheatrets jubileumsmagasin*, Oslo, 1999, p. 49.

²² Errol Durbach, "Nora as Antigone: The Feminist Tragedienne and Social Legality", *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 5, 1992, p. 35.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 36.

²⁴ Durbach 1991, p. 35.

²⁵ Durbach 1991, p. 59.

²⁶ Nora uses *glæde* once. In Act I when threatened by Krogstad, she refers to her secret as "min glæde og min stolthed" - "my pride and joy" (1.300). This is a standard phrase and cannot be seen as specially charged. Kristine Linde uses the word twice to refer to the pleasure she derived from her work. But even this is incomplete, for there is no joy in working for oneself (3.339).

²⁷ Durbach 1991, p. 123. Other versions of *lykke* are also offered in this play. For Kristine, happiness is obtained through association and caring for others; for Krogstad it comes through forgiveness and honesty; for Rank it seems to consist in being needed by the woman he loves; even Anne-Marie, deprived of her own child, has found meaning in raising Nora and Nora's children in turn. All these people are or have been 'down on their luck'.

²⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Oxford, 2002, p. 230.

²⁹ Durbach 1991, p. 67.

³⁰ Bas C. Van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command", *The Journal of Philosophy* LXX/1, 1973, pp. 9-10.

³¹ Max Weber argued that this was a prominent feature of Lutheranism: "The only way of living acceptably to God was [...] solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling". See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons trans., London, 1930, p. 80.

³² *Ibid.* p. 10.

³³ F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, London, 1876, pp. 184-85.

³⁴ This is how Ibsen said Nora appeared to him in his imagination. Quoted in Moi 1999, p. 50.

Πατρῶν δ'εκτινεις τιν' αθλον
- *Antigone*

Af alt, hvad vi i den moderne dramatiske litteratur har læst, er *Gengangere* det, som kommer det antike drama nærmest [...] den gamle tragedie kaldes skjæbne - eller slægtsdrama, den tragiske skjæbne gik i arv i ætten. Også her har vi en familietragedie, men den er tillige et samfunds-drama, den antike tragedie, gjenopstaaet paa moderne jord - P. O. Schjøtt, 1882.

Chapter V

Gengangere - Livsglæden - kan det være redning i den?

5.1 Introduction: Tragedy?

Gengangere has been caught in a seemingly endless interpretive tug-of-war. Critics are either of the opinion that this play is as close as modernity could ever get to pure tragedy, heralding Ibsen as “the subtlest master of the stage since Sophocles”¹, or, conversely, they hold that it is a very poor, and ultimately flawed attempt at tragedy. Evert Sprinchorn has highlighted the inherent contradiction in this situation, pointing out that *Gengangere*, of all Ibsen’s realist plays, is at the same time the one which “bears the closest resemblance to ancient tragedy and the play that has most frequently been the object of critical censure”.²

This radical divergence of opinion can be traced back to the realism debate, the terms of which were discussed in the previous chapter. More narrowly, the conflict lies in the issue of whether naturalistic determinism can carry the dramatic *gravitas* implied by a *göttliche Gegensatz* or not.

I will proceed with a close reading of the play which will argue that the absence of any named fate makes it a secular tragedy in true Aristotelian spirit, and that the tragic core is located in the sphere suspended uneasily between moral responsibility and contingency. In this play, the naturalistic philosophy which materialises in the face of Oswald’s degenerative inherited disease takes the place of *tuche*, chance, and reposes between the moral and

the contingent. However, the naturalistic-deterministic aspect has been over-emphasised by interpreters. As Michael Robinson points out,

hereditary fate in naturalistic guise is only one dimension of the disaster that befalls the real protagonist, Fru Alving. It is her struggle for fulfilment and truth, and the moral guilt which she incurs, that really interests Ibsen, and which initiates what can therefore be seen as a single fated action moving to unavoidable catastrophe.³

Osvald is not, after all, the hero. There is a more compelling sense of retribution in the play, which arises from the union between Osvald's parents. In his notes for the play, Ibsen wrote of such marriages, "Det bringer en Nemesis over afkommet at gifte sig af udenforliggende grunde selv religiøse eller moralske" (HU IX.136).

This reading will show that the re-definition of the tragic hero is at stake here even more than in the case of *Et Dukkehjem* as the progress of the action is much more *ubønhørlig* than in the previous play, and the tragic potential of the ordinary is put under greater scrutiny. Not only is the heroine an unexceptional middle-aged woman, but, by making Fru Alving the heroine and withholding the tragic role from Osvald, Ibsen was depriving her of essential dramatic resources: action and event. I will also show how this play foregrounds the issue of *happiness* in the concept of *livsglæde*. It is the protagonist's changing understanding of *livsglæde* which first retards and finally makes way for her *anagnorisis*.

5.2.1 *Gengangere*

Gengangere is a play about a woman who is trying to overcome her painful past through a great public act of mourning which is to lay the ghost of her debauched husband and secure a more adequate future for herself and for her son. At least, this is the play that Helene Alving has scripted for herself.

Helene Alving, pressured by her widowed mother and aunts into a marriage of convenience with the well-off Chamberlain Captain Alving when she was in love with another man, Pastor Manders, finds married life intolerable. This is in part because of her unfulfilled longing for Manders and in part due to her husband's unremitting drunkenness and philandering. After a year of wedlock, she flees her home, Rosenvold, to seek refuge in the embrace of the Pastor. However, Manders repels her in the name of duty, and admonishes her to return to her husband and to honour her marriage vows. She returns a broken woman, and not long thereafter becomes pregnant, nursing the naïve hope that the birth of the child will be the salvation of her loveless marriage. The captain's indulgence merely intensifies with time, and in a monumental exercise in damage limitation she takes control of the running of the estate. She also takes to drinking with him in a desperate attempt to keep him inside the house and from disgracing himself in public. Things come to a head, however, when Alving gets the maid Johanne pregnant. Fru Alving pays her off and with the money Johanne is able to secure a husband and nominal father for the child in Engstrand, local carpenter and rogue.

Meanwhile, she has her son Oswald sent away to Paris to protect him from the corrupting influence of his father, but brings him up to believe that the Chamberlain is a pillar of the community. Oswald establishes himself in Parisian artistic circles and makes a name for himself as a painter of talent. He does not return to Rosenvold as long as his father is alive.

Alving dies, and so does Johanne. Fru Alving takes in Johanne and Alving's daughter Regine (who is ignorant of her true parentage). From the day Manders sends Fru Alving back to Rosenvold until the present action he has not set foot in her home.

The occasion for his visit now is the fact that he has accepted the responsibility for administering the memorial Fru Alving wants to set up in honour of her husband, "Kammerherre Alvings hjem", (aptly, an orphanage), on the tenth anniversary of his death. She is confident that this charitable contribution will pre-empt any idle gossip in the community about Alving's dissolute life. This is a memorial which is specifically designed to enable her to forget, if not erase the past, albeit on a material level. For Fru Alving this is her chance to cancel her debt to Alving. She has carefully calculated how much he was worth at the time of their marriage and has separated this sum from the money she has made since taking over the management of the estate. It is Alving's money that has paid for the orphanage. In this way, when the time comes, Oswald will inherit everything from his mother, nothing from his father.

Oswald has returned from Paris, ostensibly for the occasion, and to his mother's great delight has announced that he will spend the winter with her,

giving her the chance to make up for lost time and to win over her son. During Act I Manders judges Fru Alving as a bad wife and a failed mother, accusing her of putting her own desire for happiness before her most sacred duties. She decides to speak out and inform the Pastor of the full extent of her misery, and her motive for sending Oswald away. She is optimistic that the memorial will clear the way for a brighter future with Oswald.

Her optimism begins to fade, however, when she hears glasses clinking in the next room and Regine's protests of "slip mig"⁴ as she is being pursued by Oswald, calling up the first appearance of ghosts in the play: "FRU ALVING (farer sammen i rædsel.) Ah! ... (*Hun stirrer som i vildelse mod den halvåbne dør.*) [...] Parret fra blomsterværelset - går igen" (HU IX.1.85). And on this gasp, Act I closes.

In Act II Fru Alving develops the theme of ghosts as more than revenants and as having a much more insidious hold over us - they are dead ideas which control our moral reflexes and judgements. As the action develops, we see these ghosts working their power. Fru Alving changes the focus of her life-narrative from that of blaming the pastor for sending her back to a loveless marriage in the name of duty to a rewriting of the past in which she is complicit in the family tragedy. Her engagement with progressive reading material has enabled her to question the validity of the duty which sent her back to Alving, and has helped her to register the crippling effect it has had on her chance for happiness. In Act III she confesses "Jeg er ræd, jeg har gjort hjemmet uudholdeligt for din stakkers far, Oswald" (3.122). She

explains, "Din stakkers far fandt aldrig noget afløb for den overmægtige livsglæde, som var i ham" (3.122).

Critics have traditionally seen this as Fru Alving's epiphany; the tragedy's moment of *anagnorisis*, and with this interpretation tends to follow a quite spirited berating of Fru Alving as an inadequate wife, chastising her for not being more sexually responsive and a more cheerful companion for a man she did not love.

Joan Templeton faults this interpretation (which has almost become a critical commonplace) for being defective in several respects: firstly, as she points out, "Nothing could be more out of character for [Ibsen] than requiring human beings to fulfil unwanted, unfelt obligations". She argues that what this interpretation suggests about the "relation between love and passion [...] as well as what it suggests about the relation between duty and love - seems nothing short of absurd". Templeton goes on to stress that such an interpretation ignores an important dimension of Fru Alving's narrative - that her flight from Alving was not only motivated by his debauchery, but also by the fact that she was so hopelessly in love with another man that she violated social taboo by leaving her husband to be with him. Templeton argues that this misreading arises from both a retrograde conservatism and a worryingly bourgeois morality that would perpetuate the institution of the marriage of convenience and the female marital-sexual debt, which seems to be the very institution that Ibsen is attacking.⁵ Further, it betrays a view of tragedy which is too rigidly Aristotelian, the demand that there be a climactic moment of *anagnorisis*.⁶

But there are additional reasons why this interpretation sits ill.

Gengangere, like other realist works, is a play before which critics display astonishing confidence concerning what it is 'about', in comparison to later plays such as *Rosmersholm*, which inspire much more tentative responses. Fru Alving is read as someone who has fallen on the wrong side of the happiness/duty divide and has ruined her own chances of happiness, and so it seems, everybody else's too.

This is the received wisdom. But surely, if this reading of Fru Alving is taken to its logical conclusion, it has to be argued firstly that the play endorses *livsglæden* as a positive, if not the highest good, the value she has stifled and neglected, and before which she is guilty. If this is the case, it is surely remarkable that a dramatist who took such an organic view of his oeuvre should allow such a crucial concept, *livsglæden*, to disappear completely after this work, at least in name.⁷ Surely there would follow at least one instance of *livsglæden* in *antanaclasis*⁸, some development, some refinement, in the way that key Ibsenian notions such as *lykke* and *pligt* are developed? Secondly, we have to examine the characters who represent *livsglæden* and ask what it means to each of them, and what it means to the play as a whole.

Preliminary conclusions all raise stumbling blocks for the traditional interpretation, for Alving and his children as representatives of *livsglæde* do not convince as paradigms of how to live well. Important though Alving is, he is a purely diegetic character and there is not enough textual evidence to support a reading of him that would align him with Beate as a victim of soul-murder.

5.2.2 *Livsglæden* - kan det være redning i den?

The first instance of *livsglæden* comes in Act I when Manders, Fru Alving and Oswald are discussing the late Chamberlain. Oswald has made his first entrance in the drawing room where his mother and Pastor Manders are discussing the legal provisions for the orphanage. Manders, who has not seen Oswald for several years, is profoundly disturbed by the similarity between him and Alving - he behaves as though he has seen a ghost: “(stirrende). Ah! Det var da mærkværdigt -[...]Nej, men er det virkelig -?” (1.71) and later explains his consternation: “Da Oswald kom der i døren med piben i munden, var det som jeg så hans far lyslevende” (1.72). The reference to the pipe activates Oswald’s (as it turns out, his *only*) childhood memory of his father. He recalls the day he went to Alving’s room where he remembers him as “så glad og lystig” (1.72) - a description of Alving which can only be read as that of a child translating the sight of his drunken father into terms familiar to his experience. He describes how his father sat him on his knee and encouraged him to taste his pipe. However, this moment of intimacy between father and son takes on horrendous dimensions when the father goads his son into inhaling the tobacco until the boy turns pale and breaks into a sweat, whereupon the father bursts out laughing until the tearful mother arrives and carries the boy off to the nursery where he duly vomits. This experience is one which Oswald has not been able to understand fully, and asks, again filtering the experience through a child’s mind “Gjorde far ofte slige *spilopper*?” (1.73). Although the question is directed to his mother, Manders jumps in, answering “I sin ungdom var han en særdeles *livsglad* man” (1.73).

At this point we must question Manders's choice of words. Manders's reflex would have been to slip into his sanctimonious rhetoric of decency - Manders was a childhood friend of Alving's and was certainly aware of his excesses. There is strong reason to believe that he chooses the word with care, a tactful attempt on the part of an adult to preserve an ideal, an interpretation which is supported by his subsequent attempts to dissuade Fru Alving from revealing the truth about Alving to Oswald. There is little in this exchange to suggest that *livsglæden* is in any sense being posited as a positive value. Its function here is no more than a euphemism in the service of damage control and maintaining the status quo, and this is underscored by the fact that it is Manders who uses this word; Manders, the natural enemy of the spontaneous joy which *livsglæden* in ordinary language connotes. Furthermore, its position within the dialogue juxtaposes it with two central issues in the play: that of the ghost, in the physical sense; and that of a father making his son sick.⁹

Livsglæden resurfaces in Act II, in the scene where Fru Alving has opened a bottle of champagne for Oswald to calm him in his overwrought state. He has just revealed the fact of his illness, and his doctor's bleak prognosis that he will never be able to work again. He also tells his mother that the doctor diagnosed him as having been *vermoulu* from birth, and made the biblical judgement that "fædrenes synder hjem søges på børnene" (2.106). This is a much grimmer version of the anatomisation of sin and the conflation of naturalism and morality than experienced in *Et Dukkehjem*. Oswald's account of his diagnosis is central to an understanding of the play's tragic orientation. He is convinced that the doctor has misdiagnosed his illness. As

well as expressing the ontological irreversibility that lies at the heart of tragedy, "Å, kunde jeg bare leve om igjen, gøre det ugjort altsammen!" (2.106), he longs for exculpation in the form of a deterministic curse: "Havde det endda været noget nedarvet, - noget, som en ikke selv kunde gøre for. Men dette her! På en så skammelig, tankeløs, letsindig måde at ha sløset bort sin egen lykke, sin egen sundhed, alting i verden, - sin fremtid, sit liv - !" (2.106). As Sprinchorn suggests, Oswald's assertion that his fate would have been bearable had it simply been a question of inherited disease, not involving a free choice to live a certain way, "would seem to undercut the deterministic philosophy of the play [...] Here Ibsen is clearly suggesting that the deterministic series of events does not encompass the tragedy; it is only one element in it".¹⁰

Regine has been sent off to fetch a bottle of champagne. At this point Oswald turns to his mother and comments on Regine's physical appeal, twice emphasising the fact of her robust good health: she is *kærnesund* and *kærnefrisk* (2.111). And it seems that when Regine made it clear to him that she had taken seriously an old offer of his to take her to Paris, and had even started learning French - this girl whom he had barely noticed before is suddenly transformed into a symbol of redemptive potential:

Mor, - da jeg så den prægtige, smukke, kærnefriske pige stå der for mig - før havde jeg jo aldrig lagt videre mærke til hende - men nu, da hun stod der ligesom med åbne arme færdig til at ta' imod mig - [...] - da gik det op for mig, at i hende var det redning; for jeg så der var *livsglæde* i hende. (2.111- my italics)

To which Fru Alving replies "*Livsglæde* - ? Kan der være redning i den?" (2.111), thus posing a question which demands a serious engagement on the part of readers and critics. Critics have traditionally assumed the answer to be yes. Regine returns with the champagne glass Oswald has instructed her to bring for herself, but strangely fails to fill. While she sits clutching her empty glass, it is clear that for Fru Alving her question was not simply rhetorical, and she reopens the discussion of *livsglæden*. Oswald explains to her that it is a quality foreign to Rosenvold, at least in his experience. Apparently, *livsglæden* is synonymous with the joy of work, something discernible in every face *derude*, in France:

... her læres folk op til at tro at arbejdet er en forbandelse og en syndestraf, og at livet er noget jammerligt noget, som vi er bedst tjent til at komme ud af jo før jo heller [...]. Der er ingen der, som rigtig tror på den slags lærdomme længer. Derude kan det kendes som noget så jublende lykosaligt, bare det at være til i verden. Mor har du lagt mærke til, at alt det, jeg har malet, har drejet seg om *livsglæden*? Altid og bestandig om *livsglæden*. Der er lys og solskin og søndagsluft, - og strålende menneskeansigter. Derfor er jeg ræd for at bli' her hjemme hos dig. (2.112 - my italics)

Oswald's definition of *livsglæden* as the joy of living in the most elemental sense raises as many questions as it ostensibly answers. Firstly, there is the matter of Regine, whose identification with *livsglæden* (in the same way as Manders's initial identification with it) automatically ambiguates its status as a value, and not simply because she can be read as the living assertion of Alving's own *livsglæde*.

Ibsen goes to great lengths to develop Regine's character. Indeed, he gives her the opening scene. She is not simply a token domestic, nor is she a purely symbolic character; the opening scene shows Regine to be cold, impatient, calculating and ambitious (in this sense resembling her nominal rather than her natural father) - someone with neither aesthetic aspirations nor ethical concerns; she wants to get on in life. And the French she learns, which Oswald takes for a sign of the joy of living, is simply in preparation for better things. And the way she peppers her language with French phrases is designed to establish a social distance between her and her supposed father, Engstrand. Indeed there is very little that is spontaneous about Regine. The fact that she repeatedly rephrases what she says in keeping with the accepted register of the situation demonstrates this admirably. Moreover, it is difficult to see what there is in Regine that for Oswald suggests either *livsglæde* (beyond the physical) and even less the element of salvation.

For his own part, Oswald seems to be using Regine for rhetorical effect. In a gesture which flies in the face of social convention, he insists that she bring a glass to join him in a drink of champagne. His mother does not demur; Regine brings the glass, rather nonplussed at Oswald's suggestion, but she is never offered any champagne to drink, which suggests that Oswald is not really concerned with her at all, but is drawn to her vitality as something which he knows is for himself unattainable. Moreover, as the play progresses, we learn how Oswald had mentally appointed Regine to be his companion and nursemaid, as the one person he would be able to rely on to give him morphine during the next crisis. She, like his mother, will be useful to him.¹¹

Seeming to have forgotten Regine temporarily, and to have dropped her from the *livsglæde* equation, Oswald goes on to define *livsglæden* as synonymous with the joy of work, insisting that this is an alien concept to his mother and all in Norway who have been poisoned by an ethic that saw work as a punishment and life as a cursed estate, best left as soon as it is entered. Again, this passage cannot go unexamined.

It seems that Oswald's point about work is highly subjective; he is an artist and immediately turns the discussion onto himself and his paintings, and this has to be seen in light of the fact that he will never be able to work again. However, in this context if we recall his mother's words to Manders in Act I, we will see that she, contrary to Oswald's rather stark accusation, does not see work as a curse, but indeed as her salvation. In Act I she had explained to Manders that it was her work that had kept her sane all those years with Alving. Moreover, she sees freedom as something that can be obtained through work: "Jeg må arbejde mig ud til frihet" (2.89). For Fru Alving, work is clearly not a curse, but it is necessary and desirable.

The description Oswald gives of his art as a depiction of happy people *derude* bathed in joy and light is indeed appealing, and a contrast to the greyness we see on stage, which Oswald complains is eating into his soul. However, we know enough Ibsen to be wary of this level of aestheticism, reminiscent of the young Ejnar in *Brand*. We also know that there is no salvation in unexamined positions, irrespective of whether they embrace life and light or conversely abjure happiness in favour of a formulaic duty, like

Aline Solness. In both cases the ethic is easy, and both offer easy solutions to complex moral problems; something which Ibsen is never tempted to do.

Osvald goes on to express his fear that his *livsglæde* will be polluted and corrupted by the *jammerdal* that is life at home with his mother. It is at this point that what Trilling calls “the summation of the play” is heralded.¹² Fru Alving declares: “Nu ser jeg den for første gang. Og nu kan jeg tale” (2.113). This epiphany prefaces her supposed recognition speech in which the burden of guilt is assumed and the tragedy is adumbrated.

However, her *anagnorisis* is forestalled by the news of the fire down at the orphanage which closes the second act. It transpires that Engstrand, having lured Manders down to the orphanage for a dedication service, commits arson and manages to manoeuvre Manders into believing that he was responsible for it. He then offers to assume responsibility for it and persuades Manders to join him in his project of the sailors’ home. In some ways Engstrand’s account of Manders extinguishing the flame carelessly and causing untold damage as a result can be read as an allegory of what he did to Fru Alving’s love for him all those years before - although Engstrand is an unlikely candidate for moral arbiter. Osvald sees the fire as the consummation of his father and his entire legacy, heralding his own collapse. For Fru Alving it clears the way, quite literally for the truth, and cancels all need for pretence, drawing the appalling comedy as she puts it, to a close.

After the fire Fru Alving sits Osvald and Regine down to tell them the truth of Regine’s parentage and to relieve Osvald of his self-reproach. Again, *livsglæden* is the catalyst:

Du kom før til at tale om livsglæden; og da gik der ligesom et nyt lys op for mig over alle tingene i hele mit liv. [...] Du skulde ha' kendt din far da han var ganske ung løjtnant. I *ham* var livsglæden oppe, du! [...] Det var som et søndagsvejr bare at se på ham. Og så den ustyrlige kraft og livsfylde, som var i ham! (3.121)

What is striking about this speech is its echoes and its repetitions. She repeats Manders's point about the exuberant young Alving, and if we recall Manders's motivation behind his choice of words and the context which provoked it, Fru Alving's statement cannot be taken at face value. Furthermore, she echoes Oswald's own rhetoric of light and sunshine in order to make her account speak to Oswald - that it was *søndagsvejr* just to behold him. This is, moreover, the language of romance, or remembered love; it seems doubtful that Fru Alving ever found the experience of looking at Alving so uplifting, or experienced any kind of joy in a marriage of convenience which quickly turned sour. The fire of the orphanage may have cleared the way for the truth, but in her statement the ghosts of the past merely rise from the ashes.

Her so-called epiphany plays itself out thus, with Alving transformed into sacrificial victim:

Og så måtte sligt et livsglædens barn, - for han *var* som et barn, dengang, - han måtte gå herhjemme i en halvstor by, som ingen glæde havde at byde på, men bare fornøjelser. Måtte gå her uden at ha' noget livsformål; han havde bare forretninger. Ikke eje en eneste kamerat, som var mægtig at føle hvad livsglæde er for noget; bare dagdrivere og svirebrødre - . (3.122)

And thus all the extenuating circumstances of Alving's 'debauched existence' are trotted out for the benefit of his son: the restrictions of a small

town of limited possibilities; lack of interest in his work; no real sense of calling; bad company, consisting of roisterers with no inkling of the meaning of *livsglæden*. Again, Fru Alving is structuring her description around Oswald's own, almost point for point: environment and work. However, she does not let her defence of Alving rest there - but rather brings it to a climax in an astonishing *volte face* retraction of everything she had said in Act I:

Så kom det, som det måtte komme [...]. Din stakkers far fandt aldrig noget afløb fra den overmægtige livsglæde, som var i ham. Jeg bragte heller ikke søndagsvejr ind i hans hjem. [...]. De havde lært mig noget om pligter og sligt noget, som jeg har gået her troet på så længe. Alting så munded det ud i pligterne, - *mine* pligter og i *hans* pligter og -. Jeg er ræd, jeg har gjort hjemmet uudholdeligt for din stakkers far, Oswald. (3.122)

Again, we have the repetition of *søndagsvejr*. What Fru Alving is doing here is berating herself for not having been a good wife, indeed, erasing entirely all sense of self and of a right to, if not at very least, an instinct for happiness, in exactly the same vein as critics have been berating her ever since. And thus, as Templeton so aptly puts it, “[t]he cornerstone of the modern theatre is read as a play about a woman who failed as a wife”.¹³ Indeed, it certainly seems out of character for Ibsen to make such a clear indication of the *anagnorisis*; it seems too obvious that the dramatist of interiority should make the moment of recognition so unambiguous to the extent that he announces it before it takes place. It could almost have been included in the stage directions: “FRU ALVING [makes her recognition speech].”

But even if we reject this standard reading of Fru Alving's epiphany, we certainly have to find an explanation for these lines, and why so much space is devoted to them at such a crucial point in the play, the revelation of Regine's paternity. Again, Templeton's explanation convinces: here is Fru Alving's desperate attempt, having certainly gone some way in her battle against *gengangere*. This is not an anti-idealist gesture to rid Oswald of the very life-lie that she cultivated in him and for which Pastor Manders applauds her as the only positive thing she ever achieved in her dismal career as failed mother and wife. No, she is not on an anti-idealist mission. Rather she is in open combat with the truth, the truth of Regine's paternity, which she feels she has to disclose so that Oswald can choose whether he wants to pursue his happiness with Regine nevertheless. It is an attempt above all to relieve Oswald of his self-inflicted torture resulting from his understanding of the ætiology of the disease, namely his consorting with the happy band of liberated artists in Paris.¹⁴

The reading she gives Oswald of his father's career is a highly naturalistic account in which social environment is the determining factor in his dissipation (small town, bad company, limited opportunities, sour home-life) as is her account of her own part in his unhappiness, that is the conditioning of a loveless ethic of duty. This would indeed seem to circumvent the possibility of tragedy,¹⁵ and it tells us little more than we have already surmised - that Helene Alving should never have married Alving, or at least should never have returned to him having realised the boundless misery that the union caused.

John Northam talks of Fru Alving's "generosity" in assuming the blame for the fact of Alving's degeneracy, but leaves this instinct unexamined. It is a highly problematic speech.¹⁶ First of all, it negates the portrait of Alving so carefully established in Acts I and II, and the portrait of the degenerate Chamberlain is not simply the work of a bitter widow; it is partly corroborated by the man's childhood friend. But surely, the most striking vignette of Alving is that presented through childhood recollections of his son, perhaps the least biased account we get. This distressing picture of family misery would strip the fact of Engstrand's transformation of the orphanage into Chamberlain Alving's 'rest home' for sailors of its clearly ironic dimension.

Moreover, it provides a rupture in Fru Alving's own life-narrative which has hitherto been constructed around a series of choices, albeit disastrous ones, involving varying degrees of freedom, from her marriage to her abandonment of Alving and her flight to Manders; her decision to return to Alving even though it militated against her very nature; her decision to try to make the marriage work through the birth of the child; her choice to protect her son from Alving by sending him away from Rosenvold; her decision to pay off the pregnant Johanne and subsequent decision to take in Regine after Alving's death; her decision to take control of the running of the estate; and finally her decision to cleanse her son of the Alving inheritance by dedicating the orphanage to his memory. Her entire life is thus a catalogue of choices and actions, however constrained. This last speech would sit better on Fru Solness than on Fru Alving.

Further, it gives the impression of a man who is slowly broken by a cold, duty-crazed wife; but we hear immediately afterwards that “din far var et nedbrudt mand før du blev født” (3.122); Oswald we are told, was born only about two years into the marriage. Her confession fails to convince. Ibsen explained in a letter of 1887:

De forskellige åndsfunktioner udvikler sig nemlig ikke jevnside og ikke ligeligt i et og samme individ. Tilegnelsesdriften jager fremad fra vinding til vindig. Moralbevidstheden, ‘sammvitigheden’ er derimod meget konservativ. Den har sine dybe rødder i traditionerne og i det fortidige overhovedet. Heraf kommer den individuelle konflikt. (XVIII.128)

This view of uneven ethical development has clear application here: on the one hand Fru Alving can be seen to bow to conservative pressure to play the scapegoat, and on the other to pursue truth and to chafe against taboo. And thus she follows her account with the devastating revelation that Regine is Alving’s daughter. Oswald seems strangely unmoved by the news. Regine’s reaction again reinforces the earlier argument that her *livsglæde* exists only inasmuch as Oswald declares it, or at least his definition of this particular kind of joy, which had emerged in his defence of free love. Regine’s reaction is conservative, and inevitably, it is her mother who comes under censure, not Alving - another instance of the reduplication of the hypocritical economy of blame in which the woman emerges as the sinner:

REGINE. (hen for sig). Så mor var altså *slig en*.

FRU ALVING. Din mor var bra’ i mange stykker, Regine.

REGINE. Ja, men hun var altså *slig en* alligevel. (3.123 - italics mine.)

Realising that her dream of marrying Oswald can never come to anything, and that to remain at Rosenvold would involve ministering to the sick, she announces her departure: "Nej, jeg kan rigtig ikke gå her ude på landet og slide mig op for syge folk [...]. En fattig pige får nytte sin ungdom; for ellers kan en komme til at stå på en bakke før en ved af det. Og jeg har også livsglæde i mig, frue!" (3.123).

Her valedictory speech culminates in a triumphant declaration that she too has *livsglæden* in her, which makes it impossible for her to remain in the enclosed hospice that Rosenvold will become. Here *livsglæden* seems to represent an overweening instinct for survival which cancels all trace of human sympathy and compassion. On one level Regine's use of the word can be seen as a further example of how she adjusts language to fit a given situation - *livsglæden* has been the key word in the discussion. Her entire reaction to her new reality operates on a level of social status and ambition, as she goes off to claim her father's inheritance: "...jeg er lige så nær til lidt af de pengene, som han - den fæle snedkeren" (3.124), sinking into a deterministic rhetoric which shows she will inherit the worst of both her fathers. For Regine, progress was only a question of social advancement. Now that this path is closed to her, she aligns herself ethically with Manders and Engstrand, and with her inheritance from her parents, making her drama a naturalistic one. In other words, she chooses not to choose in an ethical sense. And as Fru Alving's final sequences show, choice is the most difficult thing to face.

Regine's insistence that there is *livsglæden* in her is greeted with a "Ja, desværre" by Fru Alving, which again makes her defence of Alving on the

grounds of his thwarted joy in life all the more suspect. In relation to Regine, Fru Alving sees it as a sign of her imminent decline and corruption, that is of everything that Alving had stood for in Act I, and she admonishes her not to throw herself away. Regine then reproaches Fru Alving not for her crime against the truth, but for having cheated her out of the upbringing she felt she was entitled to, and with a resentful glance at the unopened bottle of champagne which was never served to her, asserts that she may yet “komme til at drikke champagnevin med konditionerte folk” (3.124). This statement and the visual re-foregrounding of the champagne bottle underscores not only how close Regine had come to fulfilling her social aspirations, but also how the champagne ceremony of the previous act had radically different significance for Osvald and Regine. For Osvald, it was drinking to life and to vitality, a *salut* in its most literal sense to his vision of *livsglæden* to which he had co-opted Regine as his redemptive angel. For Regine, however, the entire semiology of France can be reduced to a superficial taste for social advancement. The champagne bottle can be seen to function as an index for *livsglæden*: alcohol for Fru Alving reminding her of her husband’s excesses and those appalling nights of drinking him under the table to limit his activities to Rosenvold, and *livsglæden* as a by-word for it; for Osvald the champagne represents the free, aesthetic life; his version of *livsglæden*. Finally, for Regine, an outward show of continental sophistication and social ambition. When she leaves Rosenvold, her *livsglæde* preventing her from remaining, she has material advancement in mind.¹⁷

Regine is the last character to leave. She exits to team up with her adoptive father and Pastor Manders, for as long as they will be useful to her. And she leaves of necessity. There is no question that she should stay at Rosenvold. Apart from the reasons she gives, she had no genuine feelings for Oswald, and does not fall into the trap of a misguided sense of duty to her half-brother. But in trying to liberate herself and make a clean break with her past at Rosenvold, she is, by virtue of the alignment she makes, simply re-enacting the past: she embraces the Alving legacy, defiantly asserting that she will become like her mother. Indeed if she does end up in Chamberlain Alving's Refuge, she will, ironically acquiesce to both Manders's and Engstrand's demands from Act I that she pay her debt of filial duty, and become the *tøs* that Engstrand wants her to be (1.55; 1.58; 3.119).

Fru Alving and Oswald are finally alone, and Oswald disabuses his mother of the notion that she has shattered his illusions and affections for his father, contrary to Manders's predictions. Oswald insists that he cannot feel for his father in his misery on more than a general human level (this is a dimension absent from Regine) and the fact that Alving was his father was simply a matter of biological fact - nothing more, nothing less: "Jeg har aldrig kendt noe til far. Jeg husker ikke andet om ham, end at han engang fik mig til at kaste op" (3.125). Fru Alving is appalled at the bare honesty of this account and objects, "Dette er forfærdeligt at tænke sig! Skulde ikke et barn føle kærlighed for sin far alligevel?" (3.125), thus lapsing into the very rhetoric of natural affections and duty that Manders promotes and Engstrand exploits and which she herself subjects to critical questioning in Act II:

PASTOR MANDERS. Har De glemt at et barn skal agte og elske sin fader og sin mor?

FRU ALVING. Lad os ikke ta' det så almindeligt. Lad os spørge: skal Osvald agte og elske kammerherre Alving?

PASTOR MANDERS. Er det ikke en røst i Deres morshjerte som forbyder Dem å nedbryde Deres søns idealer? (2.90)

In the event it turns out that this voice Manders appeals to is easily subdued in times of rational armchair discussion. But when Fru Alving is confronted with the disintegration of her son (in whom she has invested her redemptive vision just as Osvald invests his in Regine) the same voice which had once before redirected her progress towards freedom to a death-dealing formalism of unexamined positions, in which Osvald was conceived and into which he was born, once more takes hold of her. For not only has she echoed her own words of Act I describing her own condition when she fled Rosenvold as *grenseløst ulykkelig* (3.125), but she is also playing out the censorious reaction she predicts she would have had to face from the hypocritical community had she not gone to such lengths to cover Alving's tracks: "Havde folk fåt noget at vide, så havde de sagt som så: *stakkers* mand, det er rimeligt, at han skejer ud, han, som har en kone, der løber ifra ham" (2.89 - my italics). It is not only the sudden application of the epithet *stakkers* to Alving which reveals her vulnerability to the very ideas she is trying to release herself from, but also the fact that she subjects her own unhappiness to the dominant economy of blame.

Both mother and son, the one morally, the other physically, are regressing. Osvald is aware of this turn in his mother, commenting that there

is no reason why a son should love a father he barely knew and had nothing to thank for. He dismisses such injunctions as mere superstition and registers his surprise that his mother, "som er så oplyst forresten" should trot out such an opinion, which is nothing more than "en af disse meninger, som er sat i omløb i verden og så - " (3.125). She interrupts him, hearing the echo of her own words from Act II, words uttered before the ghosts she was so anxious to expose themselves took hold of her and made her articulate in their service. She finishes the sentence for Oswald, *Gengangere*, realising that intellectual engagement with these ghosts in books and periodicals is meaningless, and that all ethical engagement has to be *gennemlevd*.

Oswald has indeed spoken for her at last and it is significant that despite his weakened condition he does not fall back on these ghosts and dead ideals for comfort. Not only does he challenge his mother's resurgent conservatism regarding the parent-child relationship, (what Manders in Act I had declared to be natural affection), but he also refuses to permit himself or his mother the luxury of the illusion of intimacy and love, even in this critical moment when it could offer solace.

When Oswald reminds her of the ghosts of dead ideas, which are more important to her than the ghost of Alving, she is forced to probe beyond surfaces and ask him whether he in fact loves her or not. Oswald's honesty is bare: he tells his mother that at least he knows *her*, and is grateful for her affection for him, and points out that she will be very useful to him now that he is sick.

And it is at this point that Fru Alving struggles with her most formidable opponent - the necessary stage in her path to freedom - that is her *gengangeragtige* belief in the sanctity of the mother-son bond. In the next sequence we see her at her most vulnerable, fighting to keep both the illusion of her son's recovery and of the primal, meaningful relationship alive. This has functioned as the defining moment of happiness for her throughout the play, her *morslykke*.

Her desperation is signalled by her absurd statement that she is almost grateful for his sickness in bringing him back to her, giving her the opportunity to earn an affection she can no longer take as given.

But Oswald makes it clear that it is too late for such redemptive visions; whether or not she does manage to win him is academic; he is a sick man, with barely enough strength for himself, let alone the emotional resources for worrying about others. He goes on to reveal to her the full extent of his condition, and explains to her that the illness eating into his brain could at any moment render him as helpless as an infant. He makes it very clear to his mother that he expects her to administer the fatal dose of the morphine he has hoarded in the event of such a debilitating attack. He tells her she has to promise to do this, otherwise the fear of regressing and living a life which for Oswald is not human, is too much for him. Of course this is anathema to Fru Alving, who rejects the idea out of hand. But Oswald insists that she must, accusing her of depriving him of Regine, who would have gladly administered the fatal dosage as she would not have been able to stand seeing him in such a reduced state. The fact that Regine left of her own accord and

would not in any case have stayed around long enough for Oswald to reach such an advanced state of deterioration is beside the point. Regine, even in the best case, would have given Oswald the drug to relieve her own burden, not his, and thus *livsglæden* can only mean the survival instinct.

He is taking his mother at her word, challenging her maternal reflexes in statements such as the promise that there was nothing in this world that she would deny her son. The ultimate challenge and crisis comes when Fru Alving reacts against this plea with every fibre of her being:

OSVALD. Ja, nu får altså du gi' mig
håndsrækningen, mor.

FRU ALVING (skriger højt). Jeg!

OSVALD. Hvem er nærmere til det end du?

FRU ALVING. Jeg! Din mor!

OSVALD. Just derfor.

FRU ALVING. Jeg, som har givet dig livet!

OSVALD. Jeg har ikke bedt dig om livet. Og hvad er det for et slags liv, du har givet mig? Jeg vil ikke ha' det! Du skal ta' det igen! (3.129)

It is now clear to Fru Alving that all her nursery talk, promising her little boy that everything will be all right, is simply empty rhetoric, and the only way she can ease her son's suffering is by taking his life away together with the pain. She tries to rush out to call the doctor, an action Oswald pre-empts by locking the door, and excluding all social, external and unthinking responses. She returns to Oswald, with the words *mit barn*, now imbued with a vision of horror and the ground on which her relationship to freedom is to be tested. Oswald appeals to her maternal feelings, forcing her to redefine them radically through his emotional blackmail, echoing Manders: "Har du et morshjerte for mig, - du, som kan se mig lide af denne unævnelige angst"

(3.130). She capitulates, but immediately tries to comfort herself with the thought that it will never be necessary, and reverts to her previous language of mother comforting son, as if after a nightmare.

As Horst Bien argues, the rhythm of the play is constructed in such a way that the further away from the past the action of the play gets, the more formidable the opponents of the dead moral inheritance become, and the more the present reproduces them: "På denne måten gjør Ibsen det fortidige til en funksjon av samtiden." ¹⁸

But there is no respite. She is immediately confronted with the spectacle of Oswald's final collapse and his descent into senselessness. The sun has already risen and the starkness of the glaciers glowing in the morning light is discernible on stage. Despite this, Oswald in his delirium repeatedly begs his mother for the sun. The agony of her scream "Dette bæres ikke" (3.131) is interrupted by her frantic rummaging in his pockets for the morphine, screams which are entirely muffled and overshadowed by the *målløs rædsel* following the stark positing of the decision that confronts her: "Nej; nej; nej! - Jo!- Nej; nej!" (3.131). All the while Oswald continues to demand the sun that illuminates this most inarticulate of tragedies.

Critics who try to decide one way or the other whether or not Fru Alving does go on to administer the morphine effectively reduce the play to a *pièce à these*. And the demand for closure is extraordinary in a supposedly post-modern age. Ibsen himself professed not to know for certain. In any event, the problem is extra-textual in the most basic sense. Some critics do not hesitate to write the end of what they, perhaps following Ferguson see as too

truncated an ending, an unfinished play.¹⁹ Theoharis C. Theoharis for example writes of how the last scene demands that she “kill her only son [... and that] she transform that ultimate crime into the exonerating, liberating service of what Oswald has called ‘the joy of life’”.²⁰ On the contrary, Ibsen demands nothing. He only asks, and as Fru Alving’s struggle has shown, there is probably no salvation in the joy of life.

And the question which surely persists after the final curtain is not whether Fru Alving has managed to take Oswald’s fear away, as he hopes, but of how much progress she has made since the beginning of the play, and whether she has laid enough of the ghosts of conventional morality to be able to make a genuine choice in full freedom or whether the ghosts will choose for her.

The starkness of her response reduces her horror into noiseless terror. No discourse of homely maternity can even suggest itself here, and Ibsen’s choice to have Fru Alving retreat physically from a paralysed, atrophying Oswald, instead of having her support his lifeless body, deliberately *resists* the sunlit pietá arrangement and the soothing lullabies which close *Peer Gynt* - an ending that Fru Alving has been gesturing towards through her infantilisation of Oswald, right up to his demand for the sun:

FRU ALVING (bøjet over ham). Det har vært en forfærdelig indbildning hos dig, Oswald. Altsammen indbildning. Du har ikke tålt alt dette oprivende. Men nu skal du få hvile ud. Hjemme hos din egen mor, du min velsignede gut. Alt, hva du peger på, skal du få, som dengang du var et lidet barn. -Se så. Nu er anfaldet over. Ser du, hvor det gik! Å, det vidste jeg nok. -Og ser du, Oswald, hvilken dejlig dag vi får? Skinnende solvejr. Nå kan du rigtig få se hjemmet. (3:130)

As Theoharis points out, (perhaps unnecessarily), Helene Alving does not kill Oswald on stage. And since Ibsen did not shy away from stage representations of death, one can conclude that had his final scene demanded Oswald's euthanasia, he had sufficient theatrical resources to allow her to suggest a less ambiguous ending. Moreover, to indulge more than fleetingly in such extra-textual speculation seems pointless, but to base an interpretation of the play on an outcome that post-dates the final curtain seems ill-advised. By ending the action where he does, Ibsen may indeed invite criticism of having produced a "truncated" tragedy, but he is certainly not guilty of sensationalism. Neither do we need to finish the play off for him with one or another totalising reading.²¹

Surely what Ibsen intended to highlight, with the ambiguous aid of the sun symbolism (a symbol of truth finally breaking through, or a symbol of the inexorable rhythms of nature that go on unmoved by the activities of men?) was Fru Alving alone in her final moment of choice. This moment reveals how isolating and terrifying freedom can be without the ghosts of the unexamined life to process our decisions and without conditioned ethical reflexes to take away the fear. It also exposes the full extent of the 'pollution' the *miasma* incurred by a life led in deference to these ghosts. Fru Alving's inarticulate terror presages the gaps and the silences in Beckett.

The modalities of the ghostly existence were easy rhetoric and morality; the transvaluation of this rhetoric in the intellectual fight for freedom also had a voice. But the insight into true freedom obtained at the end is neither

glamorous, nor glorious, nor suggestive of any alternative modality beyond the muffled scream of the horror Fru Alving somehow senses when she condemns the human race as *gudsjammerlig lysredde*.

Thus in affirming the ordinary as the locus of dramatic and ethical exploration, Ibsen was at once affirming the capacity of the small man for suffering and for working towards his freedom. As the curtain goes down on *Gengangere* leaving Fru Alving to confront the light on her own, none of Steiner's "rational innovations" even vaguely suggest themselves to compromise the tragedy.

Endnotes

¹ Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music*, New York, 1909, p. 205, quoted in Evert Sprinchorn, "Science and Poetry in *Ghosts*: A Study in Ibsen's Craftsmanship", *Scandinavian Studies* 51, 1979, p. 354.

² Sprinchorn 1979, p. 357.

³ Michael Robinson, "Ibsen and the Possibility of Tragedy", *Scandinavica* 20, 2, 1981, p. 175.

⁴ There are three instances of this phrase in the play. The first is in Act I. Engstrand complains to Regine that her mother repelled his advances, only being interested in handsome men. These are also the words she used to Alving, brought back to Fru Alving as she overhears Regine use them. Her protestations to Engstrand were probably genuine; theirs was a marriage of convenience and he is physically deformed. However, in the case of Alving it is not made clear whether she was simply his victim or whether she nursed the ambitions Regine nurses for Oswald. It is unlikely considering the fact that Alving was married. Critics tend to read Johanne in the way that Regine does as *en slig en* - for which there is no evidence.

⁵ This does seem an extraordinary interpretation, especially in view of the fact that this play follows *Et Dukkehjem*. Throughout the realist cycle there is an active critique of the marriage transaction: Helene Alving and Ellida Wangel consciously conceive of their marriages as such. The material aspects of other unions are made clear in *Lille Eyolf*, *Bygmester Solness*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and Gina Ekdal's situation parallels that of Johanne Engstrand.

⁶ Joan Templeton, "Of This Time, of This Place: Fru Alving's Ghosts and the Shape of the Tragedy" in *PMLA*, 1986, p. 58. Templeton argues that Fru Alving's *anagnorisis* consists in her seeing the ghosts and her acknowledgement of her cowardice before them.

⁷ Edvard Beyer in his *livsglede* survey correctly points out that "[f]ørst i *Gengangere* blir ordet *livsglede* brukt i et ferdig drama." However, Beyer does not ask *why* the term is subsequently abandoned, and his examination of *livsglede* continues with discussions of *lykke*. Beyer offers a reading of *livsglæde* in this play as that which is sinned against. See Edvard Beyer, "Livsgleden som problem i Henrik Ibsens diktning", *Edda*, 1948, p. 146.

⁸ See Michael Rifaterre, *Fictional Truth*, Baltimore, 1990, p. 125. "Antanaclosis: a repetition of a word with a different meaning each time". There is a definite tendency towards this in Ibsen's dialogues, and it appears in its most concentrated form, as we shall see, in *Bygmester Solness*.

⁹ Here I am not alluding to the debate over whether Oswald was infected by his father's syphilis as a result of inhaling on his pipe in a physical sense. Whether or not he was is uninteresting. I am simply drawing attention to the way in which Ibsen's tightly constructed dialogue serves to align the notions of ghosts, sickness and *livsglæden*.

¹⁰ Sprinchorn 1979, pp. 356-60.

¹¹ There is another aspect to Oswald's pursuit of Regine which to my knowledge has never been confronted. Is it not strange that Oswald, in full knowledge of his illness and its infectious potential, makes sexual advances to Regine? Unless the fate element is stressed to the full, i.e. that Oswald *had* to be drawn to Regine as a function of *gengangere*. But as I shall argue later, the play is not so deterministic. Whichever way we look at Oswald's assault on Regine, he is, from a Kantian perspective, using her as a means to an end, just as she is using him.

¹² Lionel Trilling, "Of This Time, of That Place", *Partisan Review* 10, 1943, 72-103, quoted in Templeton 1986, p. 57.

¹³ Templeton 1986, p. 57.

¹⁴ Again, her account is closely structured around Oswald's description of life in Paris. Alving's "tragedy" is that he lacks everything Oswald had in Paris: a sense of calling and companions who knew what *livsglæden* was. There is not enough evidence in the text to determine Oswald's sexual history or whether he knew any women who had brought *søndagsvejr* into his life.

¹⁵ See Øystein Rottem, "<<den antike tragedie, gjenopstaaet paa moderne jord>>. Et notat om skjebnesynet i Henrik Ibsens *Gengangere*", *Edda* 4, 1991, pp. 345-58. Rottem argues that Naturalism precludes tragedy because the dimensions of choice and fate are absent.

¹⁶ John Northam, *Ibsen: A Critical Study*, London, 1973, p. 99.

¹⁷ Oswald does not have tragic possibilities. Unlike Ibsen's great artists, or artist figures, until his illness manifested itself, he had complete freedom to develop his talents, and has never experienced the conflicting demands of life and art.

¹⁸ See Horst Bien *Henrik Ibsens Realisme*, Oslo 1973 p. 178. If my analysis has been successful it will bear out this assertion which was made in answer to critics of Ibsen's retrospective technique such as Szondi, who claim that Ibsen's weakness is that the present is used simply as an occasion for conjuring up the past.

¹⁹ Francis Fergusson, "Ghosts: The Tragic Rhythm in a Small Figure" (from *The Idea of a Theater*, Princeton, 1949) reprinted in Rolf Fjelde ed., *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, p. 116.

²⁰ Theoharis C. Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, London, 1996, p. 75.

²¹ See Egil Törnqvist, "The End of Ghosts", *Ibsenårbok*, Oslo, 1978, pp. 50-61.

O generations of mortals,
I count your lives as equal
To nothingness itself.
For who, tell me who,
Has happiness that stretches further
Than a brief illusion
And, after the illusion, decline? - *Oedipus
Tyrannus*

Chapter VI

Rosmersholm: Lykken som Livsmål

6.1 Tragedy or Tragi-Comedy?

Rosmersholm has always divided critics. In Norway contemporary taste dismissed it as an “altfor abstrakt tankedrama” to have any future on the stage,¹ while in France the play received more positive treatment at the hands of Lugné-Poë and was greeted as the herald of a new dramatic expression.²

Academic criticism tends to focus on its generic status: tragedy or tragi-comedy? The dominant voices in this debate tend to be those denying tragedy. Here the objection seems to be less to the failure of the secular world-view to accommodate tragedy than a failure of the new world view to cut its heroes to the old cloth. In *Rosmersholm*, it is clearly the protagonists who are at issue.

John Hurrell argues that because neither Rosmer nor Rebekka is suited to the tragic role, their death “restores no order, teaches no lesson, and finalizes no experience.”³ There are obvious difficulties with such a didactic view of the function of tragedy, but Hurrell is not alone. John S. Chamberlain also points to the lack of any convincing fit between the protagonists and the tragic role, and asserts that Ibsen’s presentation of these two characters is in itself a “sardonic commentary of the high seriousness of their tragic roles”.⁴ Chamberlain concludes that the spirit of the play is that

of tragi-comedy, as the ending is but "the effective culmination of the ironic contrast between the appearance of tragic heroism in a Romantic mode and the pathetic and ultimately humiliating realities of the central situations once the Naturalistic and therefore specifically secular and temporal identities of Rosmer and Rebecca are understood".⁵ Chamberlain is expressing a popular misconception that the secularisation of tragedy was both something new and something terminal.

Jens Kruuse (writing before Chamberlain) also felt that the tragic status of Rebekka and Rosmer was at issue. He argues that Ulrik Brendel compromises the tragic integrity of the protagonists by announcing their great project of liberation before they do and by foreshadowing their sacrifice at the end of the play. He has no other dramatic function. "Dramaturgically this means that the two idealists are under suspicion. [... Brendel] functions as a bond between the two heroes and the ridiculous. An ironic mood is suggested."⁶ Jørgen Haugan's anti-idealistic reading in *Diktorsfinxen* also insists on the lack of heroic dimensions in the protagonists. He dismisses Rosmer's project of ennobling his fellow men as "substansløse, kristelig klingende fraser om 'lutring' og 'adling'".⁷ For Haugan these perceived shortcomings in the heroes define the work as a "nihilistisk stykke. Personene tømmes for ideale formål [...] Det er intet forsonende ved deres død".⁸

These arguments pay scant attention to the internal dynamics and shifting focus of the play. Ulrik Brendel cannot define the action and lead

interpretation; the political contours of the work do not even begin to suggest the measure of the conflict which lies at its heart. As Marie Wells points out, such views fail to take into consideration “the fact that after Act II, the focus of the play narrows. The comically-tinged political manoeuvres of Kroll and Mortensgård are replaced by the searing psychological and moral self-examinations and cross-examinations of Rosmer and Rebekka.”⁹

At this point a few observations about the special status of this play within the Ibsen canon will enable a more considered response to these criticisms. *Rosmersholm* is unique among the plays thus far discussed in that the tragic experience is filtered through two protagonists. Even in *Gengangere* the tragedy is mother’s rather than son’s, not mother’s and son’s. And looking forward to *John Gabriel Borkman*, even there, despite the scenic organisation and the palpable suffering of the twin sisters, they do not carry the tragedy but are only aspects of Borkman’s *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. No single consciousness holds sway throughout the action of *Rosmersholm*, and Rebekka and Rosmer do not even experience tragedy in parallel, nor indeed do they arrive at tragedy through the same terms until the final sequence.

Van Laan has traced the “shifting protagonist” of the play and concludes that throughout Act I and for most of Act II Rosmer is clearly the protagonist and he carries the dramatic interest. However, when he proposes marriage to Rebekka and she executes that famous *volte face* from ecstatic joy to a sudden, aggressively crescendoed withdrawal not only from the idea of a marriage contract but also from *Rosmersholm* and from life itself, Rosmer

is dislodged and Rebekka takes centre stage. She remains the focus of the drama until Rosmer insists on his own experience of tragedy and his loss of belief in his ability to transform mankind. It is here the tragedy becomes truly dual.¹⁰ The tragic dyad of *Rosmersholm* is however supported by a dramatic structure so finely balanced that the play is widely held to be the peak of Ibsen's technical achievement.¹¹

In writing this double tragedy Ibsen was risking much. By this stage he had firmly established his capacity for creating compelling tragic protagonists who could carry the burden of the tragedy alone, in the spirit of Chapter XIII of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Therefore, abandoning this template in *Rosmersholm* was a significant departure, especially since it is difficult to argue for the double suicide as part of the romantic *Liebestod* tradition. (If anything the *Liebestod* can only stand in ironic relationship to Rosmer and Rebekka as their death is not about love in any romantic sense).¹² The double perspective offered in this drama risked the fragmenting of the tragic experience.

But the tragic experience of *Rosmersholm* is far from fragmented. The analysis which follows sets out to demonstrate this through an examination of the play's main problematic, *lykke*. The play's treatment of the happiness issue is another aspect which distinguishes it from within a perspective new to Ibsen's stage. All tragedy is concerned with *lykke* in various manifestations but *Rosmersholm* openly declares it its dominant *thematic* preoccupation.

Edvard Beyer was one of the first critics to underscore this point:

“Rebekka er den første av Ibsens nåtidskvinner som har mot og kraft til å kjempe med alle midler for lykken”. Beyer draws our attention to a speech from one of Ibsen’s drafts for *Rosmersholm* in which Rebekka declares “det er noget af det største ved den nye tid, at vi vover åbenlyst at proklamere *lykken som livsmål*”.¹³ It is for this reason that *Rosmersholm* is so important to Ibsen’s evolving sense of happiness, and why a close reading is necessary. In this play, the pursuit and promotion of happiness as the highest good is the guiding principle of the action. That Rebekka and Rosmer fail in this project, both on a public and a private level, signals a new tragic variant - the tragedy of a flawed Utilitarianism.

6.1.2 Ibsen and Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism has stimulated little interest in Ibsen research; index entries for “Utilitarianism” and its chief proponents in full-length studies are hard to come by. Where they do occur, they tend to be references to the feminism of *Et Dukkehjem*, or Ibsen’s correspondence with Georg Brandes on the occasion of Brandes’s translations of J. S. Mill and the Dane’s failed attempt to convert his friend to Utilitarianism.

Brandes’s translation of *The Subjection of Women* (1869) was published in the same year under the title *Kvindernes Underkuelse* and his translation of *Utilitarianism* (1863), *Moral Grundet paa Lykke – eller Nytte Principet* came out in 1872. Brandes recalls a recalcitrance on the part of the playwright to “read Mill and turn Anglo-Saxon”¹⁴, while Ibsen for his part wondered why

Brandes should want to waste his time on a philosopher like Mill.¹⁵ Brian Johnston, taking Ibsen at his word, enlists the dramatist's distaste for British empirical philosophy and his admiration for Hegel and German idealists as proof of his dramatic intentions.¹⁶

Brian Downs, in a much earlier study, probes beneath the bombastic surface of Ibsen's statement, suspecting that there was perhaps too much coincidence of disposition between the two men for Ibsen's comfort, hence the haughty dismissal.¹⁷ Downs argues that in Ibsen

there was, often overlaid or qualified, a deep strain, probably derived from Rousseauistic romanticism, which made the happiness of the individual the ultimate criterion in morals – precisely the tenet of the 'hedonistic calculus' propounded by Jeremy Bentham, Mill's great predecessor.¹⁸

Bentham's *hedonistic* or *felicific calculus* rests on "that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action."¹⁹ Happiness is the great value; unhappiness or pain the disvalue. Moreover, a sense of equality is embedded in Bentham's dictum "everybody is to count for one, nobody for more than one". As Mill explains, this means precisely that one person's happiness must be assumed to be equal to another's and counted in exactly the same way.²⁰ For Bentham this principle is grounded in an essentialist anthropology, as expressed in a characteristic display of whimsy: "By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle without thinking of it. For such is the stuff that man is made of".²¹

One of the most attractive things about Utilitarianism is its claim that the *felicific calculus* can give us the right answers in questions of morality. These answers may be hard to find, but they are there.

Obviously the two Brians were writing very different books. Downs is wise to caution against being too deferential to Ibsen's own pronouncements, especially his more unequivocal declarations concerning influence (as in the cases of his well-known disavowal of the *kvindesage* in 1898 and the influence of Kierkegaard in 1870). However, in the case of Utilitarianism, there are three crucial aspects to it which render it *prima facie* uninteresting from the perspective of tragedy. Firstly, as the philosophy of amelioration, Utilitarianism is by its very nature forward-looking, whereas "the tragic tense" is the past tense; it is that which is "beyond recall".²² Secondly, interrogating the past is a somewhat alien activity to the Utilitarian: his emphasis will be on maximising happiness in the future. When things go awry in the Utilitarian world, regret is not given room for free play. Thirdly, there is no reliance on luck, and, as we shall see, at Rosmersholm no quarter is given to the sense of contingency. Finally, as a monistic view, it would seem to be out of sympathy with tragedy, which is so often engendered by conflicts borne of pluralistic ethics.

The following reading of *Rosmersholm* will argue against Johnston's attempt to banish Mill from Ibsen's stage world, but at the same time will offer a serious caveat to Downs's assertion that in Ibsen "the happiness of the individual" was "the ultimate criterion in morals" in the narrow Utilitarian

sense he proposes, because *Rosmersholm*, far from asserting the validity of the hedonistic calculus, registers its defeat.

6.2 Act I

6.2.1 Ulrik Brendel

It is through Brendel that the happiness problem opens up, albeit indirectly. Prior to his visit *lykke* is only an absence, asserted through scattered references to the past, to Beate Rosmer's "sidste ulykkelige levetid" (HU X.1.350). Brendel occupies a minimal amount of stage time, but his effect both on the other characters and on critics is far from negligible. It is necessary to examine the role of Brendel in this act and the implications he bears for an interpretation of Rosmer before we can make any confident statements about Rosmer and his project.

As we have seen, Brendel is sometimes taken as reason enough to disqualify Rosmer and Rebekka from the tragic. For many, the fact that Brendel announces his project in terms similar to those Rosmer subsequently employs, automatically subjects Rosmer to the reductive glare of irony. Kruuse, we recall, identified Brendel as Rosmer and Rebekka's "bond with the ridiculous". His argument seems logical enough. But were Ibsen to want to deconstruct Rosmer in this way, surely he had enough dramaturgical resources at his disposal to allow Rosmer to do that himself? Would Rosmer's stature be substantially altered were the part of Brendel to be excised altogether? Moreover, does this reading not imply that Ibsen is

undermining the remaining two and a half acts of text, only to reintroduce Brendel in the final act to remove all pretence of tragedy from the last sequence?

While this is undeniably a play of action foreshadowed, mirrored and repeated, readings such as Kruuse's reduce it to an undifferentiated string of actions and events. I would argue, in direct opposition to this reasoning, that the function of Brendel is precisely the opposite. Rosmer's struggle with him is not conducted in the same realistic terms as his struggle with Kroll is. His struggle with Brendel is more of a reflection of an internal struggle with nihilism, a struggle in which Brendel does not prevail. He does pose a challenge to Rosmer's integrity, but he is overcome.

Brendel's impact is instantly felt. Ibsen allows him to release immediate confusion. Throughout this act and during his reappearance in Act IV he disrupts, dislocates, annexes and parodies meaning until he himself degenerates into nothing less than a sinister sign of nihilism. One function of this histrionic entrance is to introduce the theme of identity and convictions as unreliable categories and to establish the vulnerability of meaning. His parodic foreshadowing of Rosmer's decision to step back into the public realm is uncanny, but as we shall see is not enough in itself to discredit his project. He declares that he is on his way to take up the fight in the great battle of life, a struggle which will take the form of a lecture tour - a sacrifice at "frigørelsens alter", as he puts it, inserting a tragic dimension into this struggle, claiming that this is not his personal wish but "*enfin* - den

tvingende nødvendighed" (1.361) - the phrase Ibsen later gives to Borkman to explain the compulsion that drove him to sacrifice Ella (XIII:2.85). The gratuitous French filler underscores the fact that for Brendel language is nothing more than a rhetorical tool. With Brendel's inflated moral currency Ibsen provides a caricature of the man with a calling.

All meaning is vexed in Brendel's hands. Referring to the turning point he has reached, he cites the scriptures "-Jo, du, nu vil jeg iføre mig et nyt menneske" in direct reference to Ephesians 4:24 "... men legge av det gamle menneske og kle dere i det nye menneske", before literally putting on Rosmer's clothes, going on a drunken binge in them and then pawning them. The mock-heroic reach of his rhetoric is undermined by the philosophy he embodies. A self-styled sybarite, *Feinschmecker*, Brendel locates the good life in a debased version of the epicurean life, as something tangible and quantifiable. For him happiness is tantamount to a slavish satisfaction of the appetites. He calculates that if pleasures are indulged in solitude, they are twice as enjoyable. In direct mockery of Kroll's temperance society, he expresses a wish to sign up for a week. Kroll, rising to the bait, informs him that they do not accept applications on a weekly basis. Brendel belittles the society further by proposing a toast in faulty French - to happiness, *la bonheur* (1.364).²³

It is clear that Brendel's version of *bonheur* consists in responding to what John Stuart Mill called the "nearer desires", to appetite and self-indulgence. Mill argues that many fine men often prefer the nearer desires to

the nobler as the noble character requires cultivation if it is not to fall into misuse. Brendel's version of epicureanism has absolutely no moral purchase in Rosmer's world.²⁴

Kroll's stiff reaction of barely veiled contempt for Brendel is in character. Rebekka's admiration can be attributed to her previous reading of Brendel's work which she found in her foster-father's library (and perhaps because of the bold philosophy expressed in these works, marvels at the fact that Brendel is still alive (1.359)). Rosmer's reaction is very charitable. He lends him clothes and money, and admires him for having "mod til at leve livet efter sit eget hode" (1.365) - something Rosmer himself has only just started to do. Rosmer's reaction can be explained in part by this and in part as the result of a vestigial fondness for an old tutor who once had great influence over him and a desire to compensate for his father's harsh treatment of him. Brendel does not call down the ironic death-blow on either tragic protagonist.

6.2.2 Frigørelsens Værk

The remainder of the act is dominated by Rosmer's exegesis of his new political vision, his "frigørelsens værk" (1.367). The terms of his new calling require detailed attention to refute Haugan's sceptical reading of it as something compounded of no more than "substansløse, kristelig klingende fraser om 'lutring' og 'adling'".²⁵ Indeed, there is much apparent support in the text for Haugan's interpretation.

Rosmer's rhetoric is highly Christian both in letter and in spirit. He has given up the cloth (his father's choice for him, not his own calling) and has also renounced his faith, his "barnetro" (1.386). We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of Rosmer's apostasy, and must not underestimate the social significance of his departure from the church. In leaving the church Rosmer was effectively stepping out of his genealogy and the Rosmer *embetstradisjon*, in which his moral authority was vested. Furthermore, Rosmer never gives us cause to believe that the renunciation of his faith was just a "forbigående anfektelse" (1.386) as he puts it himself. In contrast to Julian's, there is nothing in Rosmer's vision of a better world to directly oppose the Christian spirit; indeed there is much to reinforce it. Rosmer speaks of the ideals of "fred og glæde og forsoning" (1.369), and Psalm 119 echoes in his words: "De som elsker din lov, har fred og lykke", as does Psalm 165: "Han gir lykke og fred i ditt land". It is peace and happiness which Rosmer reads into "den store sandhedens og frihedens verden som nu er ble't mig *åbenbaret*" (1.368 – italics mine).

This is no empty rhetoric. Rosmer criticises Kroll for violating the spirit of Christian *agape*, with "al den *ukærlige* tale, du der førte, - alle dine *hadefulde* udfald mod dem, som står på den anden side, din *hånende fordømmelsesdom* over motstanderne" (1.369 – italics mine). He is appealing to the basic Christian message of "love thy enemy" and still operating within a vestigial Christianity, but this does not in itself undermine the integrity of his vision, and Haugan's "klingende kristelige fraser" fail to give adequate

representation of his political mission.

The point is that Rosmer has embraced a version of Utilitarianism, and as such has preserved much of the non-theistic Christian message intact. (*Forsoning*, it must be remembered, also has a secular reach, that of conciliation, in addition to its dominant religious sense of atonement.) He has arrived at these principles through another path, and believes that they can be sanctioned independently of religious institution and divinities. Rosmer is the Ibsenian rationalist *par excellence*, a true spokesman for Enlightenment morality, with its faith in the perfectibility of the autonomous rational individual.

Haugan's charge that Rosmer's vision is "insubstantial" implies that Rosmer's rhetoric, like Brendel's, has no ethical or idealistic underpinning. This judgement does not stand up to very close scrutiny. Firstly, Haugan fails to take into account the fact that Rosmer, unlike Brendel, does not cite the scriptures for effect or self-aggrandisement. Secondly, the role of reformer is not one that Rosmer relishes; like Hamlet, he is reluctant to assume an active role. However, his decision to declare his apostasy in public and intervene in the status quo is prompted by his identification with the values that he embraces and as the response to his duty towards them. In order to prevent the spread of hatred he has had to put aside his reservations and overcome his natural inclinations: "Da stod pligten uafviselig for mig. Menneskene blir onde under den strid, som nu pågår. Her må komme fred og glæde og forsoning ind i sindene" (1.369). Prior to that he had thought he

could internalise his epiphany and devote his life to reading enlightening texts: "Jeg tænkte, jeg kunde bli' ved at leve her som hidtil, *stille og glad og lykkelig* (1.368- italics mine)". There is a definite tension here: The great world of truth and freedom that has been revealed before him does not inspire him to intervene in the affairs of men, but rather to withdraw into a world of contemplation, *theoria* not *praxis*.

Rosmer conforms to Aristotle's portrait of the *eudaimon* man, described in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the contemplative man: "Happiness, then, is co-extensive with contemplation, and the more people contemplate, the happier they are, not incidentally, but in virtue of their contemplation, because it is in itself precious. Thus happiness is a form of contemplation" (1178b29). Like Aristotle's man of contemplation, Rosmer is no ascetic, for the contemplative life requires the support of external goods, food for example. Since Beate's death Rosmersholm has turned into a real home for Rosmer, "godt og hyggeligt - og fredsomt" (1.366). Like Aristotle's contemplative man Rosmer is not a seeker of truth. He considers that he has already achieved wisdom and seeks to contemplate it further, "at fordype mig", as he puts it. What Rosmer is yearning for comes close to the Epicurean and Stoic notion of *ataraxia*, the tranquility which was the proper goal of life.²⁶ But the point is that Rosmer denies himself the tranquil contemplative life and overcomes his instinct to keep his apostasy to himself in order to enter the fray. This, after his apostasy, cannot be taken as anything but a sign of integrity and good faith. Moreover, although we see

this clear alliance between *eudaimonia* and the contemplative life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the *Poetics* Aristotle expressly states in Chapter VI that *eudaimonia* expresses itself through *praxis*, action: "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of man, but of an action, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality."

Rosmer declares himself an independent, non-partisan champion of democracy, whose project he defines thus "Jeg vil leve og sætte alle mine livsens kræfter ind på dette ene, - at skabe det sande folkedømme i landet" (1.367). He sees the true task of democracy to lie in the ennoblement of all, to "gøre alle mennesker i landet til adelsmennesker" (1.367). This vision of universal ennoblement is given a decidedly Utilitarian flavour by the afterthought "så mange som muligt i alle fald" (1.367) - a clear dedication to the principle of the maximisation of utility.²⁷ He aims to do this through a process of liberating minds and purifying wills. When Kroll expresses his scepticism at Rosmer's ability to achieve this transformation in this "ulykkelige land", Rosmer counters that he sees himself more as a facilitator for this revolution; "jeg vil bare søge at vække dem til det. Gøre det, - det må de selv" (1.368).

In two significant ways Rosmer reminds us of John Stuart Mill. On a biographical level the similarities are striking: Rosmer like Mill has rebelled against his upbringing and his father and rejects his father's beliefs and philosophies, although his rebellion takes a different direction. Mill rejected his father's absolute dismissal of God and religion and his strict version of

Utilitarianism, and questioned the wisdom of emotionally starving a child for the sake of a first class rational education. Rosmer has also rebelled against his father. It was his father's choice that he should enter the church, not his, and thus in rejecting this role, Rosmer is making a stand against paternal and paternalistic authority and against imposing callings and beliefs on others. Rosmer has effectively stepped out of the Rosmer line. And like Mill, Rosmer is a rather shy character, given more to contemplation and study than active engagement with his environment.²⁸

As the dialogue with Kroll develops, it is not only Rosmer's deep-seated belief in tolerance as an indispensable social good that suggests Mill to us, but also his preoccupation with the question of happiness. It is this principle of universal happiness that enjoins the duty on him to stand up and be counted. Here for the first, and perhaps the only time in Ibsen, happiness (here *glæde*) and duty *pligt* are in agreement. Indeed, Rosmer is expressing a duty *to* happiness.

The above points serve to situate Rosmer ethically. He stands in marked contrast to the sybaritic version of pleasure represented by Brendel. The contrast here is that Rosmer's goal is happiness, which he conceives of both in personal and social terms. This makes him a *eudaimonist*; Brendel, whose goal is pleasure is a *hedonist* and their versions of the good life differ radically. Furthermore, Rosmer does not revel in the theatricality of his role as Brendel does.

6.2.3 Lykke

It is in terms of his *eudaimonist* quest that Rosmer should be viewed. His vision is not vague as is often believed. The problem is that few critics have taken the trouble to give Rosmer due consideration, with the notable exception of Errol Durbach. Durbach interprets Rosmer's utopian vision of universal happiness as the product of a romantic world view. His constant recourse to concepts such as *lykke, glæde, frihed* echo from deep within the lexicon of what he calls, after M. H. Abrams, "high romantic words".²⁹

And the norm of life is joy - by which is meant not that joy is the standard state of man, but that joy is what man is born for: it is the sign that an individual, in the free exercise of all his faculties, is completely alive; it is the necessary condition for a full community of life and love; and it is both the precondition and the end of the highest art.³⁰

This is a dangerous line to pursue in the case of Rosmer. For it seems to me that this kind of Romantic joy that Durbach is asserting is of a very different species from that of Rosmer's rationalist ethics. As Adam Potkay points out, the eighteenth century obsession with happiness was "eclipsed in the Romantic era by the praise of 'joy', which denotes an exaltation of spirit, less a conscious way of life than a surge of emotion in the moment."³¹ Surely what Rosmer wants to establish is precisely happiness as a universalizable "conscious way of life"?

Durbach goes on to distinguish different qualities of response to the world in *lykke, lyksalighed* and *glæde*. *Glæde* is distinct from *lykke* with its "overtones of good fortune, or the sort of happiness that derives from

temporary pleasure, and *fryd*, which suggests delight - not as a condition of being but as a response to the world."³² Durbach is right to underline the difference between them, and to draw attention to the duality of *lykke* and the less porous notion of *glæde*, which he sees as a conceptual descendent of Osvald Alving's *livsglæde*. However, I think that his reading falters on two counts: if Rosmerian *glæde* is a "direct descendent" of *livsglæde*, it is guilty by association, for as we saw in the previous chapter, *livsglæde* is a suspect category. Secondly, as already noted, all the terms Rosmer incorporates into his Utilitarian vision are of biblical descent, a natural choice of lexicon for a former clergyman. Furthermore, without denying Ibsen's highly nuanced use of apparent synonyms, even the closest of readings would be stretched to sustain any *consistent* differentiation between the *lykke* cognates Rosmer employs. Most of the time it is synonymy for the sake of reinforcement. And by the end of Act IV *lykke* and *glæde* along with all other words have been reduced to *talemåder* and the salvaging of meaning takes place through symbolic action, not linguistic rehabilitation.

Rosmer has a vision of the regenerative possibilities for human beings, one that is generalisable from the personal to the social. He can live a *lykkelig* life by taking on oppressive institutions and inspiring the people to nobility and happiness. Rosmer, by comparison with several other Ibsen heroes, is exceptional in that his 'life-plan'³³ is not obviously flawed. There is much in the text that underscores the extent of Rosmer's influence in the community, both as a representative of a long line of high-ranking officials,

(which gives him automatic stature in tragic terms) and we also hear of the reach of the influence of Rosmersholm from Madam Helseth, albeit negative.³⁴ Neither is his vision in itself outrageous nor potentially destructive. Thus in many respects he is highly plausible. And whatever its vestigial Christianity, Rosmer is not, unlike Solness, in direct competition with God, but rather is mounting a challenge to the representatives of moribund social institutions. He is guilty of none of what Atle Kittang calls the “moralsk terrorisme” of Brand³⁵; none of the ineffectual narcissism of Alfred Allmers, none of the volatile defiance of Solness, and his vision does not point to an enormous chasm between potential and present reality that Borkman’s vision does. While Solness and Borkman mask their personal torment in quasi-Utilitarian terms, Rosmer’s quest *is* Utilitarian. His secularised morality is grounded in a belief in the perfectibility of mankind and in happiness as the crown of this perfectibility, freed of superstition and coercion.

Rosmer moreover retains a sense of community with those around him. When Kroll labels him a renegade, Rosmer confesses that the knowledge that his conversion would cause distress to his old friend and mentor blunted the happiness he would otherwise have felt. “Jeg skulde ha’ følt mig så glad, - så inderlig *lykkelig* ved det, som du kalder frafaldet. Men så led jeg pinligt alligevel. For jeg vidste jo nok at det vilde volde dig en bitter sorg” (1.366-7 - my italics). This happiness which derives from a sense of peace and security in new convictions is vulnerable to Rosmer’s sense of

moral community which entails a sensitivity to the feelings of his fellow men and their capacity for suffering, however alien he finds their views.

By the end of Act I it is clear that Rosmer is committed to his project in that he has rejected his public role and has found the courage to declare himself in order to assume a role that, all things being equal, he would rather not perform. His vision of happiness also seems specifically Benthamite, beyond its political agenda, in that it is definable as what is known as the “mental state version” of happiness, in other words happiness is a state of blissful contentment, or immunity from pain.³⁶ This version of happiness contrasts with the “desire satisfaction account”, which sees all action as purposive and directed towards getting what one wants. But as the play unravels, it will become increasingly clear that both these accounts of happiness are too thin.³⁷

It is not Brendel who casts suspicion on Rosmer. At this stage the only aspect of his confession which announces his imminent downfall is his consummate certainty and security in his position. Formulae such as “nu er jeg kommen på det rene med mig selv i alle dele” (1.365); “fuld visshed” (1.386) poise him for certain *peripeteia*. This is underscored by Ibsen’s choice to close the act on Rebekka’s foreboding of the white horses instead of Rosmer’s supreme self-confidence.

6.3 Act II

6.3.1 Kroll and Mortensgård

Rosmer remains confident despite Kroll's formal dissolution of their friendship. When Kroll returns the following day, Rosmer is sure that it is in order to make amends, but Kroll's next line of questioning precipitates Rosmer's *peripeteia*. He reopens the question of Beate, and for the first time the *fact* of Beate's suicide is clearly stated, free of euphemism ("den vej, som Beate gik"). Rosmer believes that her suicide was the action of an "ulykkelig, syg, utilregnelig" woman, governed by her "ustyrlige, vilde lidenskabelighed, som hun forlangte, jeg skulde gjengælde. Å den rædsel hun indgød mig!" (2.377). He explains how her mental instability was further compounded by her sense of guilt at being childless but he assures Kroll that his sister was always treated with the greatest delicacy by himself and Rebekka: she was never burdened with his ongoing spiritual crisis, nor was she given access to the literature Rebekka had concerning the proper function of marriage.³⁸ He and Rebekka had absolutely no part in her decision to take her own life. Here again we feel that Rosmer's confidence is dangerous. He has already admitted to his sexual rejection of Beate and therefore must acknowledge some part in her unhappiness.

Kroll then makes the devastating revelation that "den stakkers, forpinte og overspændte Beate gjorde ende på sit eget liv for at du skulde få leve *lykkelig*, - få leve *fritt* og - efter din *lyst*" (2.378 - italics mine). Here the notion of *lykke* continues to call up a sense of quiet contentment, shored up

by a sense of freedom and self-determination, unhampered by any sense of marital *pligt*, the duty Beate felt she had to release Rosmer from. Rosmer is horrified by the suggestion that Beate sacrificed herself so that he might marry Rebekka and live happily as the father of her child. Beate's sacrifice can be interpreted within Utilitarian terms as an attempt to diminish burdens and maximise benefits. It can be reduced to such a calculation, and it is possible that Beate had come to see herself in these impersonal terms.

Rosmer is perplexed as to why Kroll should have kept these confidences to himself for so long, and why he had never cast any aspersions on the nature of his co-habitation with Rebekka. Kroll explains that he had had no idea until the previous evening that Rosmer and Rebekka were a "frafalden mand" and a "frigjort kvinde" (2.380). It is in response to this reactionary labelling that Rosmer articulates a basic premise of his new-found belief in the natural morality and perfectibility of the human being: "Du tror altså ikke at der hos frafaldne og frigjorte mennesker kan findes renhedssind? Du tror ikke, de kan ha' sædelighedskravet i sig som en naturtrang?" (2.380). This concept arose during the Enlightenment when the perfectibility of mankind ceased to be the exclusive property of God. The terms of Rosmer's new beliefs thus have their origins both in Christianity and bourgeois morality: *renhedssind* - purity, the opposite of sin, so fundamental to Christianity, and *sædelighedskrav* - a term of bourgeois morality. Perhaps this insistence on purity (sexual purity here) fills a vacuum left by his abandoned *barndomstro*; but it will also receive fuller

expression when Rosmer faces his crisis.

Rosmer's belief in an inborn ethical sensibility is reminiscent of Mill's humanism. In *On Liberty*, Mill asserts, "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance is surely man himself."³⁹ It is a secular reformulation of Brand's words to Ejnar in Act I: "Frem af disse Sjælestumper, / af disse Aandens Torsoklumper, / af disse Hoder, disse Hænder / et helt skal gaa saa Herren kjender / sin Mand igjen, sit største Værk" (HU V.1.195). Kroll is categorical. The only version of perfectibility he will countenance is that available to man via God's church: "Jeg bygger ikke stort på den slags sædelighed, som ikke har sin rod i kirkens tro" (2.381).

Now convinced that concupiscence lies at the core of Rosmer's apostasy, Kroll concedes that his profoundly unhappy marriage mitigates his behaviour to a certain extent, but now, instead of taking Rosmer to task for keeping his break with the church to himself, insists that this is a private matter and cautions him to keep his opinions within Rosmersholm: "Dette her er jo en rent personlig sag. Der er da ingen nødvendighed for at sligt råbes ud over hele landet" (2.382). But Rosmer resists this location of his apostasy in the sexual, private realm, and still convinced of his integrity, is determined to collapse the distinction between the private and the public man and be transparent. He declares it a necessity for him to declare himself publicly, to "komme ud af en falsk og tvetydig stilling" (2.382). Kroll considers this a violation of his *pligt*, both to the traditions of Rosmersholm,

“den rosmerske familjetanke” and to the people; to do so would provoke confusion, “en usalig, en ubodelig forvirring”- miserable, irreparable confusion (2.382).

But for Rosmer, his duty to “tænde lidt lys og glæde her, hvor slægten Rosmer har skabt mørke og tyngsel gennem alle de lange, lange tider” (2.382) trumps this imputed duty. He considers it his overriding duty to cancel out the effect of the “rosmerske familjetanke” (2.382), even though he is more temperamentally suited to the role of the man of contemplation, despite the fact that, as Kroll points out (or perhaps because of it) he *is* the last in the line. There is never any suggestion that there might be regeneration through progeny in this work, either from Rosmer or Rebekka.⁴⁰ Rosmer insists that his duty lies not only in intellectual inquiry but “...jeg vil nu med i livsstriden en gang, jeg også” (2.382), again in defence of his principles and of his integrity. By now Brendel has been reduced to a muted echo by the tension and antagonism of this scene. Kroll defines this battle as one to the death, and when his archenemy Mortensgård is announced suddenly, he jumps to conclusions and declares his weapons - knives, not the noble weapons that Rosmer had pleaded for in the previous act.

Mortensgård's visit to Rosmersholm mirrors that of Kroll's the previous day. Like Kroll he has come to co-opt Rosmer to lend moral authority to his political publication. Like Kroll he warns Rosmer against going public with his apostasy, as it is his identification with the church and

tradition that makes him invulnerable on a personal level. Rosmer is characteristically undeterred, and once again insists on his unimpeachable integrity: "Jeg føler mig usårlig på alle personlige områder, herr Mortensgård. Min vandel lar sig ikke angribe" (2.387). But like Kroll, Mortensgård also has information from Beate which calls for a reevaluation of Beate's suicide. He warns Rosmer that he will become a marked man if he goes public with his apostasy: "De må huske på, De er ikke nogen fredlyst mand herefterdags" (2.390).

The combination of these two visits, from both left and right, radical and reactionary, has finally led to a crisis in Rosmer's seemingly unshakeable confidence. It is as though he has had a double curse visited upon him, and is confronted with a riddle - "møllefossens gåde" as Kroll terms it - which is to supplant his previously declared quest, that of ennobling souls. This has left him utterly demoralised. A perceptible loss of faith in his fellow men has also taken place; for the first time Rosmer condemns the "rå sind" and "uædle øjne" (2.392) of those who seek to sully the purity of his relationship with Rebekka with innuendo. Kroll and Mortensgård have each in turn through their anxiety to appropriate the Rosmer name for political ends reduced him to a sign of inherited, institutionalised respectability, in short everything he rejects, and then threaten him, in parallel, with becoming a sign for the opposite if he fails to toe the line. They have crushed and demoralised him by closing off all avenues of self-expression. Deprived of his freedom and his peace of mind,

he finds himself without a centre. He is left with the irony that the only moral authority he has derives not from his own integrity, but from the very values he has deserted. He now has to confront the intolerable gap between the image of the man he seems to be and the man he thought he was, as well as the emergence of a worse self.

6.3.2 Den stille, glade skyldfrihed

Rebekka's role for the rest of the act is clearly defined. She uses all her powers of persuasion to try to halt Rosmer's descent into doubt and despair and to prevent him from resurrecting Beate with any identity that might conflict with the one they buried her with. It is no longer a mad barren woman but a tortured, betrayed, sacrificial victim who threw herself into the mill-race out of love for her husband. Rosmer has begun to question his conviction that he has no guilt in Beate's decision to jump to her death, and the more his doubts increase, the more "uhyggelig levende" (2.392). Beate becomes. He now feels the compelling urge to get to the bottom of Beate's mental state, "at se til bunds" (2.372). This process begins with the realisation that Beate cannot have been blind to the fact that he became so *lykkelig* after Rebekka's arrival at Rosmersholm. He goes on to reconstruct Beate's sense of exclusion, jealousy and despair at their relationship. This devastates him. Rebekka asks Rosmer if it were in his power, whether he would reverse Beate's suicide. He dismisses this suggestion as irrelevant to the agony, the agony of confronting what is *uigenkaldelig* (2.394) - that which

in William Chase Greene's words is "beyond recall". And it is at this point that Rosmer begins, however slowly, to open himself to tragic possibilities.

Rosmer has been violently wrested from the realm of future possibility and thrust into the grim, implacable past. Alert to this realignment, Rebekka knows that she must rescue Rosmer from despair, and thus attempts to switch the focus back to the future and impresses on him the importance of starting the new life he had planned: "Du havde gjort dig fuldt fri - til alle sider. Du følte dig så glad og så let -." She returns to scenes of intimacy between them, which had laid the foundations for this emancipation:

REBEKKA. Hvor dejlig det var når vi sad der nede i stuen i mørkningen. Og vi så hjalp hinanden at lægge de nye livsplaner til rette. Du vilde gribe ind i det levende liv, - i dagens levende liv, - som du sa'. Du ville gå som en frigørende gæst fra det ene hjem til det andet. Vinde sindene og viljerne for dig. Skabe adelsmennesker rundt omkring, - i videre og videre kredse. Adelsmennesker.

ROSMER. Glade adelsmennesker. (2.394)

Rosmer insists that it is *glæde*, joy which ennobles. Rebekka asks whether *smerte*, pain, cannot achieve the same thing. These two poles, pain and joy, have enjoyed a long philosophical tradition, from Aristotle to Bentham to Nietzsche. Rosmer replies that pain has an ennobling capacity only if overcome, and in his case the pain is insurmountable because his guilt is intractable. This is the first test Rosmer faces. It would be natural for him at this point to seek sanctuary in his "barnetro", but he does not. This is evidence that his breach with his Christian faith is a substantial one. There is

no potential here for forgiveness, and this fact opens up the unbridgeable gap between moral and tragic guilt, between sin and *hamartia*.

I will return to the issue of tragic guilt, but at this point the basic conflict is between *glæde* and *smerte*. The former ennobles, the latter destroys. This reveals a distinct fragility at the core of *glæde*, which for Rosmer lies within a prelapsarian structure that is all too easily disillusioned. The doubt that has taken root in his mind is invincible and will always function as an obstacle between him and “det som gør livet så vidunderlig dejligt at leve [...] Den stille, glade skyldfrihed” (2.395). This foregrounding of innocence as a definitive mental state version of happiness has an alienating effect on Rebekka; she reacts physically by taking a step back, the first direct intimation of her guilt. Still determined to keep Rosmer from being crushed under the hooves of the white horses, whom they both hear approaching, she insists that the only way he can conquer them is by creating new conditions for living, “at skabe nye forhold”, in short, become a man of action: “leve, virke, handle. Ikke sidde her og gruble og ruge over uløselige gåder” (2.395). Rebekka is trying to replace Rosmer’s mental state version with a goal-directed mode of existence. Action instead of being. Rosmer’s ontological formulation, “if you are *x*, you will be happy” for “if you do *y*, you will be happy”.

Rebekka is clearly alert to the vulnerability of the mental state version of Rosmer’s happiness. Once disturbed it is difficult to re-establish and seems inadequate to sustain any material dislocations. This is why she urges

him to create new circumstances and, moreover, to act, instead of losing himself in guilty thought.

This leads Rosmer to re-evaluate his platonic friendship with Rebekka, which for him had represented the ideal of a chaste relationship between man and woman, "det som binder os så inderligt til hinanden, - vor fælles tro på et rent samliv mellem mand og kvinde" (2.396). He states that this condition (and he repeats his formula for happiness expressed earlier to Kroll, "stille, lykkelig fred" (2.396)) is best suited to times of peace and harmony, but now that he is literally fighting for his life, his emancipation and freedom, he needs to establish a new reality as a base from which to conduct this struggle. He astonishes Rebekka by asking her to become "min anden hustru" (2.396).⁴¹ This results in what is arguably one of the most famous moments on the Ibsen stage:

REBEKKA (*et øyeblik målløs, skriger op i glæde*).
Din hustru! Din - ! Jeg!

ROSMER. Godt. Lad os prøve det. Vi to vil være et. Her må ikke længere stå noget tomt rum efter den døde.

REBEKKA. Jeg - i Beates sted - !

ROSMER. Så er hun ude av sagaen. Helt ude. For evig og altid.

REBEKKA (*sagte og bævende*). Tror du det, Rosmer? (2.397)

Rosmer's response is a departure from the rational responses he has been giving so far. It foreshadows the words and intensity of the suffering of Halvard Solness,⁴² trying to correct an intolerable situation through willing:

Det må ske! Det må! Jeg kan ikke, - jeg vil ikke gå igennem livet med et lig på ryggen. Hjælp mig at kaste det af, Rebekka. Og lad os så kvæle alle mindelser

i frihed, i fryd, i lidenskab. Du skal være for mig den
eneste hustru, jeg nogen sinde har havt. (2.397)

Rosmer is now stepping out of the past, in a desperate attempt to foreclose tragedy by erasing the past through a deluded project of stifling memory in freedom, joy and, suddenly, passion. This may at first appear to be an attempt to recapture innocence, but one of the organising principles of his happy innocence was the freedom from passion – he later describes his relationship with Rebekka as “denne stille, glade, begærløse lyksalighed” (3.406). His wish to escape the riddle of the mill-race is so intense that he is confounding all the terms of his vision and using them to avoid confronting himself. He does not realise how utterly absurd this proposition is because memory, where it represents truth, cannot be thus stifled without compromising the very values he wishes to enlist. In trying to avert tragedy, Rosmer perverts his vision.

Although Rebekka refuses to join him in this attempt to stifle the past, she does not wish to confront it either, for reasons which will become apparent in the following acts. This is evident from the fact that her inexplicable withdrawal from Rosmer results in a linguistic regression into the suicide euphemism established in the first act. Rebekka threatens to “gå den vej, som Beate gik”, showing a resistance to uncovering truth.

Rosmer, prompted by the facts revealed to him by Kroll and Mortensgård, has experienced his *peripeteia*. His quest, to ennoble his fellow men has turned into a riddle, not only on the level that Kroll suggests “møllefossens gåde” but also in the tragic sense. Like Oedipus, Rosmer sees

himself as the one whose duty it was to save an *ulykkelig land*, but is subsequently consumed by the riddle of who killed Laius/Beate. Rosmer resists the task of solving the riddle, because ultimately, like Oedipus's riddle, it is the riddle of identity, and it reaches beyond questions of fact. The riddle of the mill-race extends beyond Beate's suicide and establishes itself firmly in Rosmer's conscience as the riddle of identity itself. The riddle, unlike the problem, admits of no solution; rather initiates a crisis of perspective: "The Greeks were drawn to enigmas. But what is an enigma? A mysterious formulation you could say. Yet that would not be enough to define an enigma. The other thing you have to say is that the answer to an enigma is likewise mysterious."⁴³

Rosmer has been forced to see that Beate's narrative of rejection, loss and sacrifice will not submit to his logic of mad desperate action, and to see *til bunds* as part of him feels he now must, will involve a similar loss for him: the loss of the sense of an unimpeachable moral self. This, in combination with the demoralising effect Kroll and Mortensgård have had on him, instils a debilitating terror in Rosmer.

6.4 Act III

6.4.1 Lykke for alle

Act III opens in the same way as Act I, with Madam Helseth and Rebekka alone on stage. But this time their function is not to build up interest in Rosmer. The focus is clearly on Rebekka. What Rosmer says is

now processed through Rebekka, or seen in relation to Rebekka, not as his own beliefs and statements. Kroll's paper *Amtstidenden* has published a malicious article pouring vitriol on Rosmer, condemning him as an unprincipled, wanton opportunist, without actually mentioning him by name. Rosmer has thus gone from being the guarantor of morality to pariah.⁴⁴ His *peripeteia* culminates in public ostracism. Rosmer is outraged that Kroll should turn on him in such a cowardly and spiteful fashion. He feels it imperative that this kind of action is curtailed, as the consequences will be dire:

Her må bringes redning. Alt, hvad godt er i menneskene, går tilgrunde, hvis dette får vare ved. Men det skal det ikke! [...] Tænk, om jeg kunde vække dem til selverkendelse. Bringe dem til at angre og til at skamme sig for sig selv. Få dem til at nærme sig hverandre i fordragelighed, - i kærlighed, Rebekka. [...] Jeg synes det måtte kunne lykkes. Å, hvilken fryd det da vilde bli' at leve livet. Ingen hadefuld strid mer. Bare kappestrid. Alle øjne rettede mod det samme mål. Alle viljer, alle sind stevnende fremad, - opad, - enhver ad sin egen naturnødvendige vej. Lykke for alle, - skabt igennem alle (*kommer til at se ud i det fri, farer sammen og siger tungt:*) Ah! Ikke gennem mig. (2.405)

This speech is crucial. Not only does it reiterate the position Rosmer had put before Kroll in Act I, that it was his moral imperative to intervene in a situation where hatred was being preached, but it also reaffirms Rosmer's vision in a more affirmative mode than before of a peaceful creative concord of men striving for a better nobler world, suggested by *fremad - opad*, and his programmatic standard of universal happiness - *lykke for alle* and tolerance, *fordragelighed*. This suggests a Rousseauistic organic society composed of a

single will, a "volonté générale." Moreover, it pulls together a central notion in his philosophy, namely that innocence is the *sine qua non* of happiness. For a man who has been trying to lead a transparently blameless existence, the knowledge that he is not innocent is almost too terrible to bear. But the irony is that Rosmer's own desire to bring others to "selverkendelse" is recoiling against him – it is he who is in desperate need of self-knowledge, and is vulnerable to regret and shame too. *Lykke* now comes to stand in opposition to guilt, and is thus posited within the Christian ethics Rosmer claims to have left behind: "Lykke, - kære Rebekka, - lykke, det er først og fremst den stille, glade, trygge følelse af skyldfrihed" (3.405). Hjalmar Brenel was one of the earliest critics to respond to this aspect:

I *Rosmersholm* betyder lyckan och glädjen primärt skuldfrihet. Dramat utvecklar ett av de mest centrala lyckobegreppen i Ibsens diktning. Framställningen frågar efter och söker glädje och lycka i allmän och obestämd mening, men den fastställer samvetets lycka och skuldfrihetens såsom betingelse för tillägnelsen av varje annan lycka. I bestämningen av den positiva själsförfattningens art är den konkreta livsskildringen noggrannare än den teoretiska argumenteringen.⁴⁵

For the first time Rosmer introduces the concept of security into the equation, which serves to underline his sense of radical insecurity in the face of experience he is unable to master. Rosmer explains that he has come to realise that Beate must have been jealous of his intimacy with Rebekka. This friendship is described as something approaching *lykke* itself: "Det var hos deg jeg følte denne stille, glade, begærløse lyksalighed" (3.406). Love without passion, which he variously labels "barneforelskelse" and "åndeligt

ægteskab" (3.406). Rosmer's rhetoric has moved into very Christian territory, nuancing *lykke* with *lyksalighed* 'blessedness', and making innocence a function of chastity.⁴⁶ Although Rosmer has not committed adultery in the technical sense, he has come to recognise a crime against Beate's love for him and its part in her suicide. The riddle of the mill-race may even be Rosmer's crack in the chimney; it is not unthinkable that he may have subconsciously wished Beate dead. He acknowledges the crime on his hands ("det er *brøde* hos mig" - another example of the Christian straddling the secular, *brøde* can mean both 'sin' and 'crime') and insists on his guilt, even when Rebekka tries to force him to question his right to a life "i lykke" (3.406-7).

Rosmer's quest is now closed off to him by guilt, as is the joy that this guilt in turn deprives him of. Rebekka repeats the tactic she employed at the end of Act II, that is to realign him in the present and the future. Her appeals to his previous decision to cut himself free of the bondage of his Rosmer heritage, dismissing these doubts as "slægtstvil, - slægtsangst, - slægtsskrupler" (which she in turn dismisses by direct association with the white horses) fail to impress Rosmer. He has reverted to a focus on the irrevocable that preceded his marriage proposal of the previous evening. His quest is only open to "en glad og skyldfri mand" (3.407).

6.4.2 The mainspring of morality has been taken away

Kroll has come to the conclusion that Rebekka is behind Rosmer's apostasy and, confident that Rosmer is unable to lead a revolution on his

own, he tries to control the problem at its source by confronting Rebekka with the fact of her illegitimacy (unbeknownst to Rebekka, Dr West was her biological as well as her adoptive father). He does so in the hope that he can thereby subdue her sufficiently into settling down into a life of bourgeois respectability as the second Fru Rosmer. Kroll is convinced that if he can keep Rebekka from her quest of emancipation, Rosmer will be rendered harmless and no longer represent any threat to the status quo.

But Kroll's information regarding Rebekka's parentage has a much more disturbing effect on Rebekka than anticipated, and her protests that even for a liberated woman, questions of age and illegitimacy still rankle, fails to satisfy. Freud's reading of Rebekka's horror at the realisation that she has unwittingly violated the incest taboo is perhaps the most compelling we have.⁴⁷ If there are parallels with Oedipus in the characterisation of Rosmer, the incest motif also aligns Rebekka with Sophocles's hero. Through this development Ibsen can distribute the burden of the tragedy between the two protagonists and have Rebekka undergo an experience parallel to that of Rosmer's in the previous act: a collapse of identity. Moreover, this knowledge suggests that the man who had tutored her in progressive morality had only sexual self-interest at heart and was in fact a cynical manipulator, of one style with Brendel but of more dangerous substance. This also peels back a further level of perception: just as she had been used by Dr West to further his own interests in the name of freethinking, she has similarly used Rosmer. The result is that she like Rosmer has been deprived

of her confidence in her identity, and this loss leads to immense suffering in her case too.

However, Rebekka devotes her energies not to self-realignment but to realigning Rosmer. After ceremoniously burning the slanderous pages of Kroll's newspaper, Rebekka begins her confession. She outlines a brief moral biography beginning with her move to the area from the wild reaches of Finnmark with her adoptive father, Dr West. She describes the effect her new surroundings had on her with the wonder of a Miranda face to face with a brave new world - "en ny, stor, vid verden" (3.416). She wanted to participate in the changing times and mores the doctor had taught her about and set her sights on Rosmer as her partner in moral emancipation. The only obstacle was Rosmer's marriage. "Men jeg skønte godt, hvor frelsen var for dig. Den eneste frelse. Og så handled jeg" (3.417).

As the play progresses and as the tension mounts, Rebekka, interestingly, increasingly mirrors Rosmer in her use of Christian vocabulary. *Frelse* is a distinctly religious category; *redde* would have been a more neutral expression. She absolves Rosmer of all guilt concerning Beate's suicide, insisting "Det var mig, som lokked -, som kom til at lokke Beate ud på de vildsomme veje - " (3.417). She then details the progress of this process, how she gave Beate carefully selected pieces of information of varying degrees of veracity in order to destabilise her already unhappy world, and encouraged the belief in her that as a barren woman she had no 'right' of abode at Rosmersholm, and it was her 'duty' to yield her position

to a fertile woman.⁴⁸

To justify her actions, Rebekka resorts to a brutal version of the felicific calculus: "Jeg syntes at her var to liv at velge imellem" (3.419). She gives a very actuarial account of the rationale for her choice: with Beate out of the way, two people would be happy, a definite "maximisation of happiness" in Utilitarian terms. But Rebekka's project is flawed. Not only on the grounds that in Kroll's view she was playing God, but it also falters on what is one of the most serious objections to Utilitarianism. John Rawls calls this the "separateness of persons" objection. Rawls argues that the calculus that would align the distribution of benefits and burdens into a net total seeks to organise the "desires of one person into one coherent system of desire; it is by this construction that many persons are fused into one. [...] Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons."⁴⁹ It is this lack of regard for the separateness of persons, which clears the way for an overly rationalistic, naturalistic ethics. Taking the standard of the maximisation of pleasure to extremes can offer no means of evaluating certain taboo moral actions as impermissible, only in the sense that they might produce a net *loss* of happiness. As Stuart Hampshire explains:

For a strict Utilitarian ... the horror of killing is only the horror of causing other losses, principally of possible happiness; in cases where there are evidently no such losses, the horror of killing becomes superstition. And such a conclusion of naturalism, pressed to its limits, does produce certain vertigo after reflection. It seems that the mainspring of morality has been taken away.⁵⁰

There is persuasive evidence for reading Rebekka's peculiar

brand of manipulative extermination of Beate, Strindbergian *själamord*, in these terms. Rebekka tries to offer an account of the nature of her moral conflict, and she does so in very distinct terms. Firstly she rejects Kroll's interpretation of her as a cold, calculating individual. Secondly, she gives her first intimation that she has experienced some kind of moral sea-change: "Jeg var da ikke slig, dengang, som nu, da jeg står og fortæller det" (3.419). Thirdly, she gives a very reasoned statement of her version of human action, which is directed by "to slags vilje" (3.419). While she openly admits that she wanted Beate out of the picture, at all costs, she never imagined that this could ever be accomplished. Yet there was an insistent compulsion forever driving her to "friste et bitte lidet gran til. Bare et eneste et. Og så et til - og altid et til. - Og så kom det" (3.419). The necessity she was under is communicated by the formulation "Jeg måtte friste" (3.419).

The audience is as horrified as Rosmer and Kroll are at the confession that Rebekka in full consciousness drove Beate to her watery grave. However, when Rosmer exits in the company of Kroll, there is no sense of relief or restored balance. What is important here is to distinguish between the Rebekka of the Beate narrative and the Rebekka who confesses to her part in Beate's death. She makes it clear that she is no longer identifiable with that version of her self; she could hardly expect any material advantage from her confession. This act has to be seen as an act of bravery, embracing risk and exposing her to an uncertain future; not the sort of calculation that

the old Rebekka would ever have entertained. Her declared motive of restoring Rosmer's innocence is not in any doubt. She once more intervenes in his life. While her first project of emancipation was subsumed under personal ambition, this time she intervenes as a response to his suffering, which in turn brings on intense suffering in her. That her aim, to restore Rosmer's lost innocence, cannot succeed and can bring no closure is clear to us as we watch with Rebekka as the departing Rosmer yet again avoids the footbridge over the millrace. Rebekka instructs Madam Helseth to pack her bags, as she is to leave Rosmersholm. Fear has struck root in her and she senses the approach of the white horses, an intimation of death.

6.5 Act IV

6.5.1 Nu er jeg ble 't slig

It is not until the beginning of Act IV that we get the full measure of Rebekka's suffering. When Rosmer returns it becomes evident that Rebekka does not see her return to Finnmark as an escape to a new beginning, but as her end. She tells Rosmer that all she can do now is "se at få ende på det. [...] Rosmersholm har knækket mig. [...] Knækket mig sønder og sammen." Rosmersholm has left Rebekka in a state of spiritual debilitation with an enfeebled will, once so "frisk og så modig" but now subject to an alien law (4.424).

Rosmer tells her that he has made peace with Kroll and his circle and that Kroll has made him realise that he was not cut out for the

(pointless) task of ennobling his fellow men. The accusation that follows on the announcement that he has abandoned his quest, that Rebekka had never really believed in him and had only been manipulating him for her own ends, reveals how central Rebekka was to his quest, and now that he has lost faith in her, he cannot hold onto his faith in his vision. Rebekka was Rosmer's guarantor, just as Kroll's is the church.

Rebekka insists that he sit down and listen to her one last time, as she claims that she has left out the most significant part of her confession. It is true that she had come to Rosmersholm with the sole purpose of establishing herself there, confident in the strength of her will to achieve this end. Her courageous free will was still intact at this point and nothing threatened to derail her project. Then something happened which started to undermine her will: "et vildt, ubetvingeligt begær" (4.426). Not love, but passion - the reverse image of Rosmer's feelings for her. Rosmer is horrified at the source of the energy of her actions. Rebekka likens this passion to "et vejr ved havet. Det var som et af de vejr, vi kan ha' ved vintertid der nordpå. Det tar en, - og bær' en med sig, du, - så langt det skal være. Ikke tanke om å stå imod" (4.426). The power of Eros demanded both victor and vanquished. Here we gain further insight into her previous confession and her insistence that her actions were not the result of cold calculation. Rebekka's passion for Rosmer led her into the service of Eros, and it was to Eros

that she relinquished control. "In its grip, Rebekka loses all confidence in herself as an autonomous being, self-willed and self-directing. She knows now that the rational mind is not always independent of irrational impulse."⁵¹

This confession reveals the tragic protagonist at her most vulnerable. She has hitherto been the shrewd calculator of success, *lykke* in the sense of successful purposive action, free of scruple and taboo. But coming under the power of desire means that she is at the mercy of a force that is stronger than she is. Rosmer cannot understand why then she turned down his offer of marriage, when she had him where she wanted him, "fri, - både i sind og i forhold (4.427)", in response to which Rebekka returns to her anatomy of an infected spirit and broken will. Durbach argues that the effect of the Rosmer view of life and the process of ennoblement she has undergone is parallel to that of her description of the effects of Eros, and *nomos*, the laws of civilisation and morality visit her in no less physical a manner than Eros. Durbach discusses each of Rebekka's statements concerning this process of ennoblement thus:

There is a destructive kinetic energy... a lived-through sensation of the body racked by physically aggressive forces - broken, smashed, imprisoned, infected by disease, and sapped of strength. But the rending is also metaphysical, spiritual, sexual, - a complete psychosomatic collapse... *Magtstjålet*, 'paralyzed', also conveys a sense of psychic enervation, impotence, loss of vital energy. *Stækket*, 'imprisoned', - a clipping of wings, the soul crippled in flight. Eros brought down. And the entire threnody of loss cries out against a

draining away of *begjær*, of 'sexual passion', a grief even more intense than Rebekka's lament over her lost existential autonomy.⁵²

It is, moreover, this "draining away of *begjær*" which vacates the spiritual space for Rosmer's ideal of "denne stille, glade, begærløse lyksalighed" (3.406), a variant of his fundamental tenet of guiltless happiness.

Van Laan is right to insist on the importance of the tension in Rebekka's narrative: "The experience she is describing is obviously one that requires two sharply conflicting languages for its representation, one for which no single signifier is adequate".⁵³ On the one hand she describes the slow, silent almost imperceptible process of ennoblement that has taken place in her, the result of living in proximity to Rosmer and his gentle, noble mind, which displaced this "stygge, sansedrukne begær" opening her up to "den store, forsagende kærlighed" (4.428). Then her narrative shifts into a wholly different gear without warning, replacing descriptions of peace, tranquillity and calm with notions of sickness, enfeeblement and decay. Van Laan points to the weight that has been accorded Rebekka's attempt to summarise the conflict into the statement that the "rosmerske livssyn adler. Men [...] det dræber lykken" (4.429). He cautions against allowing this statement to crystallise Rebekka's experience, arguing that to do so would be to accept

a reduction of [...] complexity [...] into the sort of formula that crushes what it seeks to grasp. When

Rosmer again asks her to marry him, she is much more successful in summing up her experience as a whole in a formula of the kind tragedy readily accommodates: 'det er jo det forfærdelige, at nu, da al livets lykke bydes mig med fulde hænder, - nu er jeg ble't slig, at min egen fortid stænger for mig' (4.429).⁵⁴

This statement of her transformation, "nu er jeg ble't slig", insists that not only has she undergone a change, but that this has been accompanied by a parallel redefinition of her ends. *Lykke* to the pre-Rosmer Rebekka must have named a very different nexus of values and associations from what it suggests to the Rebekka who stands before Rosmer now, unable to derive joy from her original goals. To the old Rebekka, *lykke* represented success and rational action directed toward that success, but neither she nor Rosmer adequately admitted the power of chance and the room for errancy in this view of life.

The dynamics of the last act are such that they permit neither Rosmer nor Rebekka to dominate the scene for too long, and just as the focus within each speech shifts unremittingly between a discourse of ennoblement and a discourse of atrophy, it is relentless in its transfer of focus from the one protagonist to the other.

Rosmer makes a statement of a total loss of faith: a loss of faith in his capacity for ennobling mankind; a loss of faith in Rebekka and a loss of faith in himself. His disintegration is as total as Rebekka's because her collapse involves his loss of the guarantor of his own vision, one that if not directed by Rosmer, certainly was animated by Rebekka. She is one in a line of a lifetime of influences Rosmer has

fallen under: the Rosmer tradition; his father; Brendel; Kroll and finally Rebekka. They each try in their own way to co-opt Rosmer for their own ends. For Rosmer this loss of faith brings with it a concomitant loss of a sense of meaning in life. Rebekka, sensing that he is slipping away tries to give him faith in life, insisting on its potential for renewal. But Rosmer demands proof, proof that Rebekka's claim that he has ennobled her is valid, otherwise "Jeg bærer ikke dette øde, - denne forfærdelige tomhed, - dette, - dette" (4.431). This suffering when confronting vistas of meaninglessness is mirrored in the collapse of Rosmer's language.

It is at this point when meaninglessness begins to take root at the heart of the drama that Ibsen reintroduces Ulrik Brendel. This episode is as extraordinary as it is seemingly unmotivated. Brendel does not come to bring any news that will further the action, nor shed any light on the quality of the tragic guilt which is being processed at such a fervent pitch. He disappears as suddenly as he appears and Rebekka and Rosmer do not even discuss his visit. Van Laan's description of him as "a proto-expressionist projection of Rosmer's despair" is apt.⁵⁵ His words moreover continue the highly schematic patterning from Act I in its foreshadowing of Rosmer's decisions. In this scene he asserts an extreme nihilism, a "hjemvé efter det store ingenting" (4.431), mobilizes a sick vision of sacrifice with his chilling description of how the lady of the house must willingly sacrifice her ear lobe and little finger.

But from a realist perspective, more arresting than this image of dismemberment is the sequence which directly follows, which startles in its refusal to engage with the Brendel scene and in its reversal of the patterning, which hitherto has had Rebekka insisting in moments of crisis on the future and the possibility of recovery. Now it is Rosmer who suddenly instructs Rebekka to leave Rosmersholm, reassuring her that he has provided adequately for her. But what emerges is that neither envisages any future. Rebekka is puzzled at Rosmer's reference to *her* future, and he dismisses any notion of a life after "det ynkelige, jammerfulde nederlag", having to abandon the battlefield in defeat before the battle had truly begun (4.434). And then it is Rebekka who resumes the insistence on the future, but it is always the one insisting on a future for the other. She urges Rosmer to take up the battle again, for it is in his power to ennoble hundreds, even thousands. She is living proof of his capacity to do so.

But Rosmer has lost faith. Rebekka insists on her right to know how it is she can release him from doubt and despair, for this lies at the heart of her own anxiety. Being able to restore his faith would bring her own liberation: "Ved du noget, som kan frikende mig i dine øjne, da kræver jeg som min ret at du nævner det" (4.435). For Rosmer, everything turns on Rebekka's willingness to perform the same sacrifice as Beate had, "at gå den samme vejen, - som Beate gik" (4.436). This would bear witness to her love for him, an ennobling love, and

would thereby restore his belief in both his own capacities and in the perfectibility of mankind.

Rebekka agrees, and out of the perspective Rosmer establishes, adds the belief in action in a world in which all verbal signs have been undermined. Rosmer momentarily regretting his demand tries to persuade Rebekka to leave instead, and walk away from madness. But Rebekka points out that the only meaning that can be established which can justify faith is through action. All words are no more than “*talemåder*”, and this is why she resists Rosmer’s interpretation of her death as defeat. “Det blir ikke noget nederlag.[...] ...jeg er under det rosmersholmske livssyn - nu. Hvad jeg har *forbrudt*, - det bør det sig at jeg *soner*” (4.437 - italics mine). Her linguistic progress towards a Christian-loaded language has been commented on earlier. But, ironically, it is at the very moment of her rejection of meaningful language that she begins to exploit this moral lexicon to its full, at a stage when Rosmer has ceased to do so. Hitherto her personal morality had rotated on an axis on which only concepts of happiness and freedom (in the sense of freedom from restraint) had been plotted. Now she approaches the Christian notions absorbed by Rosmer into his secular vision, notably those of guilt and atonement.

6.5.2 Å holde justits selv

Rosmer makes a parallel approach to Rebekka, not as somebody who

has suffered at her hands and is now seeking restitution, but as an equal. He tells her that he now submits to their liberated view of life, and they must now be wholly self-reliant morally. It is significant that Rosmer does not regress into the safety of his “barnetro,” at this moment, but insists they must “holde justits selv”, they must assert their own moral discipline. This is not a Christian term, neither is it related to justice. Marie Wells draws attention to the fact that this phrase is usually mistranslated:

According to *Norsk Riksmålsordbok* ‘holde justits’ means to ‘keep order or discipline’ and Rosmer’s words ‘vi får se at holde justits selv’ are quoted as an illustration of that usage. To the best of my knowledge, no English translation is true to this meaning, preferring instead to emphasise the idea of judgement. However, the more accurate translation would show more of the influence of Rosmer’s background. [...] The more accurate translation also reflects Rosmer’s need to maintain moral order.⁵⁶

It is in this phrase “å holde justits selv” that Rosmer’s *anagnorisis*, hitherto partial and resisted, reaches its culmination. It expresses a need for *nomos*, for order, to stave off *anomie*, chaos, lawlessness, and dereliction while at the same time making a demand for freedom. It registers a recognition “of the banality of the pursuit of happiness for its own sake and the emptiness of a life lived in accordance with duty”.⁵⁷ It points to an area that falls outside the usual spectrum of responses to culpability, beyond what laws, institutions, damaged parties may expect of the agent, to what Bernard Williams calls “what the agent demands of himself.” – “Here we must turn back again from law and philosophy to tragedy, [...] to the mistake at the crossroads”.⁵⁸

Rebekka is convinced that by dying she can let Rosmer live: “Min

bortgang vil frelse det bedste i dig" (4.437). For Rebekka there are only two available versions of continued existence: one as a dehumanised sea-troll hampering Rosmer's progress, and the other consisting of "å slæbe på et forkrøblet liv" lamenting her lost *lykke* "som min fortid har forspildt for mig" (4.437), again referring to a previous 'self' occupying another moral space. Rebekka admits no prospect of salvation for herself, either in this world or the next, and though she asserts the necessity for atonement for sins committed by older versions of the self, this atonement does not define her moral horizon.

Rebekka is slow to appreciate just how much progress Rosmer has made towards her. He declares that if she goes to the mill-race, he will go with her. For Rebekka it is enough that he accompany her across the footbridge and finally conquer his fear. Rosmer takes her hand and he performs a symbolic wedding ceremony, after which Rebekka declares her intention to perform the action *willingly*. There is good reason to read *gladelig* as "willingly" in the sense of freely chosen action as opposed to a sign of "joy" or any other cognate of happiness.⁵⁹ But for Rosmer this marriage was clearly intended to endure until death and he goes with Rebekka, insisting on the impossibility of knowing, truly knowing, whether this is the *best* course, or of ever really knowing whether they were not in fact being dragged to their death by the white horses. The only certainty there is, says Rosmer is that this is the *only* course.

The progress leading up to the final leap into death, performed *gladelig*, is rapid. It involves the total breakdown of identities of the two protagonists, not in the sense previously encountered of the disintegration of the moral self, but through a complete and deliberate merging of identities. The distinction between deg/jeg, both as concerns the distribution of blame, and in the sense of independent agency, collapses. Who leads and who follows? Ibsen is at pains to make this willing leap a voluntary, willing action that truly belongs to them both, rather than the result of the will of the one subduing the other. "For nu er vi to et" (4.438).

Theoharis C. Theoharis argues that Rebekka's death is a capitulation to oppression and that Rosmer's is inauthentic. Rebekka, he argues, however defeated,

still has enough freedom to ask if Rosmer is dying under the authority of illusion and remorse instead of enacting his own self-transcendence. His indifference to the problem, his easy yielding to conventionally aggrandising notions of destiny, make this death unambiguously inauthentic.⁶⁰

To claim that there is anything "unambiguous" about Ibsen's tragic theatre is to chart perilous waters; to claim that the death of one of his protagonists is unambiguous is to ignore the subtlety of Ibsen's dramatic portraiture. Theoharis has a very specific agenda which leads him to his reductive closed reading of the play, but nevertheless, it is hard to see in what way Rosmer is "indifferent" to this question. It is at this point that he is at his most clear-sighted, that he begins to

appreciate what it means to see "helt til bunds". What he perceives here is the impossibility of truly knowing, and that is the only response proper to this tragic insight, which he had been resisting through his certainties, his rationality and his demands for proof.

With a structural harmony that has been sustained throughout, the play returns to Madam Helseth at the end, standing at the window observing the leap to death. Her reading of the suicide besides being a function of the drama to relate the deaths is an example of what Durbach has defined as the "temptation to err": In his dramas of contemporary life, Ibsen often gives the last word to a character who remains outside the pull of the tragic field and who will give the tragic finale the most limited, reductive reading possible. Another example is Brack, whose unconscionable banality codas Hedda Gabler's suicide. In Durbach's view this is Ibsen throwing down the gauntlet to his audiences and readers, defying them to take the restricted bourgeois view and miss the tragedy altogether.⁶¹ Madam Helseth's judgement, "Salig fruen tok dem" (4.439) silences her cries for help and could reduce *Rosmersholm* to a moralistic drama of retribution. But it posits another essential question: what is the difference between Beate's and Rebekka's sacrifice? Beate's suicide can be reduced to the *felicific calculus*. There is nothing heroic about allowing the self to be absorbed into an equation and cancelled out by that equation. Beate's was a suicide of effacement. Rebekka's suicide is a more positive action: it

acknowledges the impossibility of calculating happiness, and the impossibility of seeing the past as inactive and manageable.

But in what does the tragedy inhere? First of all, if we consider those aspects of the play which renew the tradition, I think we must concur with Van Laan that Ibsen's achievement in writing a dual tragedy consists in his turning the tradition of high tragedy on its head by giving us a hero, the aristocrat Rosmer, who is invested with the stature demanded by many as prerequisite for a tragic hero, but who, at the same time, is almost disqualified from the tragic through his very aristocratic nature which proves an impediment to assertive action. But it is not only the formal requirement of a well-born hero with influence that Rosmer fulfills. It is important to remember that the Rosmer line dies with Rosmer, and Rebekka's lineage is not perpetuated. Thus there is a clear sense of an order dying with them. Furthermore, this move of Ibsen's is compounded when he pairs Rebekka off with Rosmer, an unlikely tragic figure of humble background, dubious origin, and even more dubious morals, and places a burden of action on her. Van Laan's analysis opens up much richer vistas on the play than the Brendelian readings of Chamberlain et al. discussed above.

But more central to the core of the tragedy is its treatment of the *lykke* problem. As Edvard Beyer points out, this is the first tragedy (and arguably the only tragedy) Ibsen wrote that takes *lykke* as its central theme, not simply as a tragic co-ordinate. Both characters feel that they

can master experience through mastering *lykke* through an assertive Utilitarianism. The reasons for the collapse of their life-plan based on the *felicific calculus* does point to inherent flaws in Utilitarianism itself, but the ultimate reason for their failure is that they try to order experience without admitting the power of forces which lie beyond themselves. These forces can subdue, overwhelm and ultimately destroy, and include the other side of *lykke* – contingency, what Martha Nussbaum calls “the internal ungoverned *tuche* of the passions,” whether acted upon or sublimated.⁶² Happiness, seen only as success and satisfaction, is doomed and too thin to account for what is important in life.

Both Rosmer’s abstracted happiness and Rebekka’s goal-directed happiness fail to admit of two important areas of moral luck, ‘situational’ moral luck, that is what one has to confront in life, and ‘executive luck’, how one’s projects turn out. It is in the space between situational and executive luck that the gap between the sort of person we are and the sort of person we want to be is revealed, and the elusiveness of happiness is thrown into relief.⁶³ And it is in this space too that tragic man gets the measure of himself as one who “oscillates between being the equal of the gods and the equal of nothing.”⁶⁴

The tragic power of this work resides in its representation of what is indomitable and unknowable in human experience: Triumph modulates into suffering; Eros into *agape*; innocence into guilt;

happiness into misery; victory into defeat; life into death. It is Ibsen's achievement that this scale of action overcomes the limits of naturalism and leaves the tragic experience intact.

In *Rosmersholm*, the white horses are introduced as a counterweight to the overarching desire for a rational ordering of experience. This superstition, though muted in the play, shows a residual belief in the supernatural, and a recourse to it as an aide to organising experience. In *Bygmester Solness*, which we now turn to, the supernatural and notions of contingency resurface only to dominate the thoughts of the play's hero to an extent comparable to the hold of the *göttliche Gegensatz* of the early plays.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, Didrik Arup Seip, *Ibsens Drama*, Oslo, 1972, p. 171.
- ² See K. Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre 1890-1900*, Connecticut, 1997, p. 63.
- ³ John Hurrell, "Rosmersholm, The Existential Drama and the Dilemma of Modern Tragedy", *Educational Theatre Journal* 15, 1963, p. 124.
- ⁴ John S. Chamberlain, "Tragic Heroism in *Rosmersholm*", *Modern Drama* 17, 1974, p. 277.
- ⁵ Chamberlain 1974, p. 285.
- ⁶ Jens Kruuse, "The Function of Humour in the Later Plays of Ibsen", in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen II*, ed. Edvard Beyer et al., Oslo, 1970, p. 48.
- ⁷ Jørgen Haugan, *Diktorsfinxen: En studie i Ibsen og Ibsen-forskningen*, Oslo, 1982, p. 110.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 112.
- ⁹ Marie Wells, "Ibsen - Writer of Tragedies, Failed Tragedies, Tragi-Comedies or Tragedies?", unpubl. ms., 2001, p. 5.
- ¹⁰ Thomas F. Van Laan, unpubl. ms. pp. 38-40.
- ¹¹ See for example Muriel Bradbrook, *Ibsen the Norwegian: A Revaluation*, London, 1946, p. 109. "Rosmersholm [...] is Ibsen's most perfectly balanced work. Architecturally, he never produced anything so harmonious: it is his most Sophoclean play."
- ¹² Several interpreters do situate the final leap into the mill-race within the romantic tradition of *Liebestod*. I cannot agree with this conclusion, not for the reason given by Chamberlain that we must rule out *Liebestod* "because Rosmer's request is tainted by erotic fascination", but because much more is at stake in this play. Joan Templeton's assessment seems closer to the timbre of the tragedy. Discussing the final sequence of the play, Templeton argues that "this love duet with its coupling of "you/me" "I/you" recalls Wagner's *liebestod* litany "Du Isolde, Tristan ich, / nicht mehr Tristan, / nicht Isolde." But while *liebestod* lovers die for a fatal but triumphant passion, eros has been banished from *Rosmersholm*. The couple's embrace on the bridge is the first they have shared." See Chamberlain 1974, p. 279; Joan Templeton, *Ibsen's Women*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 193.
- ¹³ Edvard Beyer, "Livsgleden som Problem i Henrik Ibsens Diktning", *Edda*, 1948, p.150.
- ¹⁴ See Brian Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, Cambridge, 1946, p. 155.
- ¹⁵ "Men nu Stuart Mills skrift! [Utilitarianism] Jeg ved ikke, om jeg tør udtale mig om en sag, hvor jeg ikke er fagmand. Dog, når jeg betænker, at der gives forfattere, som skriver om filosofi uden at kende Hegel eller den tyske videnskab overhovedet, så synes jeg at mangt og meget kan være tiladt. Jeg vil da ærlig tilstå Dem, at jeg aldeles ikke kan forstå, at der skal ligge noget fremskridt eller nogen fremtid i den Stuart Millske retning. Jeg begriber ikke, at De har villet påtage Dem den møje at oversætte dette skrift, det i filisøs vismads-mæssighed synes at minde om Cicero eller Seneca." Letter from Ibsen to Georg Brandes, dated 30 April 1873, Dresden in *Breve fra Henrik Ibsen udgivne med indledning og oplysninger af Halvdan Koht og Julius Elias*, vol. I, 1849-1873, Gyldendal, København og Kristiania, 1904, p. 276-7.

¹⁶ Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken*, Pennsylvania, 1992, pp. 36-37; p. 359.

¹⁷ Downs 1946, pp. 155-57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 156.

¹⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 1, reprinted in Jonathan Glover ed., *Utilitarianism and its Critics*, London, 1990, pp. 9-14, p. 9, n. 1.

²⁰ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, London, 1993, ch. V, p. 64-65.

²¹ Bentham in Glover 1990, p. 11.

²² William Chase Greene, *Maira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought*, New York, 1963, p. 90.

²³ This faulty French has been corrected in English translations. Archer decided to render it 'à la bonne heure' which though 'rescuing' the French is a meaningless non-sequitur. McFarlane and other translators have followed Archer in this decision. It is an intrusive move, and a pointless one. Whether the gender confusion (*la bonheur* as opposed to the correct *le bonheur*) was Ibsen's or Brendel's is immaterial and certainly cannot justify changing the terms of Brendel's response to Kroll from a defiant toast which reinforces his insult, to simple leave-taking.

²⁴ Mill extended Bentham's notion of happiness to distinguish *types* of pleasure. The "nearer good" refers to the pleasures common to man and beast, whereas the "higher pleasures" which depend on the cultivation of nobleness of character. See Glover 1990, p. 64.

²⁵ Haugan, see fn. 9 above.

²⁶ *Ataraxia* (tranquillity) "is the only conception of *eudaimonia* in Greek ethics that identifies happiness with a state of mind and makes it depend entirely on a person's attitude or beliefs". See Gisela Striker, "Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquility", *The Monist: An International Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*, 1990, 73.1., p. 77.

²⁷ See Bentham's own footnote, where he concedes that a more "perspicuous" appellation for the utility principle is "the greatest happiness principle ... the greatest happiness of the greatest number". In Glover 1990, p. 12.

²⁸ For an account of Mill's depression, see Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, 1969, pp. 173-206.

²⁹ See Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, London, 1982, pp. 174-5.

³⁰ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, Oxford, 1973, pp. 427 ff.

³¹ Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume*, Ithaca, 2000, p. 75 n.

³² I think it is fair to argue that Durbach's reading on this occasion is a little tortured. Moreover, it leads him to conclusions which he contradicts elsewhere. For example, his reading of *lykke* as a sign of "amoral pleasure" undermines his excellent reading of Nora's self-analysis in her discussion with Helmer, when he asks her whether she has not been

happy with him: "Ikke - ikke lykkelig! Nora. Nej, bare lystig" (VI.83). Durbach here defines *lystig* as "sporadic elation" in contrast to *lykkelig* which he suggests is a more serious category. See Errol Durbach, "Skønhed, Lykke, Glæde: Poetry and Performance in Ibsen", *Scandinavian Studies* 54, 3, 1982, p. 240.

³³ This is the only play in which the term is used. Rebekka refers to their joint *livsplaner* they set out together (2.394).

³⁴ REBEKKA. Men menneskene ler nu i det hele ikke meget her på disse kanter, synes jeg.

MADAM HELSETH. De gjør ikke det. Det begynte på Rosmersholm, sier folk. Og så har det vel bredt seg ut som et slags smitte, det også, kan jeg tro. (3.403)

³⁵ Atle Kittang, *Ibsens Heroisme*, Oslo, 2002, p. 31.

³⁶ For Bentham the two states were synonymous: "...pleasure, and what comes to the same thing, immunity from pain". See Glover 1990, p. 41.

³⁷ See Glover 1990, pp.37-8. Also Bentham's "Happiness as Pleasure and No Pain", from *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* chs. 3 and 4, in Glover 1990 pp. 41-47.

³⁸ One wonders what these books were. Presumably they argued for procreation as the *raison d'être* of marriage. But then why were they considered radical?

³⁹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 3, in Glover 1990, p. 89.

⁴⁰ Rosmer insists that Beate's self-reproach over her inability to conceive children was misplaced. He never expresses any regret concerning his own childlessness. Rosmersholm is, moreover, an inhospitable environment for children, subduing even their infant screams.

⁴¹ Janet Garton was the first critic to draw attention to this peculiarly inept formulation. "Rosmer's declaration is born not of love but of fear. He wants Rebekka not because he returns her desire but because she must pull the corpse off his back - though his appeal makes it clear that he is not entirely convinced that she can." See Janet Garton, "The Middle Plays", in James McFarlane ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 112.

⁴² See *Bygmester Solness*, (XII.3.106): Og nu er hun død - for min skyld. Og jeg er levende lænket til den døde. (*I vild angst.*) Jeg - jeg, som ikke kan leve livet glædeløst!

⁴³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness, Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 126.

⁴⁴ See Kroll's assessment of Rosmer in 1.357-8: "Dit milde, redelige sindelag, - dit fine tænkesæt, - din uantastelige hædelighed er kendt og skattet af alle her omkring. Og så den agtelse og respekt, som din tidligere prestelige stilling omgir dig med. Og så endelig familjenavnets ærværdighed, du!"

⁴⁵ Hjalmar Brenel, *Etiska motiv i Henrik Ibsens dramatiska diktning*, Stockholm, 1941, p. 212.

⁴⁶ *Lyksalighed* is a compound of *lykke* and *salig*. Molbech 1859 defines *salig* as "den høieste Grad af indvortes Lykke", - inward happiness, closely allied with God. He illustrates this with Psalm 119:155 - "Salighed er langt fra de Ugudelige". Rosmer would unavoidably have heard these echoes. Therefore this type of happiness cannot convincingly be equated with "the happiness canvassed by either hedonism, eudaimonism, or utilitarianism". See Abraham H. Kahn, *Salighed as Happiness?*, Waterloo, 1985, p. 111.

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work", in vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, London, 1990, pp. 308-316.

⁴⁸ Van Laan gives a compelling analysis of how Rebekka gradually recedes as direct agent in this account. She uses increasingly impersonal structures in her account, with the result that the narrative "går for sig". See Van Laan, unpubl. ms, Ch. IX, p. 46.

⁴⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, 1973, pp. 22-3; pp. 179-92.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hampshire, "The Mainspring of Morality Has Been Taken Away", in Glover 1990, p. 163.

⁵¹ Errol Durbach, "Ibsen's Euripidean Heroines", in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Ibsen Conference*, ed. Pål Bjørby and Asbjørn Aarseth, Bergen, 2001, p. 181.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 183.

⁵³ Van Laan, unpubl. ms. p. 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 41.

⁵⁶ Wells 2001, p. 10, n. 16.

⁵⁷ Ross Poole, *Morality and Modernity*, London, 1991, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 68.

⁵⁹ Recall how Brand demanded that Agnes's sacrifice had to be willing to have any worth.

⁶⁰ Theoharis C. Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, London, 1996, p. 132.

⁶¹ Errol Durbach, "The Temptation to Err: The Dénouement of *Rosmersholm*", *Educational Theatre Journal*, December 1977.

⁶² Nussbaum 1986, p. 383.

⁶³ See Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, Oxford, 1992, p. 76.

⁶⁴ Pierre Vidal-Naquet in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, New York, 1998, p. 59.

The smell of luck; it hangs on him like a coat-
Arthur Miller, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*

Chapter VII

*Bygmester Solness: Lykke as Compensatory Fiction*¹

7.1.1 Introduction

Barry Jacobs writes of Ibsen's tragedy of 1892, "*The Master Builder* is one of the most profound statements about *lykke* in modern drama".² Indeed, in no other play by Ibsen does the word *lykke* and its cognates resonate more fully than in this one. However, *Bygmester Solness* is less a continuation of the conscious quest for happiness dramatised in *Rosmersholm* than a new departure within the *nutidsdramaer*, which finds more parallels in the early plays than it does with *Et Dukkehjem*, *Gengangere* and *Rosmersholm*.

In *Bygmester Solness* there is a return to the presentation of the compulsive hero, temporarily suspended in these three plays: Nora's quest for truth arises through the action; Fru Alving's quest develops in parallel with the events of her life; Johannes Rosmer and Rebekka West similarly do not bear tragic features independently of the narratives of their lives. These characters are forced to confront very bad situational luck.³ In this sense they are atypical within Ibsen, for there is a clear family resemblance between Catilina, Fru Inger, Hjørdis, Skule, Julian and Brand, Solness and Borkman, who have in common the necessary identity we discussed in Chapter III.

Here we seem to have come full-circle. In Chapter IV, we noted how Ibsen conflated notions of contingency with a philosophical naturalism, clearing the way for a secular modern tragedy. The emphasis in all three plays

was on happiness-*lykke* rather than contingency-*lykke*. Part of this involved the embrace of the ordinary, which in turn relocated the tragic in ordinary characters, demanding the extraordinary from the ordinary. Although in *Bygmester Solness* both setting and hero are still unambiguously bourgeois, the tragic experience reaches beyond realism for its expression and returns to concepts of contingency, so absent from the previous three plays discussed.

These concepts are manifested as extra-human forces, mythological elements and an encounter with God himself. On a dramatic level it would appear at first sight that Ibsen's secularisation of tragedy has lost its strenuous hold on the material to such an extent that, to quote Gerd, there "myldrer baade Troid og Draug"(3.261).

But it is not enough simply to point out this apparently retrogressive act on Ibsen's part, of fastening the tragic onto supernatural agencies, or to argue as Bruce Bigley does that *Et Dukkehjem* and *Gengangere* were "an aberration, welcome or not, in the development from *Catilina* to *Når vi døde vågner*".⁴ The question is, why does Ibsen allow the trolls and devils to return after a thirty-five year exile? Why does God return after Nora, Fru Alving and Rosmer have all dispensed with Him? Is Ibsen inexplicably resacralising his tragic art after having so successfully secularised it? Having taught us to read the tragic in the ordinary, is he now telling us that we have to unlearn that kind of reading and look to previous paradigms once more?

This chapter will offer a close reading of *Bygmester Solness* which will address these issues and explain why this is not a reversion or a regression but

a specifically modern kind of tragedy, the kind defined by Kierkegaard, whom we shall turn to presently. While there is a definite return to a pre-occupation with contingency and the supernatural, they are doing very different dramatic work in this play from the early plays.

Bygmester Solness does not derive its force from its re-presentation of human exposure to the kind of fortune that was decisive for Fru Inger, for example. The sort of incident luck that pushes the action of an Aristotelian tragedy through the stages of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* is absent in this drama, which is composed almost entirely of long, introspective exchanges between varying configurations of the *dramatis personae*.⁵ Solness's recognition emerges as more readily illuminable by the Kierkegaardian measure.

Søren Kierkegaard had identified the difference in the status of luck in Greek and modern drama as being definitive. Whereas in Greek tragedy, recognition is:

the epic remnant based on a fate in which the dramatic action vanishes, and in which it has its dark, mysterious source [...] Modern drama has abandoned destiny, has dramatically emancipated itself, [...] absorbs destiny in its dramatic consciousness. Hiddenness and disclosure, then, are the hero's free act, for which he is responsible.⁶

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* "develop out of the very structure of the plot", the life-blood of tragedy: the inevitable and the unalterable happened to the hero.⁷ Where Aristotle talks of necessity, Kierkegaard talks of freedom and responsibility. Whereas Aristotle rests the burden of the easing of dramatic tension on the plot, in Kierkegaard's formulation this will not be brought about by the motion of any "tightly

wound spring” that will “uncoil of itself”.⁸ Rather, the burden of easing dramatic tension shifts from the plot to the free acts of the hero. Because of this, “recognition” becomes the more active “disclosure” and the hero’s movement from concealment to revelation becomes an ethical directive. For Kierkegaard, tragedy was the ethical dramatic medium *par excellence*.

This chapter will argue for the applicability of Kierkegaard's description to *Bygmester Solness*. Offering a reading of the play in the light of this view of modern drama’s relationship to fate and Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), it will consider the dual role of *lykke* in this work. It will examine how Solness uses this notion as his main strategy of concealment, how he develops it into a life narrative which is ultimately a fiction to compensate for his avoidance of revelation: a compensatory fiction. It will also consider how Ibsen himself exploits the notion in order to ask some very far-reaching questions about common morality, in particular the tensions that the demands of the hermetic nature of the life of the artist produce within it.

7.1.2 Despair

In *Bygmester Solness* the metaphysical activity centres around the paradox of the artist’s calling, which, although essentially creative, demands at best the exclusion of those around him, at worst their destruction, if not outright extinction. This question of the human cost of an individual’s calling had been explored in *Brand*, and indeed, the stage of *Bygmester Solness*, like that of *Brand*, is populated by the dead and the infirm. Brand had formulated

his struggle between the competing demands of the human and the divine in terms of absolutes: *intet eller alt*. In *Bygmester Solness* there is a return to religious speculation, but Ibsen's presentation of the precise nature of Solness's struggle signifies a necessary departure from Brand's doctrine.

That the individual strive after the ideal of full realisation of his potential, that he be in the words of Peer Gynt, himself, responding to his *livskald*, not in isolation but in full consciousness of his responsibility to those around him, constitutes the "highest moral norm postulated by Ibsen's drama"⁹. However, this imperative loses all practical application when the hero has actively rejected the ideal, and indeed any notion of the absolute.

Solness has rebelled against God; he describes how at Lysanger, ten years earlier, he had overcome his vertigo to wreath the steeple of the last church he built and had made a declaration of independence from the Almighty, announcing a new phase in his building work:

SOLNESS. [...] Hør nu her, du mægtige!
Herefterdags vil jeg være fri bygmester, jeg også. På mit område. Ligesom du på dit. Jeg vil aldrig mere bygge kirker for dig. Bare hjem for mennesker. (3.117)

The new direction in his creativity represents an exchange of his own identity as one "grounded transparently in the power that established it"¹⁰ for one grounded firmly in his social environment.

It is useful to read this trading of identities in the light of Kierkegaard's paradigm of the self, as set out in *The Sickness unto Death*. In this work, the end of human life is identified as eternal life, which can only be gained by direct accountability to God. Selfhood is acquired through an acceptance of this

ideal: "The more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God"¹¹. But what does this selfhood consist in? Kierkegaard defines the human being as:

a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. [...] A synthesis is a relation between two terms. Looked at in this way, a human being is not yet a self.¹²

The Kierkegaardian self is not to be confused with the relation between soul and body; "for then the self would be merely a dependent factor, mirroring the interplay of the other two with each other and with the environment"¹³. The human being is "not yet a self" in the strict sense in that it cannot "by itself arrive at or remain in total equilibrium and rest." This is only possible when the self relates to itself, that is, "to the power that established the whole relation" - God. When a person rebels against the ideal, against God, this sin puts him in despair; it is a refusal of the self, for selfhood, as we have seen, consists in "standing before God with a conception of God". Despair is sickness in that it is an imbalance in the relation described above and a choice against health.

Solness is quite clearly in despair, both in the affective and the Kierkegaardian sense. The irony is that his despair is rooted in the very victory of his will to autonomy. Having rebelled against the ideal, he can only define himself in terms of the temporal, in which he can find no real meaning. That he finds his social identity/reputation inadequate, and is longing for the affirmation of an identity beyond its stifling confines, is something that is stressed when he realises that Hilde (his liberating Valkyrie from another

world who offers him an alternative identity of greatness) subscribes to the common perception of him as a happy man. He feels almost betrayed. That he also mistrusts and finds wanting the discourse of his society is further underscored by his constant qualification of statements made by himself and others with phrases such as 'That's what people mean', 'That's what people say' and '...so they say'. This is why he finds Hilde's discourse of kingdoms, castles, dreams and trolls so easy to slip into and so liberating.

Yet, having denied the transcendent source of his artistic calling, he impotently clings to his immediate identity as *Bygmester*, a position he will under no circumstances yield. He declares early in Act I, "Men jeg træder aldrig tilbage! Viger aldrig for nogen! Aldrig frivilligt. Aldrig i denne verden gjør jeg *det!*" (1.38), and defends his suppression of Ragnar by insisting "Jeg *er* nu engang slig, som jeg *er*. Og jeg kan da ikke skabe mig *om* heller!" (1.39).¹⁴ Solness's choice of words is significant here. Instead of saying "I cannot change", he employs the language of creation, the power of which he attributes to himself in what amounts to a denial of the dialectic structure of the self. But finding his temporal self wanting, he resorts to tactics of avoidance and subterfuge to compensate for his gnawing sense of incompleteness.

Solness is seeking sanctuary from the spiritual paralysis which obtains from his break with the ideal (a fact that he does not confess until the final act), and as the title of this chapter suggests, he is doing so in the concept of *lykke*, which, paradoxically, provides the main structure for his subterfuge,

while at the same time exposing it for what it is. Kierkegaard identified the excessive reliance on a *lykke* narrative as characteristic of the man in despair; one who has no infinite consciousness of the self, whose “dialectic is: the pleasant and the unpleasant; its concepts: good fortune, misfortune, fate”.¹⁵

This identification is articulated by Deianeira in Sophocles’s *The Women of Thraxis*: “Good fortune and happiness, they must go together”.¹⁶

We are dealing, then, not with two separate concepts - luck and happiness, but with a close, yet, as we shall see, unstable syzygy of the two. In this play Ibsen takes *lykke* beyond its customary signification and develops a complex anaphoric nexus of meanings around it, and involves it in a dramatic tension which it cannot ultimately sustain.

7.2 Lykke

The concept of *lykke* is introduced early in Act I by Solness himself, in conversation with Dr. Herdal:

SOLNESS. Så må De vel sagtens bilde Dem ind at jeg er en svært lykkelig mand da?

DOKTOR HERDAL. Skulde *det* bare være en indbildning?

SOLNESS (ler). Nej, nej, - forstår sig! Gud bevar’s vel! Tænk det, - at være bygmester Solness! Halvard Solness! Jo, jeg takker, jeg!

DOKTOR HERDAL. Ja, jeg må virkelig sige, at for *mig* står det, som om De har havt lykken med Dem i en ganske utrolig grad. (1.50)

Here a preliminary, working definition of *lykke* is given, but it is one that Solness is to refine to such an extent that it fast becomes unworkable. That Solness is a happy man is in Herdal’s view obvious, and he defines this

happiness in terms of luck, as though luck were conclusive evidence of happiness. He thus establishes a luck-happiness equation, the logic of which Solness implicitly accepts. A sketch is drawn of a poor country boy whose meteoric rise to the pinnacle of his profession was facilitated by a monumental stroke of luck, and as the conversation develops, several points about luck are brought into relief.

Firstly, with the identification of the fire at the old house (Solness and Aline's first home and Aline's cherished childhood home) as the precipitating factor of Solness's professional success, the point is made that luck is a scarce resource: one man's good fortune is another's ruin, in this case Aline's devastation at the loss of her home. "Hun har ikke forvundet det den dag idag. Ikke i alle disse tolv-tretten år" (1.51).

The second point concerns its unstable and fickle nature. Solness confides that he is in a state of fear, and that he is so, precisely because luck has played such a decisive role in the history of his career. He is haunted by the spectre of a radical reversal of fortune: "Omslaget kommer" (1.51 twice; 1.66; 2.94). While he sees himself as standing at the top of his field, he also sees that he stands on slippery ground, for it was nothing but sheer luck that raised him to these heights, and it is luck that will likewise, with almost gravitational certainty, topple him. It is the younger generation (personified by his apprentice Ragnar Brovik) that will engineer his downfall. Youth will come knocking on the door and "så er det slut med bygmester Solness" (1.52). Solness, like Deianeira, identifies the dependency of happiness on luck, and

also acknowledges that “if we are not blind, we cannot but fear today's success may be tomorrow's fall”.¹⁷

However, the kind of *omslag* Solness fears could never constitute *peripeteia* in the manner described by Aristotle. Solness is confusing luck with the law of nature, according to which the old are inexorably replaced by the young. Here he is articulating a fear of both his own mortality and of retribution - he had ruined Old Brovik and naturally fears displacement by his son Ragnar.

This is further evidence of Solness clinging to reputation (what Kierkegaard calls “keeping hold of the temporal”) - for even after Hilde arrives and her youth is enlisted on his side, “youth against youth”, he continues to do everything in his power to thwart Ragnar. His treatment of the Broviks is consistent with the behaviour of the man in despair, whom Kierkegaard describes as “a king without a country” whose subjects live in conditions “where rebellion is legitimate at every moment”.¹⁸

The *lykke* theme is picked up again in Act II, but here the focus is clearly on a malevolent providence. Solness attempts to persuade Aline that the new house he has built for them will compensate for the dreadful emptiness that fills their present one. But Aline's grief is too intense for her even to simulate belief in this panacea: “FRU SOLNESS (udbrydende i klage). Du kan bygge så meget, du i verden vil, Halvard, - for *mig* får du aldrig bygget noget rigtigt hjem op igen!” (2.70). Incredible though it may seem to Solness, Aline blames him neither for the fire nor for her subsequent misery, nor do her words

express any resentment concerning the unequal distribution of *lykke* between them. She puts the episode down to a rotten stroke of luck:

FRU SOLNESS. For med det gamle huset, - med
det fik det nu endda være som det være vilde. Herregud,
- når nu engang ulykken var ude, så -
SOLNESS. Ja, det har du ret i. Ulykken rå'r en jo
ikke for, - siges der. (2.71)

Rather, Aline is blaming herself for failing to stand firm in grief, and even asks Solness to try to find it in himself to forgive *her*. Solness and Aline seem to agree on the ineluctability of *ulykke*, but Aline's relationship with luck is much more passive than her husband's. She retreats into the quasi-religious discourse of stoical, popular Pietism, insisting that such things as losing one's home, health and children are sent to try us, and that she has failed the test.

That she sees *ulykke* in religious terms, and its outcomes as a product of divine agency is made abundantly clear in a later conversation with Hilde in which she attributes the death of the twins to the operations of "en højere tilskikkelse"- a higher dispensation, and adds, furthermore, that it is one's duty to "bøje sig under. Og takke til" (3.102). Solness, on the other hand, who has so far avoided any overt identification of the locus of luck, sees no such need for passive submission, and rails against the apparent injustice of it: "(knytter hænderne i stille raseri.) Å, at sligt noget kan få lov til at gå for sig her i verden!" (2.80).

At this point, he is detailing the history of the empty nurseries to Hilde, and this has led him naturally back to the subject of the fire. *Ulykke*, just as *lykke* in Act I is presented as a harbinger of both provision and deprivation:

HILDE. Var det en svær ulykke for Dem?
SOLNESS. Li'som en tar det til. Som bygmester
kom jeg i vejret på den branden. (2.79)

He goes on to explain how after the fire he was able to divide the land on which Aline's childhood home had stood into plots, which gave him the necessary scope to build exactly what and how he pleased: homes for humans instead of the houses of God he had previously restricted himself to.

Whereas Herdal formulates a luck-happiness equation, Hilde conceives of happiness as consisting in autonomy (as indeed had Solness when he broke with God) and she never admits luck into the equation. On her view, the autonomous individual is the locus of his own happiness, for which he is responsible. Because Solness achieved artistic freedom, she concludes, failing to identify his despair-in-autonomy, that he "må visst være en svært lykkelig mand" (2.81). Solness is clearly very disheartened to hear this, and the familiar Ibsenian device of double repetition leaves no room to doubt that he is anything but happy:

SOLNESS (formørket). Lykkelig? Sier *De* også det?
Ligesom alle de andre.

HILDE. Ja, for det synes jeg da *De* må. Når *De*
bare kunde la'være at tænke på de to små barnene, så -

SOLNESS (langsomt). De to små barnene, - de er
ikke så greje at komme ifra, de, Hilde.

HILDE (lidt usikker). Står de endnu så svært
ivejen. Så lange, lange tider bagefter?

SOLNESS (ser fast på hende, uten at svare).
Lykkelig mand, sa' *De* -

HILDE. Ja, men *er* *De* da ikke det, for resten?
(2.81)

At this point, the notion of *lykke* is taken beyond the enabling/disabling duality so far presented, and the highly personal cost of being the recipient of

good fortune is stressed. Solness agrees with Hilde that it is a “svær lykke” to build homes, to provide the setting for scenes of domestic bliss where people can live in “tryk og glad fornemmelse af at det er en svært lykkelig ting, det, at være *til* i verden. Og mest det, å høre hverandre til” (2.82). However,

For at komme til at bygge hjem for andre, måtte jeg gi’ afkald, - for alle tider gi’ afkald på at få et hjem selv. Jeg mener et hjem for barneflokkene. Og for far og for mor også. [...] Det var prisen for den lykken, som folk går og snakker om. Den lykken, - hm, - den lykken, den var ikke billigere at få, den, Hilde. (2.82)

According to this narrative, Solness had identified domestic architecture as the locus of *lykke*, but, in order to seize it, he had to sacrifice his own domestic happiness. This is the statement of a familiar problem in Ibsen’s plays. In responding to his calling, the individual inevitably compromises his chances of personal happiness. But the question which needs to be addressed is how comparable is Solness’s narrative with Brand’s? Brand too sacrificed such a home but, as we shall see, Ibsen is asking very different questions of Solness.

Solness, moreover, does not hold out any hope for future improvement - “Aldrig i verden” (2.82). These lines underscore the protean, paradoxical nature of happiness, once Solness extends it beyond the significance it holds for “solide folk” (1.35). Happiness, in terms of success and personal/artistic autonomy can only be bought with personal happiness, the net result of which is unhappiness, and, it seems, an attendant loss of faith.

This mode of despair is an integral characteristic of Kierkegaardian despair. It is what Kierkegaard called the “sin of despairing over sin”, where

sin consists in forsaking God. Despairing over sin amounts to a denial of the possibility of redemption (and ultimately a denial of the Christian faith itself) - which Kierkegaard sees as “an attempt to keep sinking even deeper”. In the same passage, Kierkegaard goes on to detail Macbeth's psychological state after the murder, a description which could equally apply to Solness:

Through [...] despairing over the sin, he has lost all relation to grace- and also to himself. His selfish self crumbles in ambition [...] he is no closer to enjoying his own self in his ambition than he is to grasping grace.¹⁹

What this passage highlights is the impossibility of attaining selfhood outside the dialectical structure outlined earlier. Having abandoned the eternal pole, Solness has stranded himself in immediacy, and, without a conception of God, has no hope of emerging from it. According to the Kierkegaardian paradigm, an incomplete self, however successful in the temporal realm, remains incomplete and thus cannot be enjoyed.

Solness, in this last disquisition on *lykke* has collapsed the ancient and enduring identification of luck and happiness, positing the former as incompatible with the latter and the latter as self-annihilating. Thus, by the end of Act II, *lykke* has been stripped of its customary content and is reduced to a sign for spiritual malaise, the nosology of which will be revealed in subsequent confessions.

7.3 Kunstnerplads

As we have seen, Solness constantly refers to the cost of his position as an artist, which is paid in the currency of other people's happiness: “ikke med

penge. Med men menneskelykke. Og ikke med min egen lykke alene. Men med andres også" (2.83) - and with the peace of his soul. He is paying off a debt that cannot be cancelled. It is the moribund Aline who in his view has suffered the most, and it is towards her that he directs his feelings of guilt: "For min lykkes skyld [...] og nu er hun død - for min skyld" (3.106). This is a development of the Solness-Herdal conversation in Act I, where Solness confesses to the nonplussed doctor that he is happy for Aline to harbour suspicions of his infidelity: "[...] Fordi jeg synes der ligger ligesom - ligesom en slags velgørende selvpinsel for mig i *det* at la' Aline få gøre mig uret" (1.48).

Ibsen is extending Solness's material metaphor by exploiting the polysemy of the word *skyld* 'guilt', 'debt', 'sake'. Nietzsche had stressed "[...] the basic moral term *Schuld* (guilt) has its origin in the very material term *Schulden* (to be indebted)".²⁰ Guilt, therefore, is the outcome of indebtedness, which, as we saw in the Herdal-Solness conversation, is necessary for the procurement of happiness. The notion of guilt now enters the *lykke* equation, and in so doing, immediately invites the question of how happiness and guilt can possibly harmonise where happiness and luck failed, and, in what sort of moral relationship do luck and guilt stand?

SOLNESS. [...] Jeg har aldrig gjort dig noget ondt. Ikke med vidende og vilje ialfald. Og så alligevel - så kendes det som om en knugende skyld lå og tynged på mig.

ALINE. En skyld imod *mig*?

SOLNESS. Mest imod dig. (2.73)

As earlier stated, luck is definable as that which is beyond our control. And surely, at least where common morality has developed alongside Protestantism, moral judgements work on the premise that at least some degree of control resides with the agent²¹? A moral evaluation through which guilt attaches to someone for an action, and by extension, for an outcome, which is beyond their control, outrages our sense of justice.

Kant, while recognising the vulnerability of human life to luck, sought to isolate and immunise moral values from the workings of contingency by vanishing notions of luck from the moral landscape altogether. He did so through his promotion of the will as ultimately the only proper object for moral assessment. We recall that:

The good will is [...] good in itself. [...] Even if it should happen that by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose [...] it would still sparkle like a jewel in its own right.²²

This doctrine of the purity of the will immunises both morality and moral agents from luck, in that the moral burden is located in intentions and not in results.

In contrast to the Kantian position stands the Greek position. Both philosophy and, as mentioned in the introduction, tragedy were much preoccupied with the question of the vulnerability of the good life to luck. Tragedy produces examples of how morality is in no sense safe from the incursions of luck: the fortunes of Oedipus, for example, show how concerns about intention are overridden by the actualities of what is achieved. As

Bernard Williams states, the guilt that Oedipus incurs is a recognition that “in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely what one has intentionally done”.²³

Contemporary philosophers, notably Williams and Nagel, have engaged with this issue. They argue against Kant that in our moral assessments of actions of both omission and commission, there is an irreducible element of what is called moral luck. “Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgement, it can be called moral luck. Such luck can be good or bad.”²⁴ On this view, guilt attaches to the morally unlucky.

Williams defines the fundamental difference between the Kantian moral assessment as working within a ‘from there’ perspective; (intention) and the Greek within a ‘from here’ (result) perspective. To illustrate how the latter usually obtains, Williams offers the example of the life of Gauguin, who, while recognising the validity of the claim of his wife and children on him, nevertheless abandoned them to pursue the life of the artist in Tahiti. He argues that Gauguin was only justified in doing this because his paintings are seen to have made a valuable contribution to mankind. Had, however, his project been unsuccessful, had his paintings been deemed talentless rubbish, then this fact, and not the deliberations that produced his decision to leave home would have unjustified him.²⁵

There are obvious parallels between Gauguin's and Solness's moral situation. Both relegated the claims of immediate, human relationships in pursuit of their projects. Gauguin was a successful painter, and Solness's project of becoming *the* Master Builder has also succeeded. So what is it, in Solness's view that unjustifies him and declares him guilty?

In order to arrive at any possible answer to what Solness calls this "store forfærdelige spørgsmål" (2.84) it is necessary to work through Solness's confession to Hilde towards the end of Act II. The two basic positions on (moral) luck outlined here will provide useful tools for the understanding of Solness's state of mind, for, as the exchange with Aline quoted above suggests, he seems to be caught between the two.

7.4 Denne her sprukne Skorstenspiben

We can, at least pre-reflectively, sympathise with Hilde in her conclusion that Solness is going too far in assuming guilt for the fire, Aline's unhappiness and the death of his children. But his confession that he had identified a potentially fatal crack in the chimney and yet had done nothing about it, puts a different complexion on the matter: a moral one. However, it was later established that the fire did not break out in the chimney but in the wardrobe. Had the opposite been true, his negligence would have made him responsible for the fire and its consequences. So, in the event, Solness can count himself not only lucky, but morally lucky too.

But guilt cannot be thrown off so easily in Ibsen, especially not dialectically, and Ibsen would probably not have subscribed to the Greek view of moral luck: The protagonist sinking under an intolerable burden of guilt remains very much centre stage, clearly *ulykkelig* in his *lykke*.

If we take a closer look at Solness's description of the crack in the chimney, something emerges which resembles what in modern parlance would be called a self-indulgent guilt-trip. Solness's guilt, clearly does not consist in his negligence: guilt is not always a matter of pure fact.

One central point that needs to be addressed is why Solness ruptures his *lykke* narrative and declares himself guilty, when the alternative, to remain inside it, would have offered him a legitimate escape that would have vanished his guilt, or at least have offered him a structure which could have reduced its claim on his conscience. The question is whether Solness is trying to execute a genuine moral U-turn from solipsism into Kantianism, or whether his assumption of guilt should be interpreted as a reflex prompted by his fear of the workings of luck.

Solness gives Hilde a detailed account of the progress of the crack in the chimney, which, true to form, Ibsen manipulates on both a realistic and symbolic level. The crack appeared in the chimney, part of the structure of the hearth, popularly conceived of as the focal point of the family. In Greek tragedy, the hearth (*estia*) was symbolic of female sexuality and fertility and the perpetuation of the male line through it.²⁶ Solness describes how he would go up into the loft to see if the crack was still there, and, as no one else knew

of the crack, his repeated visits to check on its progress can only be interpreted as his seeking confirmation of his professional ambition. Thus the crack represents the fabric of domesticity beginning to give under the pressure of private ambition, and so functions as a symbol of the meanings so far interwoven in the notion of *lykke*. If the hearth can be taken as being broadly representative of domestic *lykke* and narrowly representative of female physical and emotional potential, then Solness's career was built on Aline's cracked femininity.

He admits that he had thought of repairing the crack, but a hand interposed and led him, instead, to drafting a cruel winter scenario in which Aline would return, freezing, and instead of the cosy warmth of the home-fire she expects, would be greeted by a conflagration.

What Solness's extreme Kantian, 'from there' evaluation shows is that his will is at fault. This is, objectively true, but, just as Ibsen does not privilege the Greek view as a preferable, liveable alternative, he by no means leaves Kantian modes of moral living unquestioned.

7.5 Pligt

Aline, who more than any other of Ibsen's creations is a bleak caricature of wholesale, uncritical digestion of Kantianism, functions as a warning against its sterile conclusions. For Kant, the good will manifests itself by acting for the sake of duty:²⁷ The impulse behind all her relationships is *pligt*, not one

which promotes human happiness and love. Her response to Hilde on being thanked for the clothes she has brought her is characteristic:

HILDE (vil kaste sig om hendes hals). Å kæreste, dejligste fru Solness! De er da rigtig altfor snil også! Forfærdelig snil -

FRU SOLNESS (afværgende, gør sig løs). Å, langt ifra da. Det er jo bare min pligt, det. Og derfor gør jeg det så gerne. (2.74)

Peter Winch uses the example of Aline Solness to make a point about Kantian formalism:

How very differently we should have regarded her if she had said [to Hilde on her arrival]: 'Do come and see your room. I hope you will be comfortable there and enjoy your stay.' Certainly in the latter case the conception of the relation between host and guest and the duties involved would still enter into our understanding of the situation, but not in the form of something 'for the sake of which' the action is performed.²⁸

Her concept of duty is so perfunctory and so devoid of any specific content that she is unable to distinguish between different levels or qualities of duty. In Act III, her guiding principle, duty for duty's sake, throws her into confusion. She fears that Solness will climb the steeple and, because of his vertigo, fall. Even so, she leaves him in order to attend to some visiting ladies on the grounds that this is her duty, and asks Hilde to stay and try to dissuade him from going up:

HILDE. Var det ikke rettest at De selv gjorde det?
FRU SOLNESS. Jo, herregud, - det var jo *min* pligt.
Men når en har pligter på så mange kanter, så - . (3.115)

What Ibsen, through Aline reveals about the Kantian principle of duty is that it is unworkable in that it has no identifiable end. Here we are presented with

a dramatisation of several philosophers' main objection to Kantianism, namely that it is not productive of human happiness.²⁹ Indeed, Aline never once uses the word *lykke* in its positive form.³⁰

Solness's uncharacteristic leap into Kantianism can be seen as a combination of factors: firstly, feeling as vulnerable to luck as he does, he is desperately searching for some kind of immutable standard, which the doctrine of the autonomous, pure will provides; secondly, it shows how difficult it is for him to abandon completely the prevailing moral norms and with them the tradition they express. Ibsen had identified this difficulty as a basic conflict within the individual.

De forskellige åndsfunktioner udvikler sig nemlig jevnside og ikke ligeligt i et og samme individ. Tilegnelsesdriften jager fremad fra vinding til vinding. Moralbevidstheden, 'samvittigheden', er derimod meget konservativ. De har sine rødder i traditionerne og i det fortidige overhodet. (HU XVIII.128)³¹

7.6 Hjælperne og Tjenerne

But Solness does not remain within the Kantian narrative for long. No ethical system in itself can bring him close to revelation. As Kierkegaard stresses, revelation is a free act for which the hero is responsible. Therefore, Solness has to make a choice to revelation, independently of imposing external ethical evaluations on his condition.

Solness is no more able to eliminate luck from his narrative than he is able to see Kantianism through to its logical conclusion: he admits his guilt but does not acknowledge responsibility. The reason for this is that he does not

view the will in an antinomic structure of good and bad, but in terms of strength and weakness.

His account of the interposing hand that led him to abandon his initial choice of repairing the crack is illustrative of Kierkegaard's account of the will, where he argues against the Socratic maxim that man sins only from ignorance. Kierkegaard's view is that man can sin through a dialectical operation of the will, which, given time by the agent, works at obscuring knowledge so efficiently that it eventually deserts to the side of the will which "has underneath it all of man's lower nature":

A very lengthy story begins [...] if a person does not do what is right the very second he knows it is the right thing to do - then the knowledge comes off the boil. The will lets some time pass [...] During all this the knowing becomes more and more obscured and the lower nature more and more victorious [...] Gradually the will ceases to object to this happening; it practically winks at it. And then when the knowing has become duly obscured, the will and the knowing can better understand one another. Eventually they are in total agreement, since knowing has now deserted to the side of the will and allows it to be known that what the will wants is quite right.³²

Solness willed the fire, and the fact that it broke out in the wardrobe and not in the chimney neither cancels his wish, nor, as he is only too well aware, does it diminish the incendiary power of his will. The subject of the potency of the will is one of his main preoccupations, and he has given previous examples of what has come to him simply through willing and wishing in silence and solitude: Kaja Fosli coming into his employ and perhaps Hilde's arrival too.³³

Although fixated on the will, Solness's conception of it is highly unKantian in many important ways. Firstly, as we have seen, for him, the will is not a moral category, and is not to be judged in terms of good and bad. Secondly, and equally significantly, this will is judged purely in terms of what it can achieve: the potent will is the gift and preserve of "enkelte udkårne, udvalgte mennesker, som har fåt nåde og magt og evne til at *ønske* noget, *begære* noget, *ville* noget - så ihærdigt og så ubønhørligt - at de *må* få det tilslut" (2.88). He is convinced that had the same set of circumstances involved Knut Brovik instead of Halvard Solness, there would have been no fire.

One of the main points about the autonomous will was its originary equality. Anyone, guided by a sense of duty could be said to be morally commendable and in possession of a good will. Thus the "stepmotherly nature" which Kant wrote of and the few chosen people amongst whom Solness numbers himself, are neither here nor there.

What Solness is, in fact, arguing for is *constitutive* luck, the fact that he has certain innate capacities, namely his powerful will, denied to others. His insistence that the house would not have burnt down quite so conveniently for Knut Brovik exemplifies his position. But Kierkegaard is clear on this point: "good fortune is not a specification of spirit", and seen in this way, Solness's suggestion that it *is* can be viewed as merely another tactic of concealment.

However, this will is not sufficient in itself. If anything really great is to be achieved, Solness is dependent on the ministrations of intermediary spirits and demons.

SOLNESS. [...] (*i stigende oprør*). Det er *det*, som godtfolk kalder at ha' lykken med sig. Men jeg skal sige Dem, jeg, hvorledes den lykken kendes! Den kendes som et stort hudløst sted her på brystet. Og så går hjælperne og tjenerne og flår hudstykker af andre mennesker for at lukke *mit* sår! – Men såret heles ikke endda. Aldrig, - aldrig! Å, om De vidste hvor det kan suge og svie iblandt. (2.89) ³⁴

Solness goes on to develop an entire folkloric corpus around the notion of *lykke*, of helpers and servants, good and bad demons (apparently indistinguishable from each other) and the troll within who determines the non-rational choices in life (413-4/465). In *Peer Gynt* the troll world stood for compromised humanity, where the normative motto "Mand, vær dig selv!" is reduced to "Troid, vær dig selv - nok!" (HU VI.2.100). Therefore, Solness's troll within can be seen as an image of his desertion of the ideal for the immediate and his choice against selfhood.

The more Solness expands on the idea of the will, the further he moves away from Kantianism and from accepting responsibility, which he devolves onto these intermediary spirits, who, as he has explained, offer no standards by which good and bad can be distinguished. His companion narrative of the will offers him an escape from confronting his desertion of the ideal and gives him a self-description that distinguishes him from the *solide folk* around him. However, his expatiations on the strong will as being the locus of *lykke* expose the guilt he feels towards Aline as being displaced and must be seen in the wider context of his narrative of concealment.

It is clear that by now the original definition of *lykke* has been completely invalidated. Solness has effectively deconstructed his *lykke*

narrative: happiness and guilt, like happiness and luck are mutually exclusive, and the claim that luck inheres in the will is surely a contradiction in terms. If contingency can be subject to the control of the will (or of anything for that matter), then it ceases to be contingency. Even arguing for constitutive luck as Solness's doctrine of the elect does, does not solve this tension, for, if this were the case, he would have no need to fear his helpers and servants abandoning him to the mercy of inexorable retribution. Solness's particular brand of solipsism whose discourse is that of a fallacious external evaluative view (*lykke*) clearly affords him no adequate processes for dealing with his feelings of guilt and its attendant torment.

Solness's torment is the result of a divided conscience, but not, as he claims, a conscience torn between the conflicting duties enjoined on him by his calling and by those around him. This is revealed by the fact that he has come to doubt the very integrity of his art, and identifies no valid project in life. His *kunstnerplads*, which he sees as being paid for in the currency of Aline's happiness, is in fact paid for by his own loss of selfhood.

Furthermore, the *lykke* construction placed on his personal and professional history, as we have seen, is fragile and collapsible, and obviously not one in which he can work out any kind of salvation, or repossess the peace of his soul. It is the narrative of "[...] the emergence of the self out of the opacity of immediacy into the clear and merciless transparency of the unhappy consciousness where nothing can save consciousness from despair [...] but a surrender to God".³⁵

But by his excessive reliance on luck, both as an instrumental force and as the articulation of the aetiology and pathology of his torment, Solness denies himself any clear access to the truth of his guilt; his choice against health. And it is the very two factors that invalidated and exposed this *lykke* construction - (guilt and the will) that Solness most needs to come to terms with, but they are exposed by his self-mythologising discourse of the elect.

7.7 De er syg, bygmester

Other identifiable tactics employed by Solness which enable him to avoid confronting the real locus of his guilt range, as we have seen, from plain intransigence and an insistence on the immutable essence of his self to a retreat behind the mask of madness. His constant challenges to those around him to declare him insane amount to a desperate plea for absolution, for whenever any reference is made to his illness/madness, some sort of discussion or disclosure of assumed guilt is never far off. It is Hilde who denies him the asylum of quasi-psychological discourse:

HILDE (ser opmærksomt på ham). De er syg, bygmester, svært syg, tror jeg næsten.

SOLNESS. Si' gal. For *det* mener De jo.

HILDE. Nej, jeg tror ikke det skorter Dem videre på forstanden. (2.89)

She diagnoses his illness in terms of a "skranten samvittighed" - what Nietzsche termed the "indecent bite of conscience"³⁶, which proves that a character is not equal to the deed, and she views this as a potential threat to her vision of his greatness. To counter this, she glorifies the *robust samvittighed*

of the Vikings that he mentions, and thus demonstrates the possibility of choosing an alternative, healthy identity. Hilde, in direct contrast to the Kantian notion of the inviolability of the rights of others, which determines all relationships as moral, insists that each person is responsible for seizing his own happiness, and questions the rights of others whose own happiness may be compromised in the process:

HILDE (i udbrud). Å, jeg synes, det er rigtig så tosset, så tosset - altså!

SOLNESS. Hvilket altså?

HILDE. At en ikke tør gribe efter sin egen lykke. Efter sit eget liv! Bare fordi det står nogen iverjen, som en kender!

SOLNESS. En, som en ikke har ret til at gå forbi.

HILDE. Gad vide om en ikke *havde* ret til det igunden. (3.107)

Hilde's vision of health could function as a description of Kierkegaard's sickness. She conceives of her self as her own self whose specifications are not the outcome of a relationship to God, and are not even, as in the case of Solness's identity as *bygmester*, the outcome of a socially constituted identity.

However, this version of health can only provide Solness with, at most, temporary relief, as the overwhelming burden of guilt that he assumes on his wife's account is to a very great extent, simply displacement, and his morbid rhetoric on the subject merely a piece of self-deluding sophistry.

Solness paints a highly sentimental portrait of Aline's radiance in motherhood, and insists that she had a calling for building human souls, a talent which he crushed. But the reality of this talent is one of the many unestablishable facts of the play. Firstly, the twins survived no longer than

three weeks - hardly long enough for any talent to declare itself; secondly, it was Aline who was primarily responsible for their deaths, not he, as it was some misguided notion of duty that compelled her to breast-feed even when feverish which sent them to their early graves. Their empty nurseries function as a poignant symbol of blind slavishness to duty and its life-denying consequences. Moreover, Aline never mentions their loss, and certainly does not conceive of them as the instance of her most profound suffering, but instead laments the material losses from the fire, particularly the nine dolls that she carried under her heart well into womanhood. There are, then, compelling reasons for recording duty as the cause of her death, and not as Solness supposes the demands of his calling. Aline is no Agnes.

This consideration very much reduces the stature of Solness's sin against Aline, but it does not exonerate him. If we recall the duality of the symbol of the crack, some sin against her persists. It consists in the fact that any fantasies entertained by Solness during his repeated visits to the loft did not involve any consideration of Aline's happiness, but this hardly justifies the violence of his metaphor.

No sin of corresponding magnitude is confessed until Act III, to which this discussion now turns. In the following section it will become clear that Ibsen, as suggested earlier, is taking the life/art dilemma in a direction different from that of Brand, and is questioning the very integrity of the artist's relationship to his project.

7.8 Revelation

It is not until the final act that Solness begins to display some kind of consciousness of the real root of his despair. In his final confession to Hilde he recounts how as a man of pious rural origins he had considered it the highest good ("det verdigste") to build churches to the greater glory of God, but God soon showed that He was not in fact pleased with him by depriving him of love and happiness (*kjærlighed og lykke*) so that he could devote himself wholeheartedly, without the distraction of conflicting demands to Him. It was God (not Solness) who let the house burn and God, (not Solness) who took his sons away and God who put the troll in him and God who put both the fair and dark devils at his disposal. Compare this with "Hvem ropte på hjælperne og tjenerne? Det gjorde jeg!" (2.89).

At Lysanger he did do the impossible; conquered his vertigo to wreath the last steeple he built and to declare his independence from God- the very moment that Hilde conceives of his apotheosis. Earlier, he had told Hilde that from the day he lost the twins, he only reluctantly built churches. This last confession in Act III, is not, however, informed by any epiphanic self-knowledge, for it, like his previous confessions rests on subterfuge.

When the crack in the chimney opened up imaginary vistas of artistic success, his dream of dividing the site of Aline's home cannot have taken the form of building to the greater glory of God on those plots, but quite unequivocally to the greater glory of Solness. Therefore, he had stopped building humble churches with any sincerity and devotion "med et så ærligt

og varmt og inderligt sind" (3.116) long before the death of the twins. As Marie Wells emphasises, he is in bad faith.³⁷ And thus the gradual process of devolvement of the responsibility for his guilt, through the compensatory fiction of *lykke*, with its helpers and servants, demons and trolls, reaches its culmination in the portrayal of a tyrannical God.

After the ascent at Lysanger, he built nothing but homes for people, which he now perceives as an utterly meaningless squandering of his talent: "Ingenting bygget igrunden. Og ingenting ofret for at få bygge noget heller. Ingenting, ingenting – alt sammen" (3.118) - so much so that his will to build has almost been paralysed. These lines stand in stark contrast to his previous confession in which he saw his sacrifice as a sacrifice to his art, and not as now, the sacrifice of his art. He declares that building homes for people "er ikke fem øre værd" (3.118) and this conclusion goes some way towards answering the question about the source of his guilt. It is not the success of Solness's project that is at issue as it is never questioned, but it does not offer him any justification, and moreover, leaves him consumed by guilt. The point is that his project itself with its definition rooted in Solness's defiance of God is at fault.

But the irony of this last confession is that through its very subterfuge, it has led him, however subliminally, back to the essence of his despair - his rebellion against God/the ideal. Its circularity has betrayed both him and his desperate need for God. As Van Laan explains, Solness's fiction is

created in response to a recognition – that is, to Solness' feeling of the utter nothingness of his existence. Solness'

narrative is a story that he tells himself in order to account for and make sense of that feeling in a manner that has a magnitude equal to it as well as to give himself, in the proposed second defiance of God, a possible means of overcoming that feeling".³⁸

Lykke thus functions not only as a compensatory fiction for a denied ideal, but has also a very clear dramatic function in that its exposure of what it was enlisted to obscure has led Solness back to a conception, albeit mendacious, of God, and has forced him to re-enter the dialectic of the self. It is his realisation that he must confront what he has been avoiding for the past ten years that more precisely defines the nature of the final action than does Hilde's project of claiming her kingdom and seeing its prince proud and free. This is not, however, an attempt to reduce Hilde's catalytic and enabling role, for it is clearly in response to her belief in him and her nympholeptic entreaties: "HILDE (*lidenskabelig*). Jeg vil det! Jeg vil det! (bedende). Bare en eneste gang til, bygmester! Gør det *umulige* om igen!" (3.119) and her Nietzschean casuistry that he is able to throw off the guilt he feels towards Aline and confront his denied ideal. For Solness, the ascent marks a reopening of his dialogue with God: "Jeg vil si' til ham: hør mig, stormægtige herre - du får nu dømme om mig som du selv synes. Men herefter vil jeg bare bygge det dejligste i verden" (3.119).

He has thus regained some degree of selfhood in that he is now "standing before God", albeit with a faulty conception, and although he has not directly submitted to Him, he does articulate a certain degree of awareness of his accountability to Him. His point is crucial in view of Kierkegaard's

dictum "The more conception of God, the more self". He has, moreover, gone through the necessary stage of divesting both himself and his newly-defined artistic project of all traces of social identification - a basic requirement of selfhood. He dreams of a new life hand in hand with his princess Hilde (a social impossibility), and of a new building phase of castles in the air- with a firm foundation. These castles are *det dejligste i verden* because Solness perceives them as the only possible accommodation for *menneskelykke* - human happiness: "Det eneste, som jeg tror der kan rummes menneskelykke i" (3.118).

This is the first time he removes *lykke* from the worldly realm of subjective experience or from the domestic realm. *Lykke* is thus depersonalised and desocialised, indicating the potential for Solness's new moral position within the community of mankind and his commitment to nurturing its spirit.

The castle in the air with a firm foundation, is however, a highly ambiguous image. On the one hand, it can be viewed from a Kierkegaardian perspective as the synthesis of the historical and the ideal, showing that through this project Solness is attempting to redress the imbalance within his self. On the other hand, it can be seen as a statement of the very impossibility of doing so - a castle in the air with a firm foundation ceases to be a castle in the air. This central contradiction communicated by the symbol of the castle is evocative of the paradox of the self set out by the Button Moulder in *Peer Gynt*: "At være sig selv, er: sig selv at døde" (5.229). The image also invokes Christ's own words: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for

my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39), inform the Kierkegaardian notion of true selfhood as being rooted in selflessness.

Solness does, much to the consternation of the crowd, achieve *det umulige* (which throughout the play has assumed mantra-like significance for him, in the same way that *det vidunderlige* does for Nora). He overcomes his vertigo once more and makes the ascent to the top of the steeple of his new house and wreathes it, making real Hilde's dream. The religious undertones of the impossible: "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee" (Mark 14:36) are thrown into relief by Hilde's ecstatic declaration on seeing Solness wreath the steeple, "Nu er det fuldbragt." - "It is finished" (John 30:19). Her identification of Solness with Christ crucified means that for her, his subsequent plunge to death in no way constitutes either defeat or any reduction in his stature. He remains forever "*Min bygmester!*" (3.123). Hilde is Hedda triumphant.

But the play does not end on an unequivocally triumphant note. Hilde's Solness-Christ identification is highly problematic: Christ assumed the collective guilt of mankind and died that man might live, whereas Hilde's vision of victory is grounded in Solness's throwing off of his private guilt in accordance with the doctrine of self-assertion, rather than any project of mass salvation. Furthermore, the question of Solness's guilt persists, and Solness carries his guilt with him to the top of the steeple; for it is only his guilt as personified by Aline that Hilde can relieve him of - only one part of his double defiance. Aline's fainting does parallel Solness's fall, but it must be

remembered that she has functioned merely as a symbol of his largely misplaced guilt.

Moreover, the irony of Ragnar handing the wreath (a potent symbol into which both notions of death and victory are interwoven) to Solness prior to his ascent violates a symmetry that dictates that Hilde should hand over the symbol of victory. Ibsen, by placing the wreath in Ragnar's hands momentarily turns it into a death-dealing symbol and Ragnar into the Nemesis that Solness so intensely feared.

James McFarlane argues for a detachment on Ibsen's part during the last sequence.³⁹ There is certainly a lack of the heroic, or what James Joyce termed "spiritual glamour" surrounding Solness's death.⁴⁰ Moreover, there is a conspicuous absence of the redemptive possibilities as articulated by the voices at the end of *Brand* and *Når vi døde vågner*; and the joining of estranged hands in *John Gabriel Borkman*. The harps that orchestrate Hilde's ecstasy constitute too subjective an experience to carry the same force as the above examples.

The central issue is clearly not that Solness falls, but why he falls. To view his fall as merely the workings of a retributive agency (as the Ragnar sequence discussed above might be taken to imply) is to reduce considerably both play and protagonist in stature. Such an interpretation demands a reading of Solness as one who makes no spiritual progress during the course of the drama. And tracing the fortunes over three acts of a man who lives in fear of retribution and then receives it, holds little dramatic and less tragic

interest. So what spiritual progress has Solness made (for it cannot be claimed that his final ascent constitutes a drastic leap of faith)? The crucial, paradoxical point that Kierkegaard makes about despair is that it is in itself spiritual progress. Unlike somatic illness, despair is “an infinite merit”, the only and necessary state through which men can return to God. Egil Törnqvist comes close to this idea in saying that Solness’s illness “is a sign of his being truly alive, a sign, that is of his health”.⁴¹

Many commentators hold with McFarlane that Ibsen is deliberately avoiding tragedy in that there is no cathartic finish to the action. In contrast, Theoharis C. Theoharis has argued eloquently for a double catharsis:

Ibsen has constructed this final scene so that no one can doubt that Solness *is* Hilde’s master builder. Whether that means he is her creator god or the all too human victim of her mischievous, unbridled, adolescent fancy is a question this play has required the audience to consider from the moment Hilde first appeared. To settle the question, Ibsen finishes the play with a classically rational *and* a classically irrational catharsis, testing the power of both to provide an adequate rationale for the change Hilde has wrought in Solness’s life.⁴²

The “classically rational” catharsis is that provided by Ragnar, whose response Theoharis describes as representing the “solemn sagacity of the chorus member who proffers small understanding for great events.” Theoharis sees Ragnar’s reaction to Solness’s fall as classic “pity and fear”, whereas Hilde’s ecstatic affirmation of Solness’s affirmative action provides more than a counterweight to this solemnity.

This is the first time Ibsen has used a dual ending of this kind. Prior to *Bygmester Solness* there are several instances of what Errol Durbach calls “the

temptation to err", that is allowing our response to the tragic action to be dictated by a chorus-type figure, always representing "small understanding of great events": *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler* are two notable examples. The audience has to separate the action from the commentary. However, nowhere else does Ibsen provide us with two voices in addition to the action as he does here. One way of understanding this development is to see Hilde as an extension of Solness and a messenger from the top of the steeple.

Solness's fall was not thus the product of a vindictive agency, but his dizziness on the heights, which like the castles in the air is a statement of the impossibility of the impossible and the limitations of the human spirit. Kierkegaard's vertigo metaphor is illuminating in this context: "[...] the dizziness of freedom which arises when the spirit would posit the synthesis and looks down onto its own possibility and then lays hold of the finite to steady itself".⁴³

Solness, after a brief glimpse at the possibility of freedom, plunges to his death, the planks and poles of finitude (no longer able to accommodate his spirit) having failed to steady him. His tragedy is the human tragedy of the struggle between the immediate and the ideal, the harmonising of which obtains not in victory, but in victory-in-defeat.

The Aristotelian rubric has clearly undergone several modifications in this play. What this chapter has attempted to demonstrate is how Kierkegaard's description of revelation is not only truer to late Ibsen than Aristotelian recognition, but also that it provides a clearer viewing lens

through which to approach these late heroes. We have seen in the case of *Bygmester Solness*, the pertinence of Kierkegaard's recasting of *anagnorisis* as an ethical imperative to the hero and his relocating of the burden of the release of dramatic tension from plot to protagonist. Furthermore, the opening up of the concept of revelation to give equal consideration to what it presupposes, namely concealment, enables us to strike at the very heart of the play.

Aristotle had argued that narrative was not proper to tragedy. Ibsen shows that it can be, for here "Ibsen has moved out of and perhaps beyond Aristotle's definition of tragedy as an imitation of a *praxis* with a plot as the soul. *Bygmester Solness* is the imitation of a *stasis* in which a poetic nexus of symbols is the soul".⁴⁴ *Bygmester Solness* feeds off Solness's narrative - a narrative of concealment which Ibsen submits not only to stage tension but also to the stresses of his own unrelenting questioning, in the mode of a Ricoeurian "hermeneutics of suspicion", in the sense that it embodies a false consciousness that needs to be revealed and to be overcome. As Van Laan points out, the new direction here is that Ibsen has created "an action whose most crucial defining component exists only in the mental activity of its supposed agent."⁴⁵

In the next chapter, we look at *John Gabriel Borkman*, in which Ibsen extends this kind of *anagnorisis* which arises through a confrontation of *lykke* and a necessary identity.

Endnotes

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IX*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer, Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1997.

² Barry Jacobs, "The Master Builder and Ibsen's Early Plays: The Call of the Wild in Ibsen", *Proceedings of the VII International Ibsen Conference*, Oslo, 1994, p. 90.

³ See Anthony Kenny's distinction between "situational" and "executive" luck in ch. VI above, pp. 239-40.

⁴ Bruce Bigley, "Praxis and Stasis in Ibsen's *Bygmester Solness* - Or What Ever Happened To Plot and Character?", *Scandinavian Studies* 50, 1978, p. 195.

⁵ Williams distinguishes two kinds of luck: *incident luck* refers to what is not in the control of the domain of the self, while *constitutive* luck refers to the capacities and talents one is born with, such as intelligence and beauty. See "Moral Luck", in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 20.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. and ed. H. V. and E. H. Hong, Princeton, 1983, p. 84.

⁷ *Poet* VI, VII, X, XI.

⁸ See Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, which sees tragedy as a mechanism (London, 1951, p. 34).

⁹ Daniel Haakonsen, "Ethical Implications in Ibsen's Drama", *Ibsenårbok*, Oslo, 1969, p. 15.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London, 1989, p. 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 112.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Compare with Peer Gynt: "Jeg kan skabe mig om till et Trolld!" (1.84).

¹⁵ Kierkegaard 1989, p. 82.

¹⁶ Sophocles, *The Women of Thrakis*, London, 1986, p. 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 129.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard 1989, p. 100.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard 1989, pp. 142-43.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. F. Golfing, New York, 1956, p. 194.

²¹ For the ethical development of Protestantism, see Richard Norman, *The Moral Philosophers*, Oxford, 1983, chs. 2 and 8.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals*, H. J. Paton trans., in *The Moral Law*, London, 1948, p. 60. (Also quoted above in Chapter III, p. 89).

²³ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 69.

²⁴ Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck", in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 26.

²⁵ Williams 1981, pp. 22-26.

²⁶ In the *Agamemnon*, after murdering her husband, Clytemnestra announces that "my staunch ally now as then, Aegisthus, kindles on my hearth the ancestral fire". Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy*, trans. P. Vellacott, London, 1986, p. 92.

²⁷ Kant 1948, p. 62.

²⁸ Peter Winch, "Moral Integrity" in *Ethics and Action*, London, 1972, p. 183. Winch remarks that "It may be said that it is unfair to Kant to take such a corrupt case of 'acting for the sake of duty' as [Aline Solness's]! Winch, *ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁹ See for example, MacIntyre 1993, and Norman 1983.

³⁰ "To help others where one can is a duty, and besides there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity and self-interest they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others at their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind however right and however aimable [...] still has no genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations [...] for its maxim lacks moral content, namely the performance of such actions not from inclination but from duty" (Kant 1948, p. 63).

³¹ It is perhaps in the light of this statement, in a sense deeper than that of the marriage contract itself that we should read Solness's description of himself as "levende lænket til den døde" (3.106). Hilde too, despite her glorification of the robust conscience is in no sense immune from the conservatism of conscience that Ibsen describes. In spite of her denigration of *pligt*, "det stygge fæle ordet" (2.75), she does not emerge from her discussion with Aline unscathed by it. She temporarily submits to its authority, and tells Solness that he has a duty to his wife. Moreover, it could be asked what authority Hilde is invoking when she demands her promised kingdom and castle. Is this Solness's *duty* to her? Promises are neither made nor taken lightly in Kantian ethics.

³² Kierkegaard 1989, pp. 126-27.

³³ On the subject of the morality of wishing, H. Fingarette writes: "Moral guilt accrues by virtue of our wishes, not merely our acts. Of course legal guilt depends primarily upon our acts, though we should note that even here the assessment of motives plays a role. But the question of moral guilt does not wait for acts; it is to a profound degree a question of what one harbours in one's heart. This is the basic gist of Freud's concept of 'psychic reality'. In the psychic economy, the wish is omnipotent. To wish is, psychologically, to have done. Hence a person suffers guilt for his wishes, even his unconscious ones." (The crowning example of this phenomenon in Ibsen is the birth of the brat in *Peer Gynt*.) See H. Morris, "Nonmoral Guilt", in *Responsibility, Character and the Emotions*, ed. F. Schoeman, Cambridge, 1987, p. 229.

³⁴ Note the similarity between Solness's description and Nietzsche's account of Germanic punitive measures, which included "the popular flaying alive, cutting out of flesh from the chest". See Nietzsche 1956, p. 194.

³⁵ Hannay 1991, pp. 192-93.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufman, 1954, p. 10.

³⁷ Marie Wells, "The Master Builder, John Gabriel Borkman and When We Dead Awaken - Variations on a Theme or Developing Argument?", *New Comparisons* 4, 1987, p. 43.

³⁸ Thomas F. Van Laan, "Ibsen's Transformation in the Aristotelian Tragic Pattern of Action in *The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder*", in *Ibsen im europäischen Spannungsfeld zwischen Naturalismus und Symbolismus: Kongreßakten der 8. Internationalen Ibsen-Konferenz*, ed. Maria Deppermann et al., Frankfurt, 1998, p. 376.

³⁹ James McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning*: Norwich, p. 229.

⁴⁰ "At the close of *The Master Builder*, the greatest touch of all was the horrifying exclamation of one without, 'O! the head is all crushed in.' A lesser artist would have cast a spiritual glamour over the tragedy of Bygmester Solness." Quoted in B. J. Tysdahl, *Joyce and Ibsen: A Study in Literary Influence*, Oslo, 1968, pp. 31-32.

⁴¹ Egil Törnqvist, "The Illness Pattern in *The Master Builder*", *Scandinavica* 11, 1, 1972, p. 12.

⁴² Theoharis C. Theoharis, "Catharsis, Ancient and Modern in *The Master Builder*" in *Ibsen im europäischen Spannungsfeld zwischen Naturalismus und Symbolismus: Kongreßakten der 8. Internationalen Ibsen-Konferenz*, ed. Maria Deppermann et al., Frankfurt, 1998, p. 386-87.

⁴³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson, Princeton, 1980, p. 61.

⁴⁴ Bigley 1978, p. 207.

⁴⁵ Van Laan 1997, p. 376.

Our idea of persons derives from two sources: one from the theater, the *dramatis personae* of the stage; the other has its origins in law. An actor dons masks, literally *per sonae*, that through which the sound comes. [...] A person's roles and his place in the narrative devolve from the *choices* that place him in a structural system, *related to others*. [...] The idea of a person is the idea of a *unified center of choice* and action, the unit of legal and theological responsibility. Having chosen, a person *acts, and so is actionable, liable*. It is in this idea of action that the legal and the theatrical sources of the concept of the person come together - *Amélie Oksenberg Rorty*.

Chapter VIII

John Gabriel Borkman: Emotions of Self-Assessment

8.1 Introduction: Crime and Punishment

As in *Bygmester Solness*, Ibsen gives us a hero who stands in an uncertain relationship to his calling, a play in which the tragic outcome is defined by the character's relationship to *lykke*. Borkman relies as much on contingency to explain experience as Solness does, but does not mobilise anything comparable to Solness's supernatural retinue. Human affairs are seen in human terms by this hero – human agency is precisely that, and the contingent is seen as a neutral, impersonal realm.

This play adjusts its focus to allow the tragic to emerge through a dual notion of the person (see the Rorty quotation above, p. 287) in the coincidence of legal and tragic guilt, explored in a much more thorough way than in *Et Dukkehjem*.

While the Latin root of the theatrical designation *per sonae* only dimly resonates in common usage, the legal aspect is still very much current. Moreover, the two concepts are often allied in tragedy, for choice, culpability and causation are crucial to both. Indeed, notions of responsibility, cause and guilt are all at stake in the Greek word *aitios*, and the verb *aitiasthai* means both to “find responsible” and to “prosecute”. I would like to foreground the dual aspect of the concept for the purposes of the following consideration of Ibsen's penultimate work because in this work both notions of action and actionability

are central, and Borkman's stage *anagnorisis* is played out at the meeting point between tragic guilt and legal culpability. But, as we shall see, it is not so much a confrontation with guilt that clears the way to *anagnorisis*, but another tragic emotion, shame.

Borkman's crime, in contrast to Solness's, is the outcome of concrete action, is specific and legally definable: embezzlement. It has, moreover, been through the formalities of legal process and is not suspended like Solness's in the realm of metaphysical speculation. John Gabriel Borkman has been tried, judged and convicted. He has served his sentence and is now technically a free man. But what Ibsen demonstrates by locating the occasion of Borkman's fall from "greet prosperitee ... out of heigh degree / Into myserie"¹ (to employ Chaucer's recasting of the tragic trajectory) in the *forhistorie* of the play is that this crime "imod lands lov og ret" (2.85) and the ensuing trial are, in and of themselves, dramatically uninteresting. Moreover, Borkman's guilt, as far as he is concerned, is a mere formality: for him it is no more than the outcome of a trial whose validity and applicability to his vision he rejects. His fall is relegated to a fact about his past, and the trial is thus configured as an inadequate response to the crime he committed because it takes too reductive a view of it. It therefore can have no saving effect, provide no resolution in the way that the trial for matricide provides closure in *The Eumenides*.

There is a clear tension in the play between Borkman as a character in the sense Rorty gives, as someone whose "place in the narrative" can be seen to "devolve from the choices that place him in a structural system, related to

others”, and his forensic aspect. He is indeed a “unified centre of responsibility”, but, as the plot itself implies, it is not as a formal forensic category that the notion of responsibility becomes meaningful. Borkman has done his time, yet in an important sense is clearly not a free man: he is physically incarcerated and socially isolated.

In this play Ibsen develops notions of responsibility in a far less rhetorical manner than he does in *Lille Eyolf* for example, where for Allmers responsibility functions much in the same way as we saw *lykke* operating as a compensatory fiction for Solness. This is partly due to Borkman’s own resistance to guilt, which stands in marked contrast to both Solness’s and Allmers’s.² In *John Gabriel Borkman* the notion of responsibility itself is central to the drama, and Borkman’s changing relationship to it is propulsive of the tragic action.

8.2 Act I

8.2.1 *Reparation*: Erhart

Something rarely commented on in the critical literature is this play’s engagement with *lykke*. It turns just as much on this multivalent notion as *Bygmester Solness* does, but here its field of play is much wider than in the earlier work. Although the play is indisputably dominated by Borkman, (despite the fact that he is physically absent for much of the action), it does present

andre livsmåter, som Foldal's naive illusjonsbaserte lillelykke, Fannys desillusjonerte utfoldelse, søstrenes erstatningslykke og antydningvis Fridas liv for kunsten, ikke for mannen eller makten.³

In fact, each character voices different aspects of *lykke*. It is a most centrifugal notion, and it catches in its wake concepts as diverse and important as sin, pride, guilt, love and above all, chance.

As in *Bygmester Solness* the notion of *lykke* is introduced without delay, but not by the protagonist as in the earlier play:

ELLA RENTHEIM. Jeg vilde lette vejen for Erhart til at bli' et lykkeligt menneske her i verden.

FRU BORKMAN (blæser). Pyh, - folk i vore kår har nok andet at gøre, end at tænke på lykke. (XIII.1.47)

Here the twin sisters Gunhild and Ella come together for the first time since Borkman's trial, and their differences are acute, on all levels, even over Erhart Borkman, son, and nephew and erstwhile foster-child respectively, their most cherished individual. They argue about what is in his best interests and both identify him as an instrument of reparation. Ella declares her intention to smooth Erhart's way in life, so that he can become *lykkelig*.

However, the deceptive simplicity and implied altruism of this stated intention belies Ella's motives where her nephew is concerned. Ella is dying. Erhart's happiness in her scheme is really her own desire for a happy death, which depends on Erhart formally dissolving his legal and emotional bonds with his biological parents and the Borkman legacy by taking the Rentheim name. Thus what Ella really means to set in motion by adopting (the now adult) Erhart is a process of purgation and purification, whereby Erhart will

disassociate himself from everything and everyone that has caused her suffering in the past, as well as compensate for one of the most painful aspects of this suffering: her childlessness. Erhart functions less in and for himself than as a symbol of a version of her own potential happiness and her failure to extend herself through progeny. Erhart Borkman would have to rename and reinvent himself in order for his aunt to secure 'his' happiness. Hers is therefore a narrative of *restoration*, in the sense that she will be securing something that she has been deprived of unjustly.⁴

Erhart's mother is equally obsessed with the question of the family name, but sees Erhart's mission as consisting in his obligation to eradicate the shame brought on the house of Borkman by his father's criminal actions. Through her, Ibsen makes a clear assertion of a tragic framework:

Jeg fatter ikke at noget sådant noget, - noget så forfærdeligt kan overgå en enkelt familie! Og så, tænk, - *vor* familie! En så fornem familie, som *vor*! Tænke sig til, at det just skulde ramme *den*! [...] Skammen over oss to uskyldige! Vanæren! Den stygge, forfærdelige vanære! Og så rent ruinert til og med! (1.43)

Gunhild rejects the claim of the pursuit of personal *lykke* as a universally valid end: people charged with a higher purpose in life have no time for such pedestrian concerns. She has been training Erhart up to this calling, and there will be no reserve energy for happiness. With a derisory *pyh* she removes *lykke* from the valid-life equation as deftly as Pastor Manders does, on the grounds that it conflicts all too easily with duty.⁵

So while Ella plans to salvage Erhart through her project of *restoration* from the Borkman narrative to enable him to begin a fresh chapter in the Rentheim narrative after her imminent death, Gunhild wants Erhart to invert the Borkman narrative of shame and deceit, and turn it into a narrative of *restitution*, of righting an imbalance and demanding the suffering of the responsible party. But both projects are ultimately sterile as they are expressions of fear: fear of death and effacement in Ella's case, and fear of living in Gunhild's case, and they both operate through the same means, that is Erhart. Imposing this great mission on Erhart to purge the Borkman name of all the stigmata attaching to it may at first seem a positive ambition, but he is simply the instrument for her revenge on his father. So obsessed is she with revenge that there is ultimately little to distinguish Erhart's role in her life from the *skamstøtte* she vows to erect over Borkman's dead body in Act III. Thus in both schemes, Erhart is circumscribed and is not "an end in himself" in the sense that Kant demands as the basis for ethical inter-personal relationships.

8.3 Act II

8.3.1 *Lykke*

While Gunhild's position is established in Act I, Ella's does not become clear to the audience, nor truly to herself, until her confrontation with John Gabriel, Gunhild's sick wolf, who for eight years has been pacing the floor above her head, never breaking free from his self-imposed extended incarceration. Ella's purpose in confronting the man who abandoned her and

married her twin sister in her stead is dual: she both wants to settle accounts and to persuade Borkman to transfer his son to her. But John Gabriel's reaction on both counts is surprising. First, he rebuts her accusation that he ruined her chances of happiness by marrying Gunhild:

BORKMAN. Der har du selv *skylden*, Ella [...] Du kunde så godt ble't lykkelig uden mig.

ELLA RENTHEIM. Tror du det?

BORKMAN. I fald du bare selv havde villet.

ELLA RENTHEIM (hånligt). - år efter år viste jeg lykken fra mig, mener du vel? (2.82)

Borkman's implication is that just as he chose to marry Gunhild instead of Ella, Ella *chose* to be unhappy by rejecting Hinkel. In his view she has no one to blame but herself, her contrary, wilful self. For Borkman *lykke* is clearly in the realm of human control, and not prey to the whims of external capricious agencies. But even more astonishing is his suggestion that personal happiness is a solipsistic project which does not depend on successful association. Not only does this account isolate *lykke* from chance but also isolates the individual from chance. This notion is not only counter to common sense but also counter to the Aristotelian analysis, which insists on the centrality of others in the achievement of happiness:

It seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods, as we said, for it is difficult if not impossible, to do fine deeds without any resources. Many can only be done by the help of friends, or wealth or political influence. There are also certain advantages, such as good ancestry or good children, or personal beauty, the lack of which mars our felicity; for a man is scarcely happy if he is very ugly to look at, or of low birth, or solitary, or childless; and presumably even less so if he has

children or friends who are quite worthless. (EN I, 1099a
32)

Ella had refused to effect the smooth substitution of Hinkel for John Gabriel, the very smooth substitution she herself fell foul of. Borkman himself puts it in just these terms: “Men når endelig så må være, så kan dog en kvinde erstattes af en anden” (2.87). But Ella is acutely aware of the interdependence of *lykke* and not only external goods but also the emotions. She can only respond with weary sarcasm, for the imperative drive of emotions such as love, and their resistance to rational ordering have framed her life narrative, indeed, they have “determined her place in this narrative” as Rorty puts it.

Instead of submitting to Borkman’s logic Ella directs the conversation round to the theme of guilt and debt, and sets out the terms of the injury she suffered at his hands. Borkman’s desertion of her for her twin sister meant the end of Ella’s emotional life, the end of a healthy, participatory life and the death of a female nature, which, in Ella’s version of it, consisted in the happy and perfect coincidence of love and procreation. This play stands out among the *nutidsdramaer* in that here it is a female, not a male character who insists on the motherhood-as-destiny formula.⁶

Borkman persists in his gloss on events: “Du kunde så godt ble’t lykkelig med *ham* også. Og da havde jeg været frelst” (2.82) – one of several instances of his tendency to deny the individuality of others while insisting on his own immutable essence. He explains how Hinkel, mistakenly convinced that his old friend Borkman was actively guiding Ella’s consistent rejections of him, went

public with their correspondence containing incriminating evidence of Borkman's suspect business practices. This led to his arrest, trial and conviction. Borkman is convinced of Hinkel's catalytic role in his downfall.

8.3.2 Helping Friends and Harming Enemies

In the terms of classical tragedy, his misplaced trust in Hinkel, the confidential letters he sent him detailing his activities at the bank, could be seen as an "error of judgement" – *hamartia*, and the enormity of Hinkel's betrayal would have been a much bigger issue for classical audiences than it is for modern interpreters of Ibsen.⁷ In her study of Sophocles and Greek ethics, Mary Whitlock-Blundell explains how:

Respect for friends could be ranked alongside reverence for gods, parents and laws [...]. In other words, it was amongst the most powerful moral imperatives of Greek life. When Hesiod predicts the total moral degeneracy in which the iron age will culminate, he envisages the breakdown of the bonds of *philia* between parent and child, guest and host, friend and friend, brother and brother. [...] The corresponding significance of *philia* in ethical thought can be seen by the attention devoted to it by philosophers and moralists.⁸

Whitlock-Blundell explains that as well as being prized as a great good, friendship also demanded a conception of enmity, which in turn had its own ethic.⁹ This is the same framework Borkman uses in his definition of the most infamous crime: "Det er ikke mord. Ikke røveri eller natligt indbrud. Ikke falsk ed engang. For alt sligt noget, det øves jo mest imod folk som en hader, eller

som er en ligegyldige og ikke kommer en ved [...]Det infameste er vens misbrug av vens tillid" (2.75).

However, despite all the circumstances that conspire against Borkman and cut him down "lige midt i afgørelsens dage" (2.75), he seems more concerned with acquitting himself in a rejection of his own finitude than with coming to an understanding of his situation, and the ramifications of his actions. Furthermore, the integrity of the position he takes on the question of friendship is made questionable, if not wholly undermined by his subsequent treatment of Foldal. Ibsen is hinting at tragedy here, introducing the old tropes, but forestalling it, because Borkman's mode here is resentment not suffering.

His shameless ethical contortionism climaxes in an astonishing *j'accuse*: "Se, alt det er du skyld i, Ella!" (2.82) - a dismal failure to distinguish between efficient cause and moral blame. Female obstinacy, sentimentality, wilfulness; the sign of his undoing.

Ella is content to have the tables turned on her in this manner; anything to prevent her project of passing on the Rentheim name to Erhart from getting derailed. Moving from the territory of guilt to debt (in the chapter on *Bygmester Solness* we saw how the word *Schuld* embeds both notions in it).¹⁰ Borkman acknowledges his indebtedness to Ella for having provided for his family ever since his conviction, and for allowing them to live in her house. Her charity is not in dispute, yet it seems to count for little. Then in a gesture consistent with his general revisionism, Borkman inverts the debtor/creditor, giver/receiver relationship as deftly as he had the sinning/sinned against: "... jeg ved, hvad

du har ofret for mig og for din søster. Men du *kunde* også *gøre* det, Ella. Og du skal vel huske på at der var *mig* som satte dig i stand til at kunne det" (2.83).

Borkman here is presenting himself in the role of enabler, as he had spared Ella's money from the high-risk investment that foundered for everybody else. Nevertheless, demanding gratitude for *not* having outraged somebody's trust, for *not* having deprived them of their fortune is hardly commendable. Dramatically, however, it opens the way for Borkman to reveal the tenor of his feelings for Ella at the time. Whether this action was, as he claims, informed by his feelings for her, or whether it was calculated as a buffer for himself and his family in the event of catastrophe, is a point on which Ibsen is typically reticent. On the one hand, it is the only locus of equivocation in his project, but on the other, Borkman would have been aware that in the event of bankruptcy, all money and property in his name would have been turned over to the courts.

What is even more remarkable is that he employs the language of deliverance and salvation from within a discourse of religious redemption. He says "og da havde jeg været frelst" instead of the more neutral *reddet*.¹¹ His salvation, however, would have been carried by the sacrifice not of self, not by any act of atonement, but by Ella sacrificing her emotional life in a cold act of transference, mirroring his own marriage to her twin sister Gunhild. Later it becomes clear that Borkman does not process experience against a matrix of redemption and retribution, because there is no place in the structure he produces for the premise for redemption and salvation - sin. Borkman attributes

his downfall to a chain of unhappy coincidences, either as an agentless, impersonal power, as we shall see below, or as the result of treachery on the part of a jealous friend and the obstinacy of an over-emotional woman.

8.3.3 Ulykke

When Borkman first appears on stage it is in his Napoleonic aspect, waiting for a delegation to come and entreat him to take the helm of a new bank: "*Borkman staaende ved skrivebordet med den venstre hånd støttet mod bordpladen og den højre indstukket på brystet*". But instead Foldal enters, the man who, with his young daughter Frida, is the only person with whom Borkman has any contact. Their relationship is mutually sustaining of their respective dreams and aspirations: Borkman's vision of restoration and vindication, of being restored to fame and Foldal's as a great tragic poet. This waiting, and the conviction that his expectations will be fulfilled define his life-activity, signalled by the triple *må*: " ... de *må, må, må* komme ... Jeg tror det så fast. Ved det så uryggelig visst - at de kommer. - Havde jeg ikke havt den visshed - så havde jeg for længe siden skudt mig en kugle gennem hodet" (2.73-4).¹²

When Foldal makes indirect reference to the embezzlement scandal, Borkman reacts violently, referring to "-den ulykke, som brød ind over banken - !" Foldal immediately tries to limit the damage: "(*beroligende*). Men jeg gi'r da ikke *dig* skylden for *det*! Gud bevare mig vel - !" (2.72). Borkman's first reference to the embezzlement is interesting: it was a crime for which he has been arrested, tried and convicted, so there is a clear question of established agency

here, in contrast to other catastrophes which frame the disasters of some of the other plays, for example, Solness's crack in the chimney (negligence/willing) and Eyolf's fall from the table (negligence). But in a movement counter to that of Solness's, Borkman depersonalises his agency through abstraction, even though the causal chain is incontestible. It is not an effect of his guilt like Solness's obsession with the fire, which is, significantly, also referred to as *ulykke*. Borkman here is mobilising the concept of *lykke* to a very definite end. More than a mere figure of speech, it goes some way to producing the fragile absolution that sustains his belief in his resurrection.

Borkman's gloss on the embezzlement episode as *ulykke* not only vanishes the issue of his own agency, but also closes off his discourse to tragic enquiry and the kind of disturbing self-addressed analysis that Solness, however fraudulently and reluctantly, subjects himself to. Whereas Solness had resisted *ulykke* as an explanation for the fire, reading instead responsibility into the incident, Borkman rests his case on it.

Aristotle is very clear on the role of accident in tragedy. *Ulykke* or *atuchema* are not the sites of tragedy, for mischance either has an arbitrary or an external cause, like Aristotle's famous example of the falling statue¹³, in contrast with *hamartia*, which leads to suffering through error:

To come to grief through *hamartia* is then, to fall through some sort of mistake in action that is causally intelligible, not simply fortuitous, done in some sense by oneself; and yet not the outgrowth of a settled defective disposition of character. Further examination indicates that *hamartia* can include both blameworthy and non-blameworthy missing of the mark: the innocent ignorance of Oedipus, the

intentional but highly constrained act of Agamemnon, the passionate deviations of acrotic persons inspired to act against settled character by eros or anger.¹⁴

In the chapter on *Bygmester Solness*, I emphasised the distinction between *incident* luck which arises from external events beyond an agent's control and *constitutive* moral luck, which describes aspects of our character and temperament.¹⁵ A distinction between two types of luck proper is made by A. Buriks, between *tuche* as *factum* and *Tuche* as *agens*, usually capitalised as a personification.¹⁶ The *factum* aspect covers states, conditions and events, rather like the category of *incident* luck. Borkman seems at first to be evoking the notion in the former sense, yet as he gets more involved in his narrative, the *tuche* he refers to, it transpires, was the betrayal of those closest to him: Hinkel and Ella. The nature of the crime was also deeply imbricated in luck as *agens*, not in the abstract sense of misfortune. Borkman reminds us of the risk factor involved in financial speculation.

In this respect, Borkman is more truly modern than his counterparts in other plays. His image of the hot air balloon is an allegory of risk.¹⁷ Anthony Giddens explains that one of the "consequences of modernity" was the marriage of the concept of "trust" with the concept of "risk". The etymology of the word "risk" is the Spanish nautical term meaning "to run into danger", "to go against a rock", and generally denotes unanticipated results obtaining as a consequence of one's actions, rather than the ineffable intentions of a deity. Giddens argues that risk "largely replaces what was previously thought of as *fortuna*" and "becomes separated from cosmologies".¹⁸

In a secular environment, low-probability high-consequence risks tend to conjure up anew a sense of *fortuna* closer to the pre-modern outlook than that cultivated by minor superstitions. A sense of 'fate' whether positively or negatively tinged – a vague and generalised sense of trust in distant events over which one has no control – *relieves the individual of the burden of engagement with an existential situation which might otherwise be chronically disturbing*. Fate, a feeling that things will take their own course anyway, thus reappears at the core of a world which is supposedly taking rational control of its affairs. Moreover, this surety exacts a price on the level of the unconscious since it essentially presumes the repression of anxiety. The sense of dread which is the antithesis of basic trust is likely to infuse unconscious sentiments about the uncertainties faced by humanity as a whole.¹⁹

What Giddens is pointing to here is a state of affairs in which the individual relinquishes a direct engagement with significant elements of existence and autonomy, yet has not freed himself from a deep subliminal insecurity.

That Foldal is attuned to the tenor of Borkman's moral reasoning is obvious from his reflex connivance in the effacement of his friend's responsibility in his unambiguous declaration of Borkman's innocence. Foldal, though himself a victim, exonerates Borkman through a defence of self, in the complex, tortured nexus of guilt and blame, thereby establishing the pattern for Borkman's subsequent treatment of Ella, as discussed above.

However, Borkman's view of an acceptable risk diverges widely from Ella's. When he apprises her of the depth of the feelings he had for her, she is at a loss, having always believed that he had abandoned her for Gunhild out of straightforward erotic caprice. She was unaware that the substitution had been

prompted not by passion but by business concerns and that she had quite literally been sold. She cannot stomach the thought that she had been reduced to the status of an object of exchange, all the more when she learns that she was then “det dyreste i verden” to Borkman.

Borkman, however, insists that where Ella sees choice, open free choice in the matter of whom he was to marry, there was none – just as for Ella the choice to take Hinkel was no choice at all. He had acted out of “høyere hensyn”, collapsing the preconditions of blame, morality and personal responsibility into the notion of “tvingende nødvendighed”, *cura necessitatis*. “Havde ikke noget valg. Måtte sejre eller falde. Den tvingende nødvendighed var over mig, Ella” (2.85). These words accommodate a meta-tragic dimension in Borkman’s self-conscious drama, which is structured around seminal tragic concepts such as necessity, while ostensibly functioning as a realistic, rational discourse of apology and examination of motive.

But this narrative of self as victim of an unscrupulous, vengeful friend, is not tragic as it is simply the tale of a crime uncovered and punished, which is, as already noted, not the stuff of tragedy, something he points out with mordant irony to Foldal when they discuss Hinkel’s betrayal:

FOLDAL. Men højt til vejrs kom han.
BORKMAN. Og jeg i afgrunden.
FOLDAL. Å det er et frygteligt sørgespill.
BORKMAN. Næsten lige så frygteligt som *dit*,
synes jeg, når jeg tænker på det. (2.76)

Moreover, Borkman’s insistence on locating his undoing in *ulykke* or *atuchema* precludes the tragic. His story only begins to insert itself in the tragic

field during his discussion with Ella, however much he tries to resist her and however determined he is to exonerate himself by inverting the sinning-sinned against relationship, because it is here that the central notion of sacrifice asserts itself.

8.3.4 *Forbryder*

Ella wrests him out of this pseudo-heroic discourse, re-inserting him squarely into the discourse of transgression. She denounces him as “forbryder”, but not in the forensic sense, which as we have seen is not the core of the drama. For Ella the locus of his offence is not his violation of the law but his offence against love. She insists that had Borkman not traduced his love for her, she would have borne the scandal with equanimity. This assertion contrasts strongly with her sister’s reaction to the affair – Gunhild is emotionally crippled by the “stygge forfærdelige vanære” (1.43) - the shame brought on her. Her hunger for revenge defines her every waking moment. But it is clear later that in Gunhild’s case, there was no great love affair between her and Borkman to fall back on, only the picture of a man who brought disgrace on her house, propelled her into reduced circumstances and consigned her to the periphery of a society whose approbation she once enjoyed.

Ella is so determined to shake Borkman out of his solipsism that she tries to shock with the charge of murder:

Du har dræbt kærlighedslivet i mig [...] Der tales i bibelen om en gådefuld synd, som der ingen tilgivelse er for. Jeg har aldrig før kunnet begribe, hvad det var for

noget. Nu begriber jeg det. Den store nådeløse synd, - det er den synd at myrde kærlighedslivet i et menneske [...] ... Du sveg den kvinde, du *elsked!* Mig, mig, mig! Det dyreste, du vidste i verden, det var du rede til at afhænde for vindings skyld. *Det* er dobbeltmordet, som du har gjort dig skyldig i! Mordet på din *egen sjæl* og på min! (2.86-7).²⁰

However, Borkman does not meet this accusation with the same vehemence with which it is made. Rather, he neutralises its force by over-rationalising his position (in the manner Giddens suggests is emblematic of modern man) by resisting the validity of its terms. He concedes that from within her limited, female perspective Ella is right, and thereby posits a gendered, perspectivist morality, which, once asserted, he proceeds to outrage with his next point: that one woman can easily substitute for another. He, however, as a man inhabits a much higher plane of experience and operates under the sign of necessity and lust for power, situated within a moral economy in which the substitution of one woman for another is stock-in-trade when the aim is to “vække alle guldets slumrende ånder” (2.87). Borkman then rehearses the claim that Ella was responsible both for his promotion to bank manager and his ignominious fall, - both determined by Hinkel’s erotic ambitions and deep frustration at her refusal to reciprocate:

For magtlysten var så ubetvingelig i mig, ser du! Og så slog jeg til. *Måtte* slå til. Og han hjalp mig op halvvejs imod de dragende højder, hvor jeg vilde hen. Og jeg steg og steg. År for år steg jeg - [...] Og endda så styrtet han mig i afgrunden igen. For din skyld, Ella. (2.88)

In this speech Borkman’s self-assessment is breathtakingly protean, slipping in and out of various discourses, never identifying himself with any

one for long enough to arrest his shifting perspective. On the one hand he seems to be reasserting the classical tragic progression of the irresistible rise of the great man, and the force of ineluctable necessity which brings him to his knees. But when the tragic fall does take place and Borkman is toppled, he does not see it as the result of his own *hubris*, or of his *hamartia*. It is brought about by a faithless, jealous friend: Hinkel as that implacable child of Night, Nemesis. In other words, external reasons.

Alternatively, he shifts the blame onto the acrotic woman who is incapable of regulating her emotions. Attracted by the grandeur constitutive of the tragic patterning, he seeks refuge in the concept of the tragic, but remains resistant to tragic guilt, luxuriating instead in the more satisfactory explanation of an *ulykke* which obtains from the lack of external goods. Whichever perspective obtains, Borkman as a victim of betrayal is exonerated.

In Act II, at what is the beginning of a very tense sequence, Ella temporarily loses her footing to be drawn into this version of the tragic trajectory which erases individual responsibility. She asks Borkman whether he thinks that their entire relationship has not been under a curse. Borkman seems to suffer a crisis of confidence at this point, momentarily deprived of his rhetorical guile, he falters in his ability to offer ready judgements, something which opens up a space for Ella to reassert her own version of the truth. Extending Borkman's notion of gendered morality, she now delivers a highly gendered reading of personal happiness, defining it thus:

Al kvindelig menneskeglæde idetmindste. Fra den tid, da dit billede begyndte at slukne i mig, har jeg levet mit liv som under en solformørkelse. I alle disse år er det ble't mig mere og mere imod, - rent umuligt tilslut, at elske nogen levende skabning. Ikke mennesker, ikke dyr eller planter. (2.88)

This assault climaxes in the charge that: "Du har bedraget mig for en mors glæde og lykke i livet. Og for en mors sorger og tårer også. Og *det* turde måske være det dyreste tab for mig, du" (2.88-9).

Ella's statement of female happiness is conventional; her portrait of motherhood verges on the sentimental. But her complaint against Borkman that he closed off all avenues to emotional fulfilment and experience is substantial. Motherhood for Ella means participation in nature and in process. Deprived of this opportunity, she is alienated from her fellow human beings, her biological function and the natural environment, leaving Erhart to absorb her pain, her sense of loss and her obsessive battle for her name to live on after her death.²¹ But while Ibsen traces Ella's career with weighty poignancy he does not leave her to shoulder the burden of tragedy. Her heartbreak is just that, a heartbreak, and as such cannot extend beyond the sense of the tragic encapsulated in common usage into the realms of tragedy proper, however vexed a term this may be. The blame for Ella's emotional wasteland does lie squarely on Borkman's shoulders, but it is not this guilt alone that asserts the tragic measure of the play. For as previously mentioned, Ella's devastation is not tragic, especially since it is not mirrored by a commensurate sacrifice on the part of Borkman. Despite his claim that he loved her deeply, his choice to sacrifice her

reveals none of the contours of agony that shape Brand's decision to sacrifice Alf and Agnes.

8.4 Act III

8.4.1 Jeg *måtte* det

Act III returns us to the gloom of Gunhild's drawing room. Borkman makes his first appearance for eight years, much to the consternation of both his wife and her maid. But it is not in a spirit of reparation and conciliation that Borkman returns. He proceeds to make several gestures at self-acquittal, almost parodying the oft-quoted Ibsenian adage "[a]t *digte* - det er at holde / dommedag over sig selv."²² He claims that he has repeatedly sat in judgement over himself, and each time he is forced into an acquittal, on the grounds that freeing the ore was incontrovertible, irresistible and imperative, and like Solness, he sees his relationship with his project as coterminous with his own identity, with his irreducible sense of selfhood: "Menneskene skønner ikke at jeg *måtte* det, fordi jeg var mig selv, - fordi jeg var John Gabriel Borkman, - og ikke nogen anden" (3.97). His insistence that there is an absolving, "sejrende bevidshed" (3.99) holds sway over the entire scene.

In a breathtaking feat of ethical acrobatics, Borkman, like Solness, manages to recast his solipsism as a kind of utilitarianism, and like Solness he does so through a concept of *lykke*. But unlike Solness, Borkman never expects the term to apply to himself, or any one individual close to him, and he never directs his self-examination in terms of happiness. In this respect, he could not

differ more from Halvard Solness who sees happiness as a condition for living “Jeg, jeg - som ikke *kan* leve livet glædeløst!” (3.106). Borkman, in isolating *lykke* from the personal resembles Gunhild who earlier rejects *lykke* as a valid end for people with higher goals in life.

So far then, Borkman has resorted to an impersonal notion of a cruel providence not only to eliminate his responsibility for the disaster at the bank and the number of lives it broke, but also to disburden himself of blame. But even then there is no felt compassion for his impoverished investors. Borkman’s use of *ulykke* as the sign of his own downfall in fact communicates nothing more than the combination of circumstances which led to his fraud being uncovered, and his resentment at having been caught, and thus stands very close to the common usage of the term ‘bad luck’.

Here he provides the closest insight into what *lykke* for him consists in. His sense of selfhood, already asserted, prepares the ground for his defence and it coincides just as fully with the template of the ‘necessary identity’ we saw in the cases of Brand, Solness, and obtains in a negative form, in Hedda Gabler. But this alone cannot exonerate him without remainder.

Borkman’s “dommedag over sig selv” in the first part of Act III unfortunately is no more able to precipitate an *anagnorisis* than Solness’s multiple ‘confessions’ to Herdal and Hilde in the same mode. Borkman’s self-evaluation is entrenched: “Og det domsresultat, jeg stadig kommer til, det er *det*, at den eneste jeg har forbrudt mig imod, - det er mig selv” (3.98). Gunhild challenges this solipsism by confronting him with his family and his investors,

and the extent of his sin against them. (Solness, at least, did not have to have this pointed out to him.) His family he gives but scant attention to by identifying their interests with his and subsuming their injury under his own (the only occasion, it must be stressed, that he makes such an identification). Using the same strategy he had employed earlier with Ella, Borkman re-mobilises the tragic discourse, which automatically trumps the interests, rights and needs of Gunhild and their son, Erhart: "Jeg havde magten! Og så den ubetvingelige kaldelse indeni mig da!" (3.98).

This raises the ethical dilemma, of the Gauguin problem, encountered in *Bygmester Solness*. What difference would a successful outcome have made? Would Borkman have been justified in 'borrowing' his investors' money if he had indeed succeeded in releasing the trapped millions? He is certainly of the view that he would, and makes a clear statement to this effect to Foldal in Act II.²³

His version of events is that he was the only person with the vision and capacity to respond to the pleas for release of the "bundne millioner", and his conceit is that no one else would have responded so wholeheartedly even if they had heard the plaintive cries of the imprisoned ore. This reinforces his idea of the unique value of the self, and his own selfhood. It is this "kort og godt" which acquits him.

The only source of regret for Borkman is the fact of his post-release incarceration, the fact that he has allowed himself to idle away the last eight years in inert obscurity, instead of seizing the opportunity to re-enter the world

of men and try to overturn the tragic pattern: "Samme dag, jeg kom på fri fod, skulde jeg gået ud i virkeligheden, - ud i den jernhårde, drømmeløse virkelighed! Jeg skulde begyndt nedenfra og svunget mig op til højderne på ny - højere, end nogensinde før, - "(3.98).²⁴ But it is not too late: "Ja, når hele verden hvæser i kor at jeg er en uoprejselig mand, så kan der komme stunder over mig, da jeg selv er nær ved at tro det. [...] Men så stiger min inderste, sejerende bevidsthed op igen! Og den frikender mig" (3.99).

Van Laan argues that *John Gabriel Borkman* is in many ways Ibsen's exemplary tragedy. His view that Ibsen was essentially a writer of tragedies in the Aristotelian mode has been discussed. But for Van Laan one of the most important modifications the Aristotelian tragic pattern undergoes in Ibsen is the use of the "retreat":

In this version, the protagonist yearns to act boldly and aggressively but from lack of self-confidence, fear that the consequences will be disastrous, or some other cause also feels a counter-urge to retreat into the safety of ordinary existence. After yielding to this counter-urge, in some cases following upon an initial burst of action, the protagonist eventually realises that the retreat cannot be maintained because it proves to be a state of death-in-life and because the urge to act ultimately proves too strong to resist. And so the protagonist finally acts decisively, with the almost immediate result being reversal and catastrophe.²⁵

Van Laan argues that *John Gabriel Borkman* is the *nutidsdrama* which "contains Ibsen's most conspicuous use of the pattern". After thirteen years' absence from pursuing his calling, he is "stirred into reflection about his

retreat''²⁶ - *anagnorisis* as mental process, and he realizes that his greatest sin is against himself and his total inertia in confronting the past and the future.

Although Borkman has never seen the tragic trajectory as fixed and irreversible, he is supremely confident that an indomitable will can prevail and that the tragic patterning can be overturned by the very agency which instantiated it, his tragic identity. But hitherto he has done nothing to show that he is equal to his tragic identity. He has wasted many years in passivity, waiting for \surd delegation to appear and vindicate him, hiding behind a rhetoric \surd ^a which shifts between self-aggrandisement and blame. It is Erhart's rejection of him that catalyses his recognition of this, and his acknowledgement of sin, the opening for his *anagnorisis*.

Now the sin he acknowledges is not *his* sin against his investors who had entered into a relationship of trust with the bank he represented, nor is it the "greatest sin" which Ella accuses him of, but the sin against his own project. But for him it is not merely an issue of reinserting himself in the world, albeit at the top. Gunhild accuses him of simply trying to repeat his previous life, but he dismisses the concept of repetition applying to life. Not in the sense that anything new will happen, but in the sense that the past is unique and unrepeatable, and is only transformed by the individual's relationship to it. Extending the metaphor of resurrection and renewal, Borkman refers to the "genfødte øje" which has the power to transform past actions.

Is this the eye of *anagnorisis*? Not quite, but it certainly represents an adjusted focus. It is followed by a flash, however momentary, of self-

knowledge. Borkman complains that nobody has ever understood him. When challenged by Ella he modifies the charge to complain that nobody has understood him *since the time when he thought he did not need understanding*, a reference to the time when he and Ella were in love and he was at his most ambitious. Echoing his complaint to Foldal in Act II that “Det er forbandelsen, som vi enkelte, vi udvalgte mennesker har at bære på. Massen og mængden, - alle de gennemsnitlige, de forstår oss ikke” (2.71).

The terms of Borkman’s discourse are revealing of a highly eclectic and predatory ego, one which has inserted itself into the discourse of the tragic to acquire stature and it also feeds off the Christian narrative of forgiveness and rehabilitation. But the essential elements of both narratives are lacking and this invalidates his project. From the tragic patterning, the *anagnorisis* is deferred, and from the Christian patterning of redemption and salvation, aspects of forgiveness and repentance have been overwhelmed in this attempt at sublation of two opposing systems. By refusing to acknowledge the price exacted both from himself and others in his rise and in his fall, Borkman denies himself restoration within a Christian ethics. He falls back on the notion of the curse, suggested to him by Ella in Act II, using it like *lykke* to vanish his own agent-responsibility from the narrative and to underscore his belief that he has been impeded by flawed human beings.

When Gunhild decries his self-love, he insists that his love is not a love of self but a love of power, which he twists into a spurious utilitarian model as “magten til at skabe menneskelykke vidt, vidt omkring mig” (3.100). The irony

of this is inescapable – not only does Borkman make repeated, derogatory reference to “masse og mængden” in the rhetoric of the elect favoured by several Ibsen heroes, but he has of course achieved the opposite. This pseudo-utilitarian aspect of his project was one that Solness also had recourse to. This is one of the defining characteristics of a certain type of Ibsen hero – the inability to live on an individual level and so employing the conceit of ameliorist concerns for mankind to compensate for the individual misery and destruction they cause.

It is at this point in Act III that Borkman breaks out of the *danse macabre* that Gunhild, not Frida, is playing for him, instructing him “Drøm aldrig mere om liv! Forhold dig rolig, der du ligger!” (3.100) – in the grave. Gunhild’s sick wolf has broken out of his cage and poses a threat to her peace of mind. In order for her to live out her narrative of restitution through Erhart, it is necessary to keep Borkman immobilised in her resentment, and for his life’s narrative to end there. It becomes too difficult to carry out her project of annihilation if Borkman is at large again, more difficult for everything that he stood for to be hidden “i glemsel for menneskenes øjne” (3.101).

It may be objected that this *anagnorisis* comes too suddenly, and is as spurious as every other position Borkman has occupied. However, if the terms of Borkman’s recognition are considered carefully, it will be clear that this is no mere posturing.

8.4.2 Emotions of Self-Assessment

One of Borkman's defining characteristics is pride. Ibsen underscores the pride emerging through his speech with stage directions making this explicit (2.93; 3.99, for example). However, few have given the structure of Borkman's pride, and its reverse, shame and guilt, much thought, even though pride is a common designation of the tragic hero. These emotions are in Gabriele Taylor's view the cardinal emotions of "self-assessment" as they regulate the agent's view of himself. Taylor explains:

[i]n experiencing any of these emotions the person concerned believes of herself that she has deviated from some norm and that in doing so she has altered her standing in the world. The self is the object of these emotions, and what is believed amounts to an assessment of the self.²⁷

Pride falls under Hume's category of "indirect passions", that is passion involving reason. The classic example given of an agent's perceiving his altered standard in the world is Oedipus in the so-called Messenger scene when he realises his true identity. "O Light! May I never look on you again, / Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting, / Sinful in my marriage, sinful in shedding of blood".²⁸ Oedipus's response to this shame is to pluck out his eyeballs with Jocasta's brooch pin – eyes that "should no longer see his shame, his guilt".²⁹ What this experience has done to Oedipus is to impose a change in his assessment of his self and his relationship to the world; a radical alteration. As Taylor goes on to say, "the drama is of course internal, the view of the event is

the agent's and the change takes place within him. He provides the stage as well as the *dramatis personae*."30

The *structure* of pride can therefore be seen to provide the emotional matrix that enables *anagnorisis* to take place. For without this self-referential paradigm shift, there can be no insight, no recognition, no unconcealment. Pride, as a *dispositional* state insulates the agent from such insight. The English word "pride" does not share the transparent structure of the Greek and Latin words *hypselos* and *superbus*, which both indicate an elevated position within a structure – the proud man has inserted himself over and above all others in a hierarchy of some kind, be it ethical, social, intellectual or artistic.

But there is a further aspect to pride underlined by John Rawls which is particularly relevant to this play. Rawls discusses pride in the light of notions of self-respect. He breaks the concept down into its constituent aspects: firstly, pride embraces the sense of the individual's sense of self-worth; secondly it covers his security in his conviction that his life plan is worth carrying out and a concomitant security in his actual ability to see his life plan through. Rawls argues that without it "All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism."31

The demand at work here coheres with the Aristotelian principle that an agent must have a rational life plan, and equally, needs to have his person and his deeds appreciated by others, and therefore others need to confirm the importance of what he does. Rawls insists that in order for this to be possible, it is essential "that there should be for each person at least one community of

shared interests to which he belongs and where he finds his endeavours confirmed by his associates."³²

Already from this preliminary investigation into the structure of pride, we have uncovered two fundamental insights into the mechanism of tragedy; firstly the principle of pride as a necessary condition for *anagnorisis*, and secondly, other-regard as a necessary condition for self-esteem.

The notion of a "community of shared interests" is a fragile concept in Ibsen. Even in earlier plays like *En Folkefiende* when the emphasis is on functioning communities, the notion is questioned to breaking point. Ibsen's heroes are characteristically isolate, and their usual mode is to walk alone, so alone in fact that they lay themselves open to charges of solipsism. This explains that when they do form alliances they are at once so vulnerable to them and so energised by them, for example, Solness and Hilde, Rosmer and Rebekka. Their dialogue takes on an extra-social dimension and, dispensing with the realistic limits of the play, dwarfs them with a highly theatrical *folie à deux* in which identities merge, shift and double.

But in *John Gabriel Borkman* the isolation and social disenfranchisement of the hero is so extreme as to be underscored in every way. The man has literally been locked away for fifteen years, the outcast exile in the classical tragic mode of the *apolis*. During these years he has been clinging to a dream of rehabilitation, or "resurrection" as he puts it, but refuses to acknowledge the transgression he committed, and instead focuses on the legal aspect of his experience as a question of bad luck. The burden of guilt is carried by others, by

his friend and his lover. Borkman himself as we have seen has removed himself totally from the ethical equation and inserted himself instead into a impersonal causal nexus.

In view of his isolation, it is not surprising that the little social contact he does have, with Frida and her father Wilhelm Foldal, is dominated by discussions of worth and self-worth. Borkman's relationship with Foldal is a bitter reflection of the isolate hero who has no-one to confirm the validity of his project. Frida is the first character to be presented on stage with Borkman. The young girl-ageing man dynamic is familiar from *Bygmester Solness*; but here Ibsen deliberately eschews the *folie à deux* as a force to carry the action. Borkman holds no special fascination for Frida and vice versa, and his relationship with her father is so cynically configured as to suggest a parody of this *folie* and simply reinforces Borkman's isolation.

There is literally nothing in Borkman's world to reflect back a sense of self. This desolation is amplified in the stage directions, which at once aggrandise and mock. Surrounded by Empire-style furniture stands Borkman with a "*fornemt udseende, fint skåret profil, hoasse øjne og gråhvidt, kruset hår og skæg*" (2. 67) and "*ser sig om i al tomheden*" (2.70). To reinforce this existential emptiness, Ibsen has him looking into a hand mirror – a glass reflecting back his own image. This is a departure. Other Ibsen characters in moments of heightened agitation typically drum their fingers on windowpanes, the perspectives they afford reinforcing their feelings of entrapment, and frustration. Borkman, by contrast, is self-regarding, looking inwards, not out.

Because he can find no satisfactory confirmation of his project in his environment, he looks to history for analogies of his situation. What stares back at him from the mirror is a “Napoleon, der blev skudt til krøbling i sit første feltslag” (2.74).

The reference to Napoleon is an instance of Borkman’s rhetorical experimentation. Groping desperately for a structure which will sustain the measure of the name John Gabriel Borkman, he has recourse to historical and mythical templates (Napoleon, and waiting à la Prometheus for a delegation to come and wrest him from obscurity and ignominy and beg him to resume the reins of the bank) and above all his repeated use of Biblical language, the rhetoric of resurrection, of “the kingdom, the power and the glory.” At one point he even tries to co-opt Erhart into his vision of resurrection to a new life through hard work. But his confidence is plagued by self-doubt and his agitation rises against the relentless *tempus fugit* of the play.

His overture to Erhart comes in Act III. It is quite a reversal from his earlier position when he explains to Ella that it makes no difference to him if Erhart traded the Borkman name for the Rentheim name, as he is man enough to bear his name alone. But what has come between this solipsism and this empty overture is his *anagnorisis*.

As we have seen, Borkman’s *anagnorisis* is facilitated through the structure of pride, which, as we have seen is not sustainable if it is not discernible to others. When this rupture occurs, shame, its counter-emotion takes root.³³ Shame is distinct from guilt. Guilt is occasioned by the knowledge

that the agent has transgressed, has violated some code, the validity of which he accepts (a moral code for example) or one that is imposed on him (a legal one). Shame, on the other hand is not so localised; “it is the emotion evoked by shocks to our self-respect”,³⁴ in other words when we are reduced in our own eyes or the eyes of others (Borkman’s “genfødte øje”) in extreme cases this can lead to an annihilation of our sense of identity.³⁵ It arises as Douglas Cairns puts it “out of a tension between the ego and the ego-ideal – not the ego and the super-ego as in guilt.”³⁶ Borkman makes a clear acknowledgement of loss of integrity and the desertion of his project. His commitment to the “bundne millioner” has degenerated into empty posturing, occasioning shame.

Borkman’s *anagnorisis* takes this form. It is not a question of recognising his crime on a forensic level, but the crime against his identity as well as acknowledging his offence against Ella. The pride-shame nexus is central to the ancient Greek notion of *aidos*, which loosely translates as shame. *Aidos* in classical tragedy is intimately connected with honour: “the notion of honour is never far away from the evaluation that is constitutive of *aidos*”.³⁷ In the chapter on *Brand* we considered the example of Ajax who took his own life as a result of the damage done to his ideal self as constituted by the honour code. It is the same mechanism that is at work here: it is a deep sense of loss of stature that precipitates Borkman’s *anagnorisis*, free of the obfuscations raised by the misdirected guilt that devours Solness.³⁸ This prompts Borkman’s belatedly reaching out to his son in an attempt to salvage some of the ‘other-regard’ so necessary for validation of his project. And when this fails, Borkman ‘puts on

the harness of necessity' and goes out to meet his death on the snowy prospect. His exit at the end of Act III is preceded by a long silence on his part, and his announcement of his departure is evocative of Cleopatra's speech before she takes the poison. Compare:

BORKMAN (*som vågnende til beslutning*). Så ud i uvejret alene da! Min hat! Min kappe! (*Han går skyndsomt mod døren*). (3.111).

CLEOPATRA. Give me my robe, put on my crown;
I have immortal longings in me. (Act V S II, ll. 282).

Act III defines the terms of Borkman's decision to walk out to his death. This act, as well as containing his recognition of his desertion of his project, also contains a protracted debate on *lykke*.

8.4.3 *Lykke*: Erhart

Borkman, unlike Solness, never participates in this debate from a personal point of view. In the discussion involving Ella, Gunhild, Borkman, Fru Wilton and Erhart himself, Erhart asserts his right to live for happiness, on a very personal level. His encomium on *lykke* provides an interesting counterweight to that of his aunt's. Rejecting the burden of restoration/restitution imposed on him by his mother and his aunt, he insists on breaking out of the tragic cycle and the death-in-life they represent, and at the same time he rejects his father's appeal to join him in a new life. He acknowledges Ella with gratitude for having enabled him to grow up with "al den sorgløse lykkefølelse, som jeg tror der kan være over noget barns liv"

(3.103) – (perhaps one of only a handful of Ibsen children thus blessed). He presents very rational objections to the careers mapped out for him, refusing to become Ella's son, but rejecting his mother at the same time, accusing her of having crippled his will by annexing it for her own purposes:

Du, du har været min vilje! Jeg selv har aldrig fåt lov til at ha'nogen! Men nu *kan* jeg ikke bære dette åg længer! Jeg er ung! Husk vel på *det*, mor! (*med en høfligt, hensynsfuldt blik til Borkman.*) Jeg kan ikke vie mit liv til soning for nogen anden. (3.104)

He rejects the validity of any kind of *livskald* so central to the identities of most of Ibsen's creations, especially one imposed vicariously on him. He identifies *lykke* as the birthright of the young, but fails to provide any substance to it. It certainly does not involve work – it is its antithesis as he makes clear to his father: “Ja men jeg *vil* ikke arbejde nu! For jeg er ung! [...] Jeg *vil* ikke arbejde! Bare leve, leve, leve. [...] For lykken” (3.106). And *lykke* in Erhart's version of it consists in his love affair with Fanny. But the love he shares with Fanny does not have any of the romantic poetic reach of Foldal's dream of “den sande kvinde”; neither is there any sense of depth to it: Fanny already has one husband who is dead to her, and has decided to take Frida along on the trip south to cater for Erhart's needs once he grows tired of her.

This version of *lykke* seems to be more a reflection of Erhart's need to escape the “stueluft” than a positive value in itself. Not only does it lack on the one hand the carefree poetry of the Ejnar-Agnes alliance, but it also implies an appalling commensurability – the kind asserted by Borkman earlier in the play when he insists that one woman can easily replace the other. This is what the

character of Ella exists to negate. The entire story of Ella's suffering has arisen from the inescapable fact that when true love occurs, the beloved is irreplaceable. To argue the opposite is to diminish the integrity and individuality of persons.

It is therefore impossible for the Erhart-Fanny-Frida triad to remain in the tragedy, and thus they exit and set off on their journey south, stepping out of the tragedy as determinedly as the Regine-Manders-Engstrand constellation does in *Gengangere*.

8. 5 Act IV

8.5.1 Utenfor muren

Their decision to leave to travel south coincides with Borkman's decision to walk out into the icy cold. Erhart's very simplistic version of happiness cannot speak to his father, for it does not provide any kind of possibility for the assertion of a great project. Borkman exits to make a final pilgrimage to his former vision of the great kingdom. He encounters Foldal, who has just been run over by the sled spiriting his daughter off to an uncertain future with Fanny and Erhart. Despite this knock, Foldal is still sustained by his versions of "lille lykke", whether they reside in the romantic abstraction of the *Ewig weibliche*: "Det er så lykkeligt og så velsignet at tænke på at ude, rundt om os, langt borte, - *der findes dog den sande kvinde*" (2.78), or in his optimism for his daughter's future.

The encounter with Foldal gives Borkman a second chance to display his emerging humanity. He indirectly concedes his wrong to Foldal in his statement that this was not the first time he had been run down, and even affectionately calls him “gamle ven” (4.120).

As he progresses upwards with the dying Ella who struggles to keep up with him, it becomes clear that he cannot resolve the tension between the humanity that she represents and the inhumanity of the tragic identity. The landscape here is of great significance. Not only does it serve as a counterweight to the “fengselsluft” of the Rentheim estate but it grants Borkman a space of play in which to assert the tragic, which the house would have denied him.

This in no way suggests that the tragic cannot be played out in the bourgeois home - Rosenvold is the *locus classicus* of such potential. But Borkman had not been engaged in this world for many years, and thus an exit from this stasis was the only way open to him. Had he stayed in Gunhild’s parlour, the best that he could have done would have been a recantation à la Bernick. The landscape that the bourgeois world gives out onto at the end of this play is what Fritz Paul terms the “heroic landscape”.³⁹ Borkman is now “utenfor muren” - outside the house and the city, the *polis*. Resisting Ella’s “lokketoner” to return to the secure warmth of the house, he celebrates his rejection of his past years of self-imposed isolation, and goes into exile in the manner of classical heroes. He formulates this assertion of freedom in a mode anticipating the high Expressionism of the later Strindberg, claiming if he returns, “loft og

vægge vilde skrumpe sig sammen. Knuge mig. Klemme mig flad som en flue” (4.121).

By allowing Ella to walk with him, he is conceding her importance and establishing the terms of his tragedy, and the reality of the choice he made all those years ago. This belated, unspoken acknowledgement permits a closure, which, without being a resolution of conflicting values (if anything this play is as sharp a portrait of tragic incommensurability as anything Ibsen wrote since *Brand*) shows a hero who has broken out of the solipsistic cycle and yet at the same time reasserts his tragic identity and his commitment to his project.

For the first time Ella brings her charge of murder against Borkman without it falling on deaf ears. He is aware of the scale of the sacrifice exacted for what Daniel Haakonsen describes as his “chimerical world”.⁴⁰ He paints a picture of his dream of establishing a worldwide sense of community, and to bring warmth to countless homes. This is what he was on the brink of achieving “den gang jeg, - den gang jeg døde” (4.123).

Ella is clearly moved by this confession. For in it is an acknowledgement of his finitude and vulnerability. In this final act she calls him John, the plain element in his name, not the John Gabriel Borkman of his over-reaching ego or his former reputation. Here she is reaching out to the man, the human being she once loved.⁴¹

She insists, however, that where he sees warmth and community, she feels an icy blast. This provides the key to the irreconcilable conflict: “Det pust virker som livsluft på mig”, explains Borkman, and describes the night of his

failure. His ode to capital takes his discourse to previously unscaled heights, far beyond the posturing of earlier acts, and persuades us of his commitment to his vision: "Jeg elsker eder, der I ligger skindøde i dybet og i mørket! Jeg elsker eder, I livkrævende verdier – med alt eders lysende følge af magt og ære. Jeg elsker, elsker, elsker eder!" (4.124).⁴² This is followed by his acknowledgement that he sold the human heart that loved him for "rigets – og magtens – og ærens skyld". Borkman agrees with Ella when she declares that this particular trade-in is one with no returns: "Du vinder aldrig den pris, du krævet for mordet. Du får aldrig holde noget sejrindtog i dit kolde, mørke rige! (4.124)." This is an assault on the vain hope Borkman had been nurturing during all those years of isolation: his vision of vindication through his own version of "opstandelsens dag". However, when Borkman walks out "utenfor muren" into the coldness of the night, he leaves this dream behind. There is no mention of it in Act IV.

When the crisis occurs, and Borkman suffers a heart attack brought on not by the icy hand that Ella feels but by an iron hand, he is positioned and ultimately destroyed by competing values. The ice hand as the avenging angel of human love and instinct betrayed; the iron hand that of a vision betrayed. Ella sees Borkman's death as a merciful release from the grip of both. At first she decides to rush off back to the house to find help, and unwittingly repeats the words Gunhild had uttered in the previous act when her sick wolf threatens to make a break for freedom: "Bliv rolig liggende der du ligger" (4.125) / "Forhold dig rolig, der du ligger!" (3.100).

When Gunhild enters, not as a response to any appeal or cry for help from Ella, but out of what can only be seen as residual concern and she realises that Borkman is dead, her first thought is that he took his own life. Ella reassures her that he did not die by his own hand but by an “isnende malmhand”, thus fusing the two poles of the conflict: the human and that of his calling.⁴³

Borkman's death is Ibsen's final statement of how the competing demands on his heroes: “vær human” when pitted against the relentless deontic “jeg må” of their modality, can only synthesise in death and annihilation. For the first time, the death of the hero brings about a sense of *catharsis*: Though reduced to aging and dying “shadows” and having been stripped of all occasion for their own consuming passion – revenge on Borkman and possession of Erhart – Ella and Gunhild can now come together in a final assertion of love, and forgiveness, not entirely overwhelmed by the bleakness of the landscape.

With this last play, which clears the way for the dramatic epilogue *Når vi døde vågner*, Ibsen has shown how modern tragedy, just as Greek tragedy, can be “propelled by a small set of irreducible determinants of which three seem to be of special importance: compulsion, excess and identity. In concrete linguistic terms, tragedy tends to foreground *must* and *too* and the *name*”.⁴⁴ We have seen how the majority of his tragedies is supported by heroes whose mode is *jeg må*: necessity as opposed to ability, or rather, *realisability*, which inevitably involves

a transgressive excess in the struggle to realize and sustain tragic identity. Except this time this tragic constellation is nuanced with *catharsis*.

With *John Gabriel Borkman*, "Ibsen has joined reality and symbolism with the spirit of tragedy."⁴⁵ The tragic belongs fully to the realist realm but looks to symbolism for its expression. But this is the last such tragedy Ibsen wrote. In *Når vi døde vågner* Ibsen shifts the experience of the tragedy into the symbolic and the allegorical, and the result is a new dramatic expression, remote from Aristotelian prescriptions.

Endnotes

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*, F.N. Robinson ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, London, 1966, p. 189, ll. 1975-76.

² In *Hedda Gabler* Ibsen withholds guilt. In that play guilt is largely absent as a category in that it does not function as the means through which the protagonist organises her responses. This is not the case in *John Gabriel Borkman* – Borkman does not reject guilt as a category – it is simply that he is confident of his innocence.

³ Astrid Sæther, “‘Ud i den jernhaarde drømmeløse virkelighed’ – om Ibsens *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896),” in *100 år etter: om det litterære livet i Norge i 1890-åra*, ed. Harald Bache-Wiig and Astrid Sæther, Oslo, 1993, p. 36.

⁴ ‘Restitution’ and ‘restoration’ are very close concepts. I use them differently to draw out the difference between Gunhild and Ella’s perspectives. Gunhild’s ‘restitution’ comes closer to a sense of trying to right an imbalance caused by an injustice that has been suffered, and it comes close to a sense of revenge, or *Lex Talionis* – the repayment of a wrong in kind, part of the ethic of Helping friends and Harming Enemies discussed below, pp. 269-299. By ‘restoration’ I mean the sense that someone is compensated for a wrong suffered, which does not necessarily demand that the perpetrator of the original wrong suffer. I base this distinction on that given in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, Oxford, 1996.

⁵ But where Gunhild differs from Manders is that her sense of duty is openly specific and self-directed while Manders sees himself as the representative of an entire moral and social order. In Act III Ibsen reinforces the impression that Gunhild’s position on happiness is determined by her feelings towards Borkman, and is, moreover, inconsistent. Here Gunhild accuses John Gabriel of a dereliction of his *duty* to make her and their son happy. It is this that informs her bitterness towards him. Her disappointment in him, not only for having brought personal humiliation on her during the trial, but also for neglecting her personal happiness (which in fact comes down to the fact that he never loved her, and only married her out of expediency) explains her dogged rejection of happiness as a valid end and animates her sterile project of vicarious retribution.

⁶ Several of Ibsen’s female characters of the prose plays famously resist the motherhood-as-female-destiny formula, Hedda being the most absolute. Starting with Nora (who does not regard gender in itself as being sufficient qualification to rear children), through to Ellida (who resists the role of step-mother), to Rita (who finds motherhood an obstacle to sexual fulfilment), to Aline (whose talent for motherhood exists only as an effect of Solness’s guilty romanticisation). *Rosmersholm* is an exception: Rebecca manipulates Beate’s childlessness and ‘defective’ female identity to drive her to suicide.

⁷ We recall how Phaedra was similarly betrayed in the eponymous tragedy.

⁸ Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 31-2.

⁹ “Greek popular thought is pervaded by the assumption that one should help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies.” Whitlock-Blundell 1989, p. 26

¹⁰ See the note on *Schulden* in Chapter VII above, p. 260.

¹¹ Helmer, on receiving Krogstad's exonerating letter uses the same word - "Jeg er frelst! Nora, jeg er frelst!" (HU VIII 3.353). In this case too there was nothing spiritual at stake.

¹² His words here strangely echo those of Gunhild in conversation with Ella in Act I: "Ja, Erhart - min herlige gut! *Han* skal nok vide at oprejse slægten, huset, navnet [...] Det får komme, som det kan. Jeg væd ikke *hvorledes* det vil komme. Men jeg væd at det *vil* og *skal* komme engang" (1.46).

¹³ *Poet.* IX, 1452a.

¹⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 382-83.

¹⁵ Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck", in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 28.

¹⁶ See A. A. Buriks, *Περί Τύχης: De ontwikkeling van het begrip tyche tot aan de Romiense tijd, hoofdzakelijk in de filosofie*, Leiden, 1948, pp. 124-29. See also Vasiliki Giannopoulou, "Divine Agency and Tyche in Euripides' *Ion*: Ambiguity and Shifting Perspectives" in *Illinois Classical Studies* 24-5 (1999-2000), pp. 257-71.

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that he identifies Ella with the hot air balloon, but refers to Gunhild as a shipwreck.

¹⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Oxford, 1991, p. 30

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 133.

²⁰ The reference is to Matthew 12: 31-2: "Derfor siger jeg Eder: Al synd og Bespottelse skal forlades Menneskene; men Bespottelse mod Aanden skal ikke forlades Menneskene. Og hvo, som taler mod den Hellig-Aand, ham skal det ikke forlades, hverken i denne Verden, ei heller i den tilkommende". Translation by Det norske Bibelselskap, 1873. I am grateful to Arnbjørn Jakobsen for this reference. Jakobsen convincingly demonstrates that Biblical language is mobilised by several late-Ibsen characters in order to forestall the existential emptiness they experience - see his illuminating article in *Samtiden* 3, 1994: "'Hva skal jeg ha' at leve for da? Bagefter?" Om Ibsens bruk av bibelallusjoner i samtidsskuespillene'', pp. 209-223. Ella uses the analogy of the blaspheming sin against the Holy Spirit to assert the magnitude of Borkman's sin against love, felt and subsequently betrayed, which she sees as commensurate with the sin of acknowledging God and then denying Him. Borkman's use of Biblical language is a measure of his perception of his own stature, and suggests transcendence of the life of the unexceptional human being, however valuable that life may be.

²¹ It is noteworthy that while both occupy very conservative positions on gender, Ella insists on breaking with patriarchal tradition by trying to establish a version of matrilinear inheritance as far as her name is concerned. Perhaps she feels that patriarchy has turned its back on her. Borkman, moreover, does not react to her proposal as being in any sense subversive.

²² Et Vers: "At leve er - krig med trolde / i hjertets og hjernens hvælv / At digte, - det er at holde / dommedag over sig selv" (1887 - HU XIV p. 461).

²³ The question of outcome determining the morality of an action is clearly expressed in the *Hippolytus*, when Phaedra's Nurse laments her bad luck: "I tried to find a remedy for your trouble, and I was unlucky. With better luck, I would have been called a wise woman. After all,

wisdom is only happening to guess right." Euripides, *Hippolytus*, trans. P. Vellacott, London, 1953, p. 48.

²⁴ This reveals a further parallel with *Et Dukkehjem*, and with Krogstad's evaluation of his career.

²⁵ Thomas F. Van Laan, "Ibsen's Transformations in the Aristotelian Tragic Pattern of Action in *The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder*", in Maria Depperman et al. ed., *Ibsen im europaischen Spannungsfeld zwischen Naturalismus und Symbolismus: Kongressakten der 8. Internationalen Ibsen-Konferenz*, Frankfurt, 1998, p. 368.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, Oxford, 1985, p. 1.

²⁸ Sophocles, *King Oedipus*, trans. E. F. Watling, *The Theban Plays*, London, 1969, 1228-30.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 1305.

³⁰ Taylor 1985, p. 16.

³¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, 1973, p. 440.

³² *Ibid.* p. 442.

³³ See Taylor 1985, p. 24.

³⁴ Rawls 1973, p. 442.

³⁵ "...shame springs from a feeling of diminishment of the self." *Ibid.*, p. 444.

³⁶ Douglas Cairns, *Aidos*, Oxford, 1993, p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 13.

³⁸ In an article in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IV*, Oslo, 1978, Charles Leland argues that Borkman's *anagnorisis* predates the action of the play; it occurred in the realisation of his calling. "Borkman understood who he was, the nature of his calling or vocation, and what the consequences would be long before the beginning of the action of the play itself. The action of the play does not so much lead to *anagnorisis* as it reveals an *anagnorisis* and its ultimate consequence" (139-40). Leland argues convincingly, but his position is problematic, and surely an overstatement, for this reading essentially invalidates the dramatic dimension of the play and reduces it to a kind of afterword, subordinate to the pre-curtain action. *Anagnorisis* by definition is precipitated by crisis (something Leland points out himself), but there is little in the text to suggest that Borkman's choice to sacrifice Ella, though difficult, at the time was of tragic magnitude.

³⁹ Fritz Paul, "Metaphysical Landscapes in Ibsen's Late Plays", ed. Bjørn Hjemmer and Vigdis Ystad, *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IX*, Oslo, 1997, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Daniel Haakonsen, "John Gabriel Borkman", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen VIII*, ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad, Oslo, 1994, p. 215.

⁴¹ Ibsen gave his hero a very resonant name. The Gabriel element recalls the archangel - an image of something which surpasses the human in divinity. John recalls either the Baptist - the pathfinder, or the writer of the apocalypse, at the same time as being a very ordinary, down to earth name.

⁴² F.R. Leavis asserted that the tragic requires a poetic use of language; "poetry, with the attendant non-naturalistic conventions [...] is necessary in order to provide the distance and the frame without which there can be no intensity of the right kind". See F. R. Leavis "Tragedy and the 'Medium'" in *The Common Pursuit*, London, 1952, pp. 130-1, quoted by M. S. Silk "Tragic Language" in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, M. S. Silk ed., Oxford, 1996, p. 460.

⁴³ Frederik Engelstad argues persuasively for the echo of 1 Corinthians 13:1 at the moment of Borkman's death: "Om jeg taler med menneskers og englers tunger, men ikke har kjærlighet, der er jeg en lydende malm eller en klingende bjelle" - (italics his). See Frederick Engelstad, *Kjærlighetens irrganger: Sinn og samfunn i Bjørnsons og Ibsens diktning*, Oslo, 1992, p. 196.

⁴⁴ Silk 1996, p. 465.

⁴⁵ Haakonsen 1994, p. 242.

I assumed that everyone was aware that Ibsen was carrying the Greeks into the nineteenth century - *Arthur Miller*

Conclusion

Had Arthur Miller been correct in his assumption that “everyone was aware that Ibsen was carrying the Greeks into the nineteenth century”, there would have been no reason to write this thesis.¹ If the preceding analysis has been successful, it will have established three major points: a) that with Ibsen, a secularised world view can sustain a tragic vision, b) that this tragic vision is predicated as much on the recognition of the vulnerability of human happiness as Greek tragedy and c) that Ibsen’s tragic practice reproduces many of the concerns of Aristotelian theory.

Those who read in the history of tragedy a diachronic corruption of the Attic *ur*-form overlook the fact that far from being the scourge of modern world outlooks and aesthetics, the secularisation of the core of tragic action goes back to Aristotle. Even critics like Raymond Williams, who are in no doubt as to Ibsen’s rightful place in the pantheon of tragic authors, identify the secularisation of tragedy as a much later chapter in the history of the genre.²

Thomas Van Laan’s work has yielded the clearest conclusions regarding the family resemblance between Aristotle and Ibsen, and he has convincingly demonstrated how Ibsen was essentially an Aristotelian dramatist in whose hand the basic template underwent several modifications.

My reading of *lykke* and its cognates as residing at the centre of the tragic *agon* and as the notion which best encapsulates Ibsen’s ‘tragic sense of life’ has attempted to build on Van Laan’s conclusion, and in doing so finds Ibsen even

closer to the spirit of the Greeks and their negotiations with *eudaimonia* than previously thought.

But I have not argued for a 'heritage' view of Ibsen's tragedy. While he was clearly writing within a tradition, whether extending it or subverting it, he was rarely content with imitation and re-presentation. The readings of the moral questions that these plays openly address, such as some of the crucial nodes in Kantian and Utilitarian ethics, show how Ibsen lived up to his own standards for the poet: "[...] Digterens Opgave: at klargøre for sig selv, og derigjennem for andre, de timelige og evige Spørgsmaal, som rører sig i den Tid og i det Samfund, han tilhører" (HU XV.394). Both the 'timelige' and the 'evige' participate in Ibsen's tragic vision, the one never obscuring the other.

This thesis has interpreted its conclusions about Ibsen's development as a tragedian as falling into three phases: high tragedy; naturalist-realist tragedy and finally, a significant variation on high tragedy. This is by no means an original conclusion; Sverre Arrestad had explicitly mapped out the same three-part structure in 1959.³ It is simply that it arrives at it through a different set of pre-occupations and therefore extrapolates different conclusions from the three phases.

The first, historical phase reveals a young playwright who had already organised his tragic vocabulary into semantic groups based around notions of contingency and happiness, but who was still undecided as to how to read Heraclitus's enigmatic conclusion *ethos anthropo(i) daimon*: 'the character of a man determines his fate' – or – 'fate determines the character of a man'?

By the time *Brand* was written, it is clear that Ibsen was more concerned with *ethos* than *daimon*. In this play *daimon* is absorbed by *ethos* and produces the 'necessary identity' of the compulsive tragic hero who re-emerges in the late plays.

In the middle phase, questions of fate, contingency and *daimon* have all been subsumed by a naturalist philosophy. However, Ibsen does not permit the heroic to be stifled under determinism. In *Et Dukkehjem* and *Gengangere* choice lies at the heart of the drama, and is just as crucial for the revelation of character as it is in the *Poetics* (1139a22-3). The fact that these choices are made against an implied deterministic scheme intensifies rather than diminishes their tragic significance. *Rosmersholm* shifts the focus onto the experience of searching for the happiness within a rationalist world view. It reveals the recalcitrance of human experience to rationalist templates, and the power of areas beyond our control, such as the *tuche* of the passions, which confounds the quest to 'se helt til bunds' and prevent us from being transparent to ourselves. These plays paint a paradoxical portrait of the human who is at once enlightened and at the same time vulnerable because of that very enlightenment.

The final phase signals a renewed openness to the supernatural and forces of contingency. While *Bygmester Solness* and *John Gabriel Borkman* point to the many ways in which luck, neutral or moral, can be decisive in the story of a life (Solness's good luck, Borkman's bad luck), Ibsen is relentless in his insistence that these areas do not eliminate responsibility or be allowed to obscure insight. This goes as much for incidental as constitutive luck. These

plays explore the ontological vulnerability of the happiness of any individual who resists living the unexamined life.

The most important conclusion that this reading of Ibsen has revealed, however, is that the tragic experience is structured around the hero's relationship to *lykke* in some form, and it is through this deceptively mundane word that Ibsen enlarged his tragic world from a crude, schematic structure to a highly sophisticated representation of "timelige og evige spørsmåal". There is an inherent split at the heart of *lykke*, which makes the end of human life always divided against itself. This irredeemable division encapsulates the Ibsenian agon, and makes Ibsen, like Euripides, *tragikotatos*.⁴

To return to Arthur Miller's comment quoted above, the view that Ibsen carried the Greeks into the nineteenth century is by no means the prevailing wisdom. As we saw in Chapter IV, there is still a tendency to deny that he was a tragic playwright at all. A choice has to be made. We could bow to the purists and opt for an exclusive view of tragedy. Steiner's most recent inventory of 'pure tragedy' only admits a handful of Greek plays, Marlowe's *Faustus*, *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, Racine and *Wozzeck*.⁵ But this stance obscures the fact that tragedy is as Martha Nussbaum so aptly puts it "a messy business," and it is therefore too reductive and too limiting.⁶ The term 'tragedy' is not a recondite term, and in view of its immense purchase on the literary and popular imagination, it cannot usefully be thus circumscribed. As long as the term is applied in a considered way, there is no reason why it should not be applied to a far wider range of authors. A more hospitable approach is needed for

definitions to be more useful. Gilbert Ryle's analogy of the car park makes the point: A car park need not contain any particular model of car; it need not contain any car at all, "but one thing it must have, and that is *room* for cars, no matter whose, and no matter of which make."⁷

Endnotes

¹ Arthur Miller in an interview with Christopher Bigsby, quoted in Brenda Murphy, "The Tradition of Social Drama" in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, ed. Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge, 1997, p. 15.

² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, London, 1966, p. 30: "What has mainly to be shown, if the historical development of the idea of tragedy is to be fully understood, is the very complicated process of secularisation. In one sense all drama after the Renaissance is secular [...]."

³ Sverre Arrestad, "Ibsen's Concept of Tragedy", *PMLA* LXXIV, 1959, p. 285.

⁴ Aristotle described Euripides thus ("most tragic") in *Poet* XIII.

⁵ George Steiner, "Tragedy Pure and Simple", in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and Beyond*, M. S. Silk ed., Oxford, 1996, p. 542. Steiner also accepts "moments" in Ibsen, Strindberg and Beckett.

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 14.

⁷ Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 84.

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