

HENRIK IBSEN AND THE THEATRE CONVENTIONS



SVEND CHRISTIANSEN

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## Henrik Ibsen and The Theatre Conventions

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## P R E F A C E

Oddly enough, it was not until relatively late in the Ibsen research history that interest seriously arose for the stage comments of his plays, i.e. the stage arrangements and physical acts of the characters as prescribed by Ibsen himself – or in other words, that interest arose for the poet and playwright as a set designer and producer of his own plays. In 1953, however, literature researcher John Northam published *Ibsen's Dramatic Method*. This was an attempt by Northam to point out a new way of penetrating the surface of the plays to access their universal and fundamental layers, scrutinising the previously and completely ignored stage comments. He stressed that Ibsen had an eye for detail; he would remember, almost alarmingly detailed, the things that he saw. Northam argued, successfully documenting his arguments, that Ibsen portrays his characters not only by what they say and do, but also by way of their looks, minor acts and their environments. However, Northam excluded one single key factor: *the theatre conventions of that time*. Apparently, it did not occur to Northam that Ibsen (although he was a naturalist) had to adjust his plays to the theatre that remained, for as long as until the turn of the century, largely identical with that which was created during the baroque years with quite a few of its stage performance rules being intact. Had Northam paid attention to this factor he would not have ignored, as he did, Ibsen's use of *right* and *left* to indicate the entry and exit of the characters and the positioning of doors, windows, furniture and other stage properties that are paramount in any Ibsen play.

One does not have to spend much time with the Ibsen dramas to understand that everything is of importance and that nothing is left to chance. Thus, he is always very careful to tell the reader about whether something is placed or takes place to the right, the left or at the back of the stage. But what makes him choose one side instead of the other? There is the traditional explanation

and then my personal interpretation – choosing the last option, the answer proposed in the first chapter of this book, should help us to gain a better understanding of the imagery world, the playwright's relation with the subject matter and his characters.

There are still a number of drafts of several of Ibsen plays available today. They help us in our understanding of the way Ibsen was working. Although he spoke very little about this playwright business, and even if he did, we are not completely certain whether this was done with the deliberate intention of misleading others. It is not completely unjustified that he was named the Great Sphinx. Most playwrights and poets naturally keep quiet about their literary role models, but Ibsen was more stubborn than anyone else. His work is less silent. It speaks about a strong dependence on the Bible, the importance of fairy tales, Norwegian folktales and H. C. Andersen, and it reveals his philosophical interest in Kierkegaard, Hegel and Schopenhauer, his wide reading of classical works by Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Holberg and the Danish romantic poets of Oehlenschläger and Chr. Winther, among others. But when it comes to establishing his role models of style, the task is more difficult, notably as regards the contemporary realistic plays. There is, however, one play – *A Doll's House* – which calls to mind a particular playwright; the close-up of Nora and the many everyday details that make up this character create a certain atmosphere surrounding Nora, reminding us strongly of the Russian playwright Ivan Turgenev's way of writing. Contemporaries considered Turgenev to be a "poetic realist", owing to his ability to create a particular atmosphere. The likely influence of Turgenev on Ibsen, which relates to his excellent powers of observation and his talented (or genius) ability to put these powers to use in the poet's dramatic language, explains why I have considered it worthwhile to test my assumption of the influence from Turgenev. This subject is dealt with in part 2.

Parts 3 and 4 should be seen as supplementary comments to Northam's work on Ibsen's stage remarks, with the theatre conventions and the particular conditions and opportunities they present to the dramatist still playing a key role. For example, the eye-catching stage requisite that is prescribed to be placed at the front of the stage (blossoming rosewood in the third act of *The Lady From the Sea*) should be considered as of particular importance owing to its positioning. The question is thus; how important is it? We will try to answer that question and we will discuss other problems of similar nature in part 3

(The flowers). In my view, it would not make sense to methodically examine all the stage comments regarding stage requisites since this work has already largely been done by Northam. I have therefore made an overall description of one single category, which in one way or another prescribes how the flowers should be placed on the stage or held by the actors in their hands. This should be sufficient with a view to demonstrating Ibsen's approach to the stage properties related to the stage conventions.

The reason why I notably focus on any kind of lighting with regard to the applied visual effects (including lighting contained in descriptions given by Ibsen's characters) and thus why I deal with this subject separately in part 4, is that Ibsen – based on the information he provides – seems to reveal important details about the plays in which those characters are performing (or at least some of them) and indirectly about himself, about this relationship with dominant problems of his time and of his own, in particular related to his life as an artist.

In the first collection of his plays, published in 1898, Ibsen kindly asks the readers to “acquire the works by reading and living them in the order in which I wrote them”. “Only by acquiring my entire production as one single, coherent, continuous unit, one will understand the intended and targeted impression of the individual parts”. If you skip reading the oldest plays, you will easily misinterpret the newer. “The peculiar, inadequate and misleading interpretation” of his later works conducted by several quarters, he argues, is somewhat explained by that the younger generations do not possess the same level of knowledge about his earlier works as they do of his later works.

This statement, which no doubt is very important, has been at the forefront of my mind while conducting this research. Moreover, the playwright has had the statement printed in his steep, authoritative handwriting, possibly to underline its importance. Thus, bearing Ibsen's admonition in mind, I meticulously read the plays in strict chronological order. In addition to some interesting visual relations I discovered that Ibsen was very economical in his use of stage effects; by reusing pieces of furniture, objects, clothing, colours and lighting from one play to another (not always physically present on stage but solely mentioned in the lines), Ibsen undoubtedly wanted to lead the minds of the readers and his audience in a particular direction, and therefore it makes good sense to view his plays as one big piece of work consisting of 22 parts<sup>1</sup>.

One of the motifs reused – the white horses in Rosmersholm – is invented specifically as a replication of and in contrast to the black ghost horses in *The Vikings of Helgeland*. The return to a previously applied and thoughtfully varied motif – incidentally the horses are seen on stage in Rebekka's white shawl as already documented by Northam<sup>2</sup> and in the black clothing of Hjørdis – does not infrequently pave the way for new interpretations. However, the correlation between two or several motifs is not always obvious; occasionally it does not emerge until you get access to records and drafts related to the plays where such are available. One example is *Hedda Gabler*. In one of the drafts for this play, Ibsen reused the garden decoration (first act) with some modification from the previous play of *The Lady From the Sea*. The fountain in the centre of the garden, surrounded by flower beds, was a new feature, but the water and the flowers represent a replication of the sea motif and the flowers from the living room that were placed on the veranda in *The Lady From the Sea*. One record describes Hedda wearing a morning dress with light blue and red as the dominant colours<sup>3</sup>. The correlation to the previous play, however, is not immediately comprehensible, and you will need to jump to *The Little Mermaid* by H. C. Andersen to understand it. No doubt H. C. Andersen was a source of inspiration for Ibsen in his writing about the mermaid<sup>4</sup>. As opposed to Ellida, the lady of the sea, who is drawn irresistibly towards the sea, and personified by the stranger, the little mermaid feels an inextinguishable yearning for land, the world of human beings, personified by the young prince: "Each of the young princesses had a little plot of ground in the garden, where she might dig and plant as she pleased. One arranged her flower-bed into the form of a whale; another thought it better to make hers like the figure of a little mermaid; but that of the youngest was round like the sun, and contained flowers as red as its rays at sunset. She was a strange child, quiet and thoughtful; and while her sisters would be delighted with the wonderful things which they obtained from the wrecks of vessels, she cared for nothing but her pretty red flowers, like the sun, excepting a beautiful marble statue. It was the representation of a handsome boy, carved out of pure white stone, which had fallen to the bottom of the sea from a wreck. She planted by the statue a rose-colored weeping willow. It grew splendidly, and very soon hung its fresh branches over the statue, almost down to the blue sands...". Ellida has an arbour in the garden; the way in which it is described makes you think of that of the mermaid at

the bottom of the sea and notably the illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen stands out. “They call this my arbour” she says to Arnholm, the senior master, “because I had it fitted up”. Inside the arbour, lost in her yearning for the stranger, she alienates herself from the rest of the family, the man and the step-daughters who are sitting on the veranda.

By giving the female main character a red and blue dress – the colours of the sun and the sea bed in the fairy tale of H. C. Andersen – Ibsen tries to depict her as a person whose mind is filled with a strong and dissatisfactory yearning and with dreams, a person left to live on the “bottom of the sea”, a place where she does not feel at home, and longing for sunshine and light. Often Ibsen uses the clothing in his description of a person’s characteristics. For example, in *The Master Builder* he indirectly describes Hilde by way of the bunch of wild flowers she has placed in her bodice – and Hjørdis in *The Vikings of Helgeland* by letting her dress being of the same colour as the black horses in *Asgårdsreiden*, those who carry the dead men and women who have lived a life full of deeds, which is the kind of life that Hjørdis is longing to live.

The source of this reuse, which is a characteristic feature of the Ibsen dramas, *may* stem from the conventions or customs of the old-age theatre. Each piece of decoration was composed by many different parts, belonging to plays that have been performed in the past, and new pieces were only added when no other alternative was available. This was done for economical reasons and because people had become accustomed to this practice.

Being director in Bergen and Kristiania for as long as from 1851 to 1863, Ibsen enjoyed a strong and ever-lasting impression of practical theatre operations, and he made his own and decisive contribution as well, notably by way of his detailed stage comments. They were so detailed that he occasionally became a novelist rather than a dramatist. But although he used to publish his plays as books prior to performance – publishing them as closet drama and play scores – he remained a genuine dramatist. He was thinking, feeling and reasoning, taking a stand on the problems of his time and his own life as a real-born theatre writer. He could use drama to recast everything that came within his spiritual reach. That is why Ibsen’s closet dramas – *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* – are easily performed on stage; the life and art of these plays contain drama in every scene and the characters are designed in a manner that enable them to be operated on stage.

However, the dramatist, Henrik Ibsen was a product of the theatre system that he grew up to learn about during his apprenticeship and when he became a skilled playwright. The scene-drawings that he used while being the artistic director at the national theatre of Bergen (the drawings are now kept at the institute of theatre science in Bergen) show the strength of his familiarity with this system. Applying great precision and working meticulously, he wrote his notes and coupled them with drawings to illustrate the set-up and scenes of some of the most popular plays at that time. The records clearly show that the scene convention applied by Ibsen is largely transferred to the scenes of his own plays. But as one might have anticipated, the conventions are attached to the same symbolic and poetic meaning as any other significant element in the dramatic world of Ibsen's poetry. Therefore, the theatre conventions of the past, which are otherwise long forgotten and irrelevant to contemporary life, become worth studying.

## I

# RIGHT – LEFT

As already mentioned, Ibsen's work involved the classical theatre concept with back cloths perspective and wings. The technical and artistic foundation consisted of Italy's high baroque style. The theatre was equipped with a back cloth, maybe a cut-through tableau curtain, side wings, set pieces and borders above, all in line with the customs of perspective of that time. One or more of the spaces between the side wings could be sealed off by walls with doors or windows. Entries and exits in and out of living room interiors, however, were just as often performed without using a door, i.e. one of the passages between the side wings might as well be used. Already in the early 1800 closed rooms were introduced on stage (in 1829 at the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen). However, for as long as until the end of the century, the open wings were used, although most often in combination with closed rooms as was the case on the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen (introduced 1874).

The wings were illuminated by a string of lamps located on the front edge of the stage, and lamps mounted on poles behind each side wing, including the front drapery wing, as well as by lamps mounted in the ceiling and masked by the borders. A mechanical system allowed the lamps to be covered by taffeta; for a long time, only red and blue colours were used to illustrate sunrises and sunsets, and the darkness of night. At the beginning of the century, oil was the source of energy for the lighting (Argand lamps designed in the same manner as the subsequent paraffin lamps), later gas was introduced and replaced by electricity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The location of the lamps was virtually unchanged throughout the period.

The scene outlined involved a unique set of conventions and guidelines that applied to the location of the individual decoration items, pieces and furniture and the way in which the actors were to use the scene environment. The-

se rules originated from practical considerations and social factors and issues related to etiquette. The location of the lighting (the best light came from the front edge) and the conception that your voice would tend to be lost among the open wings would drive the actors to the front of the stage. In order to understand the importance of the social factors one must appreciate that the scene space of the baroque period was not considered as being a particular place that was significantly different compared to that of the audiences. The scene and audience space was looked on as one common space, one big auditorium or salon. The actors were performing in the common salon but their social status was quite different; Goethe's rules applying to the actors can only be understood today by recalling that they were developed at a royal court theatre. Rule 42 states that "When two people are talking with each other, the person standing to the left must be careful not to come too close to the one standing to the right, since the most respectable person is standing to the right; women, elderly people, etc. The person to the right should stick to his rights and not give in to being forced towards the wings, but should maintain his stand and inform the person approaching, at least by using his left hand, that he must move away". The area to the right of the respectable person (to the left when viewed from the audience) was known as the fixed area in German theatres. This was where the theatre would place its most significant side wings, pieces and practicables, i.g. thrones, or other objects of great importance to the play. The area to the right of the audience was known as the mobile area, as this was the area where most entries and exits were made.<sup>5</sup>

This way in which the actors entered and left the stage and in which decoration items were placed was generally maintained throughout the entire 1800 century, although the realistic style theatre, with its increasingly realistic scenes, was obviously forcing the theatre people to skip the deeply rooted convention – that the action was to go from the right towards the left and then back again.

In France, the high number of salon comedies (Scribe and imitators) had probably helped people to forget this baroque rule. Illustrations in past Molière editions seem to indicate that the rule has been applied here as well; if one goes through the scene remarks of his plays, however, one does not find any indications of 'right, left'. The same practice was seen just as early in Germany.

A typical Scribe decoration would be as follows:

”Un salon; port au fond, deux portes latérales; à gauche, une table et ce qu’il faut pour écrire; à droite, un bureau de livres et de papiers”. (1<sup>st</sup> act). (*La Camaraderie*). One should not get distracted by the table and writing set being placed to the left and then think that this would indicate that important things will be written here; the objects placed on the desk to the right are just as important to the action of the play and character descriptions. In the next act, in a different salon, the desk with the writing set (for purposes of variety or to avoid any misunderstanding?) has been moved to the right. However, there clearly remains left from the old convention since the door or the doors to the left would usually lead to the inner rooms of the house or the apartment; the doors to the right lead to peripheral locations, and at the back they provide a view to the garden or a similar view, to the front room and exit. Otherwise, the entry is made from the ‘exterior’, usually through the door at the back.

This tendency to create a symmetrical scene image is most likely also rooted in the baroque period. The court’s glorious and propagandist performances that served to glorify the ruling prince were usually decorated in manner where depth, length and perspective (symmetrically arranged) were of key importance. In fact, making an entry from the back is after all more effective than when made from the side.

The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen acquired the tradition of the fixed and mobile areas (this is clearly shown by the stage management plans), although the left and right sides were referred to as the side of the king and the ladies-in-waiting, owing to the location of the loge for the king and the ladies-in-waiting<sup>6</sup>.

The French practice affects developments too, possibly owing to the popularity of the Scribe comedy and because Heiberg lets most of his vaudevilles be performed in a decoration that is symmetrical, that is, involving an effective decoration at the centre of the back. In the play of *Recensenten og Dyret* it represents the back of a tent at the amusement park of *Dyrehavebakken* (“In the centre of the theatre is the tent, which is located all the way through, so that one can see the promenade at the back end on the other side where people are passing by”). In the play *Et Eventyr i Rosenborg Have* it is the “....cavalier passage separated from the scene by a painted wood fence....”, and in the play *De Uadskillelige* “a swing is put up between two trees...”. Using tableau-like set-ups, Heiberg often places furniture symmetrically in front of the back-

ground – in the play *Recensenten* “Tables and benches to both sides with the desk of Trop to the right; “Two benches, one on each side” in the play *Et eventyr*; in the play *De Uadskillelige*, tables and benches are found too, both in front and in the back.

The second-generation dramatists of Henrik Hertz and others were using the scene and decorations in exactly the same manner. In the play of *Svend Dyrings Hus* (performed 1837), in the old servants’ hall, Helvig’s ghost is making its entrance through a “a small door in the portal at the back”; this is what is meant by tableau-like (“following the choir the music will make a strong transition”, the door “is opened abruptly”, “the lighting changes”. On the right side – but it is not always quite clear whether Hertz means to the right or left to the audience, we see the boy’s couch. The couch is laid with straw because of the cruel stepmother. Regisse’s bed and the cradle of the youngest child are placed to the left. Most entries in this play are made from the right – whereas the more dramatic and secretive entries come from the left (Stig Hvide, Regisse’s lover, and Ragnhild, spellbound by runic letters. In the play *Ninon*, at the house of the main character, we can see “through the open folding doors and windows at the back end....a fairly large part of the garden”. The rooms in *Ninon* are in line with the tradition and thus placed to the left – “to the right of the actors”, as Hertz writes himself, and “The main entrance to the left” but he forgets it in a later scene, and without concern he lets the maid exit to the street to get the mistress’ toilet glass and powder set. Ibsen is never that absent-minded when he lead his character in and out of the scene. But with every play he wrote he was applying the same baroque scene concept with the regard to the use of the left and right sides – a concept that he learned before his apprenticeship during his youth while being employed as manager at the Norwegian theatres in Bergen and Kristiania (both were influenced by the Danish theatre traditions of the golden romantic age although they were established as *Norwegian* theatres to counter the strong cultural influence from Denmark. But Ibsen would have taken everyone by surprise if he had not involved this concept when developing his poetry visions which he coupled with a conventional and realistic application.

Thus, as early as in his play *Catiline* (1848-49) he follows the tradition of using the right and left sides, and he does so in a manner that shows it was associated with extraordinary importance. The decorations in the play, how-

ever, are typically baroque; there is no mention of any practicable doors, but then this is explained by the entrances and exits always being made between the side wings. Only if a particular door was serving a special purpose, it would be placed in front of one of the passages between the wings. The indication of ‘right, left’ is rarely seen in theatre plays before around 1820. A typical example is the play *Embedsiver* written by Iffland<sup>7</sup>. None of the interiors described make use of doors and the indication of ‘right, left’ is not used until in the 5<sup>th</sup> act where it is of great importance for the performance of the play and the character description. The action takes place in a room in front of the prince’s anteroom. One of the actors informs us that the large anteroom is found to the right. At the left side, there is another door to back stairs through which the villain of the play is put by a henchman who accepts to be bribed. The father of the play, the zealous Dallner, however, does not take any short cuts but is kept back by the dishonest henchman in the large anteroom. Later in the play, he obtains satisfaction for the unfair treatment and this is clearly reflected by way of a touching family tableau the centre door being opened. “We see Dallner sitting, Listar is standing behind him with his arm beneath his head, Ernst is standing by his knee and holding his hand. Mr. Rosen is kneeling with his face resting on his hand”. Iffland is sending the villain up the back stairs to underline that he has a sense for using the decoration for a moralising symbolic purpose. This is further emphasised by Falkenberg, the chamberlain who cannot be bribed, he replies as follows to Falbring, the villain; “This is the root of all your misfortunes; that you and your peers are walking by the back stairs”.

In the well-known play of *Elverhøj* (1828) the scene for the 2<sup>nd</sup> act is described as follows: “A cabinet at Højstrup. On the left side, a window in front, with a view to the garden. On the same side at the back, an entrance to a side room.” At this time, when the Royal Theatre did not know of closed rooms, the window consisted of a practicable window that could be opened and closed and that was found in a set piece placed between the two front side wings. The reason why there is no mention of doors in the right side is simply (as already explained) that the actors would use the passages between the side wings although this was quite unrealistic. The door to the left is not brought into use until the young nobleman Flemming is to be hidden from Ebbesen who enters from the right. The secretiveness of butler Bjørn Olufson is comi-

cally linked to the window. When the curtain rises, he is alone on the stage; he is standing “in the open window and talking into the garden.”

BJØRN: ...I beg your pardon? – Am I not able to be quiet? Well, don't you ask me that question. I'm an experienced man with 33 years of service as a butler here at Høistrup. For all those years, I've enjoyed the confidence of everyone – the blessed lady of the house, the master, the maid and many other noble ladies and gentlemen. I know quite a number of secrets but neither my words or looks have or will reveal any of these. If I should tell you all that I know, you would be taken by surprise. But, dare me to say anything – what do you say? Do I scream that loud myself?...

Thus, although the left side in this example depicts an external wall (the door at the back and at the same side leads into a separate, inner room) the window, however, is part of the plot as if something secret is taking place. In Heiberg's vaudeville *Nei* there is a practicable window in play, correctly placed to the right at the “exterior wall” but it is not attached with the same kind of importance as that in *Elverhøj*; it is solely used by Link, the bell-ringer, to determine that there is graduate Hammer, hurrying home.

It is quite peculiar that Ibsen does not use the “right” and “left” indications until in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> act of *Catiline*. Until then, his characters have just entered and left the stage, on a few occasions Ibsen uses the phrases “from the side” or “from the other side” to describe the action. Right now we are in “a garden behind Catiline's house, which is dimly seen between the trees. There is a side building on the left”. The reason why “left” and “right” are not used until this point of time is probably that Ibsen, so far, has been able to rely on the custom designation of entries and exits; the expression of “the other side” would then be immediately understood as the left. But the scene above (2<sup>nd</sup> act) deals with tree different locations; from the right we have people entering from the outside; from the side building to the left (the inner room of Catiline's house), we have Aurelia, the wife, entering the scene; the people who are standing in the way on the scene are sent in the direction of the house at the back where they will wait until they are asked to re-enter the stage because their action is required.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last act, Ibsen continues using the indications of “right” and “left” throughout the production of his dramatic plays. The 3<sup>rd</sup> act takes

place in “Catiline’s camp in a well-timbered area in Etruria. To the right we see Catiline’s tent and next to this there is an old oak tree”. The tent and oak tree are the only objects on the scene and specifically located to one side – why, I will explain below. At the end of the act, a number of lines are communicated between the good and evil spirit of Catiline. His wife Aurelia and the vestal virgin Furia who are key to the understanding of Ibsen’s use of the right and left sides. Furia, with her love-hate relationship to Catiline, has sworn to revenge herself on her sister’s death, which he has caused, and she has convinced him to kill Aurelia because the love of Aurelia is keeping him locked in the present life that Furia has learned him to despise. He stabs her with a sheath knife and she escapes from the tent. He follows her and returns shortly after, showing the bare knife to Furia:

CATILINE: Release me, Furia! Take this knife...with this I’ve spiked the eye of the morning star...take it, take it...and run it straight through the body...then it will lose its power...and I’ll be free.

FURIA: (grabs the knife). This will happen, your soul, whom I have both hated and loved. Shake off your dust and go with me into oblivion!” She runs the knife deep into his breast and he drops to lie at the foot of a tree.

CATILINE: Dark *Styx*, lift your head high and swell! Bear with me, do not sink the boat, rush it forward...towards the kingdom of the silent prince at the home of all ghosts. The road there is divided into two! I will go silently, towards the left.

AURELIA (from the tent, pale and staggering with a bloody breast): No, towards the right! Towards Elysium.”

Thus, Ibsen places the underworld to the left and Elysium, the field of the blessed souls, to the right. But why place Hades, the underworld, to the left and Elysium, the paradise world, to the right? Maybe the idea stems from Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, as Elysium, the field of heroes, at the outskirts of Hell, that is, in the large anteroom; to meet the real sinners, however, you have to go further to the bottom. But you may rightly wonder why he so carefully indicates the location of the two worlds. Maybe we will get closer to an explanation by taking a look at yet another poem about good and evil. We know that Ibsen

highly appreciated *Faust* (Goethe) and that he was very familiar with the poem<sup>8</sup>. At the end after Faust's death, Ibsen introduces this scene comment: "Glorie, von oben rechts" (11676). "Glorie" was a well-know machine at the baroque theatre, it was luminous and contained various heavenly beings, here it was a crow of angels. The machine was lowered from the ceiling onto the floor and then elevated again. The fact that *Faust* takes place in a theatre is stressed repeatedly in the poem; in the scene in question, all the angels fill out the entire scene space after having risen from their halo, strewing roses all round and pushing the disappointed and furious Mefistofeles into the proscenium (the angels arrive to save the soul of Faust). As already mentioned, the dramatists at the time of Goethe rarely made any references to "right" and "left". This was only done when considered of outmost importance as in the example of Iffland's *Embedsiver*. In *Faust*, the left-right reference is used once only, indicating that the angels which are sent from heaven must be truly important. True, it is all about saving the soul of Faust.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in Goethe's poem, heaven is found to the right and this cannot be explained by the view that it is considered to be found at the outskirts of Hell but rather because the right side was considered to be more valuable and more distinguished relative to Goethe's rule that the most respected person would be standing to the right. Goethe does not inform his readers about whether right is to be viewed from the audience or from the actors. But that does not matter in this context; the main thing is that Goethe may have contributed to Ibsen's imagination of linking the heavenly and the divine with the right side, and in Ibsen's plays "right" and "left" are always seen from the actor's perspective. The couple of Catiline and Aurelia are dying to the right at the foot of an old oak tree, in reconciliation and victory:

AURELIA (pointing towards the rising light): No, because love will make the horrors of death and the night go away. See, the thunder cloud is giving way; the morning star is wavering weakly (with her hands in the air): The light is victorious! See, the day will come, big and warm! Follow me, Catiline! Death will seize everything (she drops onto him).

And he cries, quickly removing the knife from his breast:

CATELINE: The mild powers of the morning are looking down on us in reconcili-

ation; you have conquered the soul of night by your love.” (During the past scene, Furia has gradually moved herself towards the back, disappearing between the trees. Catiline’s head is sinking onto the breast of Aurelia, and they die).

In *When We Dead Awaken*, the sculptor Rubek and model Irene also meet their death to the right, during an avalanche in the mountains, presumably after reconciliation and victory.

Let us now try to examine whether Ibsen is associating characters, events or objects in his plays with the right side in a manner that clearly reveals that he truly attaches a heavenly and divine importance to the right side. There are three main characters who are clearly connected with the right side, either by way of an emphasis that is made during important replies and lines in the right side or by the action that predominantly takes place in the right side. The characters are king Håkon in *The Pretenders*, Hedvig in *The Wild Duck* and Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*.

*The Pretenders* (1864) contains three main characters: Skule, God’s stepchild on earth, Nikolas, the bishop, the representative of the wickedness on earth, and Håkon with his great ambition of unifying all the Norwegians. The first time that Håkon is associated with the right side is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> act, and it is done in such a remarkable way that you cannot avoid being puzzled. The 2<sup>nd</sup> act is set at the king’s premises in Bergen. “There is a large, sloped window at the back of the wall and alongside the wall, the women are seated. The king’s chair is placed a few steps above the floor at the left wall, and there is a large entrance in the middle of the opposite wall...All around there are tables with jugs, horns and cups. King Håkon is sitting on a raised platform with Margrete, Sigrid, Ragnhild and many noble women...the king’s and the earl’s men and guests are seated around the tables...earl Skule and bishop Nikolas are playing a board game at a table to the left...”. Obviously, it is the baroque tradition that has influenced Ibsen to place the king’s chair with Håkon, the queen and earl Skule’s wife and sister to the left, including the earl himself and the bishop. During the act, the two are left alone in the hall. Earl Skule is “walking thoughtfully to and fro”. He tells us how he impatiently and painfully has been waiting for the death of his close relatives to enable him to move forward to take over the throne, and shortly after he is talking about Håkon. In reply to an answer from Skule, the bishop has said that “the happiest man is the greatest

man. The happiest man is he who makes the greatest things, he who handles the demands of life in a manner that generates the thoughts that he does not understand but that point out a way with an unknown destination, which he chooses to and must follow until he hears people screaming with joy, and he looks around and is wondering and concludes that he has made a great achievement”.

EARL SKULE: Yes, that is what is certain about Håkon...(first thoughtfully, then gradually moving) Should Håkon be made of something different than I? Is he one of the happy ones? – Yes, is everything not working for him? Is everything not turning out to the best for him? Even the peasant is feeling this; he says that the trees are bearing fruit twice and that the birds are brooding their eggs twice every summer while Håkon is king. The village which he burned down and ravaged is now rebuilt and the corn is ripe ....it is as if the Lord covers everything that Håkon destroys with crop; it is as if the holy powers hurry to wipe away any guilt on behalf of Håkon (pondering) what have I not done to try to get the king’s seat, which I failed to achieve – and what Håkon has not done, he who is now securely seated there. I was young and let go of my love to get married into a powerful family. I prayed that I would be granted a son – I only got daughters.

BISHOP NIKOLAS: Look Earl, Håkon will get sons!

EARL SKULE (walking towards the window to the right)<sup>10</sup>: Yes, everything works out well for Håkon.

BISHOP NIKOLAS (follows him): And you, you will let you be hunted as an outlaw, away from happiness throughout your entire life. Don’t you see that there are some much stronger powers which are helping Håkon to achieve his works. He gets help from up there, from them – who are against you....stand up, straighten up!....Remember that the first great achievement in the world was made by someone who raised himself against a strong empire!

EARL SKULE: Who?

BISHOP NIKOLAS:The angel who raised himself against the light!

EARL SKULE: And which was thrown into the abyss.

BISHOP NIKOLAS (wildly): And created an empire there and became king, –

greater than any of the ten thousands of earls up there! (drops down onto the bench at the table).

Shortly after the bishop stimulates the evil doubts in the mind of Skule that Håkon is not a legitimate but a misplaced child; owing to the uncertain times, he argues, Håkon was sent to a safer place and a peasant's child was given to the mother, although no one really knows more about it, those who did know have all died now.

EARL SKULE: There are no one in the world who can lighten up this place! (walks forcefully to and fro): Almighty God, can this be true? Håkon – the king – he who rules the land and the kingdom, he should not be the freeholder! And why would this not be fair? Has he not had all the luck in this world, so why should this not include being taken as a child from a poor family and put in the cradle of the royals.

BISHOP NIKOLAS: While the entire people believes that he is the son of the king.

EARL SKULE: While he thinks it himself, bishop, that is the most of the happiness, therein lies the strength! (*walks to the window*)<sup>11</sup> See, how handsomely he is riding the horse. No one does that as well as him. His eyes are shining and full of laughter, he looks forward to the next day as if he knew that he was made for always walking forward, always forward (turns around, facing the bishop): I'm a king's arm, maybe even a king's head – but he is the king".

When Ibsen suddenly becomes in need of a window, he *makes one up*; it was not there at the beginning since it was missing in the initial appearance and layout description. This is the first and only time that Ibsen – who is otherwise very meticulous in his work – makes up an item. The reason why he places it to the right may simply be that this is an outside wall (the big exit door goes through this wall). But what makes him think up a window right here, then? What is its purpose? Håkon is described as a person who enjoys extraordinary luck, which at that time was equal to God. He is the happiest man and therefore the greatest man too, a true Aladdin who does not doubt his high vocation. The second time that the suddenly appearing window is mentioned, we see Håkon riding a horse (not through our own eyes but through the description given by Skule who is suffering a lot of pain owing to envy and grudge. He

is a character filled with light (“his eyes are shining with laughter and light”), and the fact that we have just been told that he may not be the son of the king but rather the son of a poor peasant strengthens the impression that he is heaven sent. It is not immediately understandable that Ibsen – based on the manner in which he has previously made use of the right side in *Catiline* – has felt the need to depict Håkon as brilliantly as he does in this scene. It is not until the confidential conversation between the earl and the bishop that the king is characterised and that the reader and audience gets to know him well. Right before Ibsen decides to introduce a new window in the right side, Skule has explained that he prayed to the holy ones that he was granted a son, but he was given only daughters, which makes the satanic bishop reiterate the point by saying: “Look Earl, Håkon got sons!”. This line about the sons makes Ibsen create the window, which is so important that it requires extraordinary emphasis. Obviously, Håkon gets his son with Margrete, the daughter of Skule. But it turns out that Skule was wrong, arguing that he had not get a son; suddenly a son born outside marriage is emerging and given in his custody by the woman he loved during his youth. Through him, Skule is brought face to face with himself and is forced to give up his dreams of greatness if he wants to save the soul of his son – but by making the right choice he also saves his own soul and finds peace in death. From the window, the bishop talks about a lighting character of a prince but involves Lucifer, a devilish sender of light, which is in line with this character.

Håkon is again markedly linked to the right side in the 3<sup>rd</sup> act, 2<sup>nd</sup> scene. We are in one of the rooms of the king’s mansion. “There is an entrance door at the back, and on each of the walls there are smaller-sized doors; at the front on the right side, there is a window... Close to the door to the left, there is a bench and further back there is a cradle where the king’s child is sleeping. Margrete is kneeling next to the child”. The boy child, who Håkon will get according to the prophecy in the last act, has been born. And now Skule is announcing the king’s arrival by way of a new window to the right at the front. Skule has entered the stage after the queen has been singing a lullaby:

DUKE SKULE (while listening and approaching the window): Isn’t that the king?

MARGRETE: Yes, he is walking up the other stairs, I will go and get him! (takes the father’s hand and lead him jokingly to the cradle again): Guard the king’s

son while... And if he awakens, bow deeply and greet him in the manner a king is greeted! Now, I'll go and get Håkon... (Exits to the right).

DUKE SKULE (following a brief and dark silence): Håkon has a son. His family will live after him. If he dies, his son will be a hereditary to the throne.

And then he repeats, nearly word by word, part of what he said during the conversation by the window in the previous act:

Everything works well for Håkon. Maybe he is not the right one; but his belief in himself is solid as always; the bishop tried to spread a rumour but was not given the required time because of death, he was not allowed by God. God is protecting Håkon, he was able to keep his belt of strength.

Skule is tempted for a short while by the thought to kidnap the king's child but is unable to. When the king enters from the right, Skule urges the king to share his powers with him:

So you wanted to become king...you would have been fit to become chief at the time of Erling Skakke, but the time has outrun you and you don't appreciate it. Don't you see that Norway, as it was created by Harald and Oluf, resembles that of a church that has not yet been blessed. I will see to that! Norway was a nation, there will be one people. Trønder went against Vikværing, Agdeværing against Hørdalænding, Hålogalænding against Sogndøl; everyone will be as one after this and everyone will know and appreciate that they are one people. That is the deed that God has asked me to do; that is the deed that the king of Norway must carry out now. But this deed, Duke, I assume that you would not take on, because you wouldn't be able to! Duke Skule (beaten): Gather....? Gather all of Norway into one? (in disbelief): That cannot be done! Such an achievement is not mentioned in the saga of Norway! Håkon. For you that would be impossible, because you're only able to redo the old saga; but for me it's just as easy as it's for the falcon to fly through the clouds.

This scene (visually associated with the other scene earlier by way of the window to the right) clearly underlines that Ibsen is able to make *qualitative* use of the right side. Here it is done to emphasise Håkon's great ambition of transforming Norway into one people instead of only one nation. The entrance door is found at the back (used by Skule). The door to the left leads into Margrete's

bedroom and the door to the right leads to the other stairs. From a realistic perspective, it would be unlikely to equip the room with two entries. Ibsen's purpose must be a different one since he first lets Skule view the king in a window in the front to the right and then lets him enter from that side through a basically superfluously door.

There is another, final example from the Pretenders that I will provide with regard to the special use of the right side, although it does not relate to Håkon's character but to his opponent Skule. The second last scene takes place in a "forest of pinewood in the hills next to Nidaros. The weather this night is foggy and the background is only barely visible and occasionally invisible. ... King Skule ... Peter ... and other bellows are heard in the forest to the left". The game is over for Skule, and he knows it. But why would he enter from the left when this is unconventional? An explanation is given shortly after when a new entry is made from the left. One of Skule's men is asking his fellowmen to get down and lie flat out on the ground; people are approaching. "Everyone immediately drops down and hide behind stones and stumps; a procession of people on horsebacks and foot are approaching but is barely visible through the fog and between the trees; the procession is coming from the left side and continues towards the right side."

PETER: It's the queen ... they are going to Elgesæter. The king's child is there, too!

At Elgesæter there was a monastery, and a journey to that destination (a holy place) would – in view of the above – naturally take place from the left towards the right. But there is no doubt another and more important reason why the theatre playwright of Henrik Ibsen has set aside a time-honoured rule, that Skule rejects the strong temptation of acquiring the power to rule Norway and instead decides to sacrifice his son Peter who, according to the perception of that time, has sinned deeply by stealing the shrine of Saint Olaf from the cathedral to please his father, and thus he cannot be properly acclaimed as king. Skule is tempted by the ghost of bishop Nikolas who is disguised as a brother of the cross.

Because to place you on the top of the world ladder/ I want you only to follow

your own aspiration/ you will get the country with its cities and castles/ if your son succeeds you as king of Norway.

KING SKULE (lifting his hand as if making an oath): My son will – (stops suddenly and screams terrified) The church thief! All power to him! Ha.....Stay away from me, stay away from me! (raises his arms into the air towards the sky). And have mercy on me, you, whom I'm now screaming for help as I'm in great need (falls to the ground).

CROSS BROTHER: Damn! Now, everything just went smooth; / I was thinking that I had him/ but the light made a loving move/ that I didn't know – and that made an end to the game.

After a few more words, he disappears into the fog between the trees, i.e. into the back, which resembles the end of Furia in *Catiline* and her final and failed attempt to lead *Catiline's* soul into perdition. But Skule gets up, pauses momentarily, and looks around:

Where is he, the black one? (jumps up). Where are you? Gone! – Well, that doesn't matter because now that I know the way myself, both the way to *Elgsæter* and beyond (exits to the right).

In the final scene, when he enters and knocks on the gate to enter the monastery of *Elgsæter*, takes place at the centre of backstage, and when he together with his son voluntarily lets himself be beaten up by the city men of *Nidaros*, this is done through the same gate, which provides for an effective tableau. In reality, however, he dies in the right side, like *Aurelia* in *Catiline*; in the second last scene, he walks towards his death to the right, and viewed from the audience, the *Elgsæter* monetary is placed to the right.

In the play about Dr. Stockmann, an enemy of the people, the main person is kept to the right side nearly throughout the play. Ibsen achieves this by designing Stockmann's apartment so that the door that leads into the doctor's working room in the living room layout of the 1<sup>st</sup> act is found in the front to the right. In the 5<sup>th</sup> act we are introduced to this room; as with the final scene of the *Pretenders*, the right side is expanded to include the *entire* scene space. In the room where the meeting takes place (4<sup>th</sup> act), Stockmann makes his speech from an erected platform in the middle of the right wall. Stockmann and his fa-

mily enter via a door to the right in the front (the actual exit is through an open folding door at the back). To the left there are three windows where the meeting participants muster the so-called “compact majority” (excluding one vote from a drunken man) when the doctor attacks them, from the right.

I have already said that I don't intend to waste a word on the puny, narrow-chested, short-winded crew whom we are leaving astern. Pulsating life no longer concerns itself with them. I am thinking of the few, the scattered few amongst us, who have absorbed new and vigorous truths. Such men stand, as it were, at the outposts, so far ahead that the compact majority has not yet been able to come up with them; and there they are fighting for truths that are too newly-born into the world of consciousness to have any considerable number of people on their side as yet.

Both Stockmann and Håkon are able to think new thoughts.

There is a high probability that Hedvig's character determined the location of the couch and table layout in the main decoration of *The Wild Duck*. “Hjalmar Ekdal's studio, a good-sized room, evidently in the top storey of the building. On the right, a sloping roof of large panes of glass, half-covered by a blue curtain. In the right-hand corner, at the back, the entrance door; farther forward, on the same side, a door leading to the sitting-room. Two doors on the opposite side, and between them an iron stove. At the back, a wide double sliding-door. The studio is plainly but comfortably fitted up and furnished. Between the doors on the right, standing out a little from the wall, a sofa with a table and some chairs; on the table a lighted lamp with a shade ... Photographic instruments and apparatus of different kinds lying about the room. Against the back wall, to the left of the double door, stands a bookcase ... Photographs and small articles, such as camel's-hair pencils, paper, and so forth, lie on the table.” There is a “large window in the slanting roof”. That is understandable as the scene is set in the studio of a photographer, but apparently Ibsen has been inspired by this fact since the changing lightning plays an important role (thus, it is almost grotesque that the two of the characters, Werle, the merchant, and Hedvig are going blind). However, the large and dominant, sloping window is placed to the right, and beneath it Ibsen has placed another of his important means of expression – a couch with a table and some chairs. This is obviously important owing to the game, the confession and disclosure that

usually takes place here. But this layout is nearly always placed to the left; when it is placed opposite, it is usually done with a special purpose unless the opposite side is already being occupied for another important purpose (e.g. *Rosmersholm*, see page 43). Hedvig spends quite some time at this table during the play. She is “sitting on the sofa, with her hands shading her eyes and her thumbs in her ears, reading a book” when the curtain goes and the attic room of Ekdal becomes visible. She will be sitting by the table, reading the menu that Hjalmar has brought her instead of the delicacies that he promised to bring home to her from the dinner with merchant Werle.

HJALMAR (with a paper): Look, here it is.

HEDVIG: That? Why, that’s only a paper.

HJALMAR: That is the bill of fare, my dear; the whole bill of fare. Here you see: “Menu” – that means bill of fare.

HEDVIG: Haven’t you anything else?

HJALMAR: I forgot the other things, I tell you. But you may take my word for it, these dainties are very unsatisfying. Sit down at the table and read the bill of fare, and then I’ll describe to you how the dishes taste. Here you are, Hedvig.

HEDVIG (gulping down her tears): Thank you.(She seats herself, but does not read; Gina makes signs to her; Hjalmar notices it.)

HJALMAR (pacing up and down the room): It’s monstrous what absurd things the father of a family is expected to think of; and if he forgets the smallest trifle, he is treated to sour faces at once. Well, well, one gets used to that too.

When you think about Hjalmar’s passion for food, the fact that he forgets to bring home the food to Hedvig and uses the menu as alternative (a heartless but no doubt unintentional move) appears more powerful. Shortly after, the family conversation at the table reaches its peak.

HJALMAR: And if I am unreasonable once in a while – why then – you must remember that I am a man beset by a host of cares. There, there! (Dries his eyes.) No beer at such a moment as this. Give me the flute.

(Hedvig runs to the bookcase and fetches it)

HJALMAR: Thanks! That's right. With my flute in my hand and you two at my side – ah – !

(Hedvig seats herself at the table near Gina; Hjalmar paces backwards and forwards, pipes up vigorously, and plays a Bohemian peasant-dance, but in a slow plaintive tempo, and with sentimental expression.)

HJALMAR (breaking off the melody, holds out his left hand to Gina, and says with emotion): Our roof may be poor and humble, Gina; but it is home. And with all my heart I say: here dwells my happiness.

Hjalmar is doing some retouching work, strongly against his will and keen on joining the father in the dark attic. When Hedvig enters, he is easily persuaded and lets her carry on his work.

HJALMAR: But mind you don't hurt your eyes! Do you hear? I won't be answerable; you do it on your own responsibility – understand that.

HEDVIG (retouching): Yes, yes, I understand.

Sitting at the table, Hedvig is telling Gregers about her dream life in the attic with all the picture books, left by the old sailor who was called the “flying Dutchman” and with the wild duck. Here both Hjalmar and Molvik get their portions of their lies by Relling while they eat their salad of pickled herring, beetroot, etc, and this is the first time we are told about “the claim of the ideal” that Gregers Werle was presenting to the people in the cabins at Højdalsværket but which was never honoured.

RELLING: Ah, then you've learnt to knock a little discount off, I expect.

GREGERS: Never, when I have a true man to deal with.

HJALMAR: No, I should think not, indeed. A little butter, Gina.

RELLING: And a slice of bacon for Molvik.

MOLVIK: Ugh; not bacon! (A knock at the garret door.)

Old Ekdal enters with a fresh rabbit-skin after a ‘hunt’ across the dark attic. The ‘demonic’ Molvik, who suffers from hangovers after a binge last night, immediately leaves the table.

Thus, seriousness and fun alternate at the table to the right, and the satire with which Hjalmar is characterised is further underlined; he does not know what the audience knows – that he is “the trues man” of Gregers. Hedvig expresses her despair that her father no longer recognises her “(throws herself onto the couch, sobbing): No, no, he’ll never come home to us again”. In the same manner, the dead Hedvig also lies on the couch at the end.

Although Ibsen goes on at Hjalmar all the time, you still sense a certain warmth and sympathetic humour in the character description that is unique compared with the other characters in Ibsen’s universe. It has been said that the poet, in the form of Hjalmar, is very close to himself:<sup>12</sup> statements made in letters reflect a childish passion for certain foods and beverages, e.g. “delicious beer”<sup>13</sup> Maybe Hjalmar portrays the persons whom Ibsen felt he would have been very likely to become given some slightly different circumstances. Hjalmar is a photographer, he makes a living out of creating pictures by use of the sun. This profession underlines one of the most central aspects of Ibsen’s imagery – the sun and light (more details follow on p. 159 ff.). I argued that Hedvig was the reason why the action in *The Wild Duck* showed a tendency to be drawn towards the right side but I have to correct myself; Hjalmar is probably part of this reason, too. In fact, the entire family in the attic influences this tendency.

Håkon and Dr. Stockmann are persistent in their perception of being the chosen ones; Hedvig is the child, the youth, and her love for her father is big and unconditional to such an extent that she cannot bear that her father is rejecting her; she is mostly blind to his meanness and egoism, but when she finally does see it, she presents unlimited tolerance towards him and focuses solely on how to please him. Stockmann’s truly naive view of other people may seem comic but he clearly enjoys the sympathy of the author. This sympathy applies to all three of them – Håkon, Stockmann and Hedvig, including the Ekdal family. All three are wholehearted in their persistence and lack of compromise and such characters are rarely seen in Ibsen’s writings; the fact that he clearly keeps the characters in the right side, which Ibsen probably attaches to God, may be interpreted as his *entirely private comments*. The final tableaux should be viewed in the same manner as in *Catiline*, *When We Dead Awaken*, and *The Master Builder* (the fall from the tower takes place to the right), and these plays will be further dealt with below (see p. 74). Here we will take a closer look at a third

and different ending as seen in *Little Eyolf*. The decoration is described as follows: “A high crag overgrown with copsewood in Allmers’ grounds. A steep precipice with a railing in the background and a flight of steps leading down on the left. A wide prospect of the fjord, which lies far below. A flagstaff ... beside the railing. In the foreground on the right is a summer-house, covered with climbing plants and wild vines. A bench out in the front of it. It is late in the summer evening with a clear sky”. This is most likely a reuse of a former decoration. Key elements of two decorations in *The Lady From the Sea* have been combined (from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> acts). “Doctor Wangel’s house, with a large verandah garden in front of and around the house. Under the verandah a flagstaff. In the garden an arbour, with table and chairs...” “At the “View”, a shrub-covered hill behind the town...Farther back the outer fjord is seen, with islands and outstanding headlands... It is a summer’s evening, and twilight.” This is about the high altitude of the place, the shrub, the flagstaff (probably in the same place, i.e. halyard, although there is no mention of this), the summer-house to the right, the time, and the illumination. It is not strange that Ibsen has felt the urge to reuse items from the plays of *The Lady From the Sea* and *Little Eyolf*. Both plays deal with the themes of suggestion, telepathy and strong and compelling forces of various people. They involve people who sacrifice their happiness by “selling” their souls – they form lasting friendships with other people without love. Examples include the stranger, the rat-virgin, Rita who loves Allmers jealously and who does not want her son Eyolf to live and the boy is immediately drawn towards the sea by the rat-virgin who is on her way out on the inlet in a boat, or by his own mother? – Bolette – Arnholm, Asta – Borghejm, both girls get married to escape and be liberated)<sup>14</sup>. At the end of the final act, the married couple Rita and Allmers is left alone with their sorrows and remorse regarding the death of Eyolf. Asta, whom he really loves and who also loves him, has left together with Borghejm. Rita tells her husband that she will go down to the beach and get all the proletarian children, all the boys who did not help Eyolf when he had fallen into the water. She wants to take care of them as if they were her children, they will read his books, play with his toys and be sitting in his chair. When Allmers asks Rita whether she understands that it is not love that drives her to bring the poor boys into her wealthy home, she answers that that is not the case, not yet. Rita’s sincerity affects Allmers and he asks her if he can join in. “Let us see if it couldn’t work”,

he says softly, and she answers, almost inaudibly “Let us, Alfred’. They are both silent. Then Allmers goes over to the flagstaff and hoists the flag to the top. Coming back, he says:

There will be a hard day’s work before us, Rita.

RITA: You will see – the peace of the sabbath will rest upon us from time to time.

ALLMERS (quietly, touched): And we shall know then, perhaps, that the spirits are with us.

RITA (whispering): The spirits?

ALLMERS (as before): Yes. They will be beside us perhaps – those whom we have lost.

A peculiar expression – the visiting spirits! Where does Ibsen get this idea. In the preface, I mentioned that Ibsen probably had the fairytale *The Little Mermaid* of H. C. Andersen in mind when he wrote *The Lady From the Sea*. Ellida was feeling an irresistible sensation towards the sea, the little mermaid was dragged towards land. Ellida’s longing is represented by the stranger, that of the little mermaid in the young and beautiful prince whom she saves from drowning without the prince’s knowledge. She sacrifices her wonderful voice and her beautiful hair to be allowed to become human and walk on land. But she has no soul and will not get one until she succeeds in gaining the love of a human being. But the prince is in love with the beautiful princess, whom he thinks saved him from drowning. The sisters of the little mermaid give the mermaid a knife which she has to stab into the chest of the prince just before the sun rises after his wedding night; but this she cannot do. But she does not end her life as the “death cold foam of the sea” but joins the daughters of the sky. They are singing for her when she rises into their world. “When we have been striving for tree hundred years to making good things, our souls will be immortal and we will take part in the everlasting happiness of humans. You poor little mermaid, you tried with all your heart to do the same as we do, you have suffered and endured, now you have come to the world of the spirits in the sky and you will be able obtain your immortal soul in tree hundred years by making good deeds”. The spirits, are they the spirits from *The Little Mermaid*? And the good deeds that they must perform, do they include Rita’s and Alfred’s

efforts on behalf of the poor boys on the beach? It might also be of importance that the action takes place in a high place. The flag that is being hoisted to the top indicates an upward movement. Moreover, Allmers is urging Rita to look up to catch a glimpse of the spirits. Last, but not least, the final tableau takes place to the *right* at the summerhouse (Ellida's bower), or the little mermaid's hideout at the bottom of the sea.

According to Koht, Ibsen was not convinced about the transformation of the two<sup>15</sup>. At the first performance of *Little Eyolf*, he asked a lady, whom he knew already, whether she thought that Rita would seriously be able to help the poor boys. "Don't you think this is simply a passing thing?" We do not know his answer. But in the play he believes in the transformation, Koht argues, and we will have to agree because the end takes place to the right. In other plays of Ibsen, the end is performed to the left and in those cases the outcome is more dubious as we shall see in the following.

When trying to pinpoint Ibsen's use of the *left side* to understand the values that he attaches to this side, I first come to think of a particular scene in the play of *The Pillars of Society*. This play is usually considered to mark the beginning of Ibsen's realistic dramas building on particular problems and ideas. But this was not his first attempt at that time; he had already written two plays (*Love's Comedy* and *The League of Youth*). Both are highly satirical plays and there are quite a few features in *The Pillars of Society* that make it fit for being included in the group of the other two plays rather than the realistic group of subsequent plays. Several of the characters are described in a satirical manner and in a way that closely resembles a parody, and this does not only apply to the subordinate character of Hilmar Tønnesen (almost a genuine farce character). The main character of Bernick, the consul, has been given lines that closely resemble that of a parodic caricature, e.g. his conversation with John Tønnesen (has just returned from America) about the unmarried sister of the consul, who is in love with John and has been awaiting his homecoming:

BERNICK: Yes, and married very well, too. She has had several good offers – curiously enough, when you think that she is a poor girl, no longer young, and, besides, quite an insignificant person.

JOHAN: Insignificant?

BERNICK: Oh, I am not blaming her for that. I most certainly would not wish her otherwise. I can tell you it is always a good thing to have a steady-going person like that in a big house like this – some one you can rely on in any contingency.

JOHAN: Yes, but what does she – ?

BERNICK: She? How? Oh well, of course she has plenty to interest herself in; she has Betty and Olaf and me. People should not think first of themselves – women least of all. We have all got some community, great or small, to work for. That is my principle, at all events. (2<sup>nd</sup> act).

Think first of oneself: “Betty and Olaf and me”. But would it be an exaggeration to say that *The Pillars of Society* is a satiric comedy in line with *Love’s Comedy* and *The League of Youth*, a modern prose comedy, or is it a melodrama rather than a realistic play; or would society morality be a more proper label when considering the character types (either predominantly good or bad) and the caricature. The people at the table in the 1<sup>st</sup> act are seated in line with the rules of a middle age morality play (the sewing is done for a charitable purpose): the evil ones are seated to the left and the good is placed to the right, together with the newcomer with no knowledge about the city’s gossiping who is seated to the right of the hostess who is sitting in the middle. As in *Love’s Comedy*, the evil is represented by the bourgeoisie, the customs, and the representatives of conventional thinking, the good is represented by those fighting for “the spirit of truth and freedom”<sup>16</sup>.

The impregnable building of the bourgeoisie, the villa of widow Halms, is obviously placed to the left while the courting and poetry writing of the unengaged couples takes place to the right. Ibsen satirically criticises the couples in love by describing how the image of their ideal love is transformed as soon as it meets the practical requirements of an engaged or married life. He does this in a manner that words change in meaning, e.g. in the conversation between Falk, the poet, and Stråmand, the clergyman (once he was a believer and practitioner of unconditional love, we are told). He and Falk talks about Lind, the newly engaged, who is pursuing his theology studies and planning on going to America as a missionary. Stråmand is concerned about this plan:

He's hale and healthy, eminently fitted / To start a family in almost no time. (I assume he certainly has that in mind) / But as to means my friend – ? “Build not on sand” / So said the Scripture. Another thing entirely / If the offering – .

FALK: Be assured it won't be meagre; I'm sure of that.

STRÅMAND: I see, – well that will surely / Help matters, if there are those willing and eager / To sacrifice – Falk: He's totally prepared. Stråmand: He is? Do I understand what you just said? In these cases, offerings are brought to him / He's not the bringer.

MRS. STRÅMAN (Looking into the garden): Look dear, here they come!

FALK (Stares at him, astonished, for a moment, suddenly understands, and bursts into laughter): Oh, I see! The offerings! Yes, you have in mind / Festival offerings, the coin and paper kind. (2<sup>nd</sup> act).

Obviously, the reverend (Stråmand) enters from the left instead of from the right, which is the standard entrance side. “One has heard a carriage stopping outside to the left. The clergyman, his wife and eight small girls, all dressed to travel, enter one by one”. Thanks to his work at the theatre, Ibsen knows that sending a carriage, notably a horse carriage, on stage would be quite impossible. He therefore lets us hear the arrival and the entrance of the people one by one, as they descend from the carriage. This is a realistic theatre performance that is also effective in delaying the presentation of Stråmand and his family. In fact, the two parties can be considered as one single many-jointed person, or a fabulous monster, the slightly funny dragon in the fairy tale that Falk, the knight, is about to kill. Ibsen carefully makes sure the clergyman and his family stay close together (“Falk stops Stråmand, whose wife and children are always just by his side”), 2<sup>nd</sup> act.

As mentioned, the left side is referred to as the fixed side in the baroque theatre, being the area that contained the most important decorations, set pieces and practicables. It is typical of Ibsen to place the representatives of the bourgeoisie here, including Halm, the widow, the aunts, Stråmand and his family and the engaged and truly changed couple. We do not know whether Ibsen, who favours contradictions, was irritated by the priority given to the left side by theatre traditions. Ibsen maintains the left side but attaches something

negative to it. It is certain that he has applied the different senses of conventional theatre thinking to the left side for personal purposes, and further developed the concept of the left side as the most important and distant place on stage into one where secrets are confessed and revealed. In *Catiline* the empire of the darkness, Hades, the forgotten world, is found to the left. In *Emperor and Galilean*, Julian is talking about a kind of spiritual experiment, about heavy and marshy water on his left side; he thinks it is a stream that had forgotten to flow<sup>17</sup>. When Julian tells us about his relationship with his imperial uncle, he indicates that, always in his dealings with him, he acted as a shipwreck without a rudder, drifting to the left following a stream of mistrust, and then thrown to the right by the burst of a strong wind<sup>18</sup>. The stream of mistrust to the left! While the Christian feeling of remorse pushes to the right! When Ibsen is given directions of such important feelings of mistrust and remorse, it would be reasonable to assume that he is also using the left and right sides of the stage to tell us something important about the events that he make take place at either side and about the people who he conspicuously places at the left or right side.

The romantic play *The Feast at Solhaug* (Ibsen was strongly criticised for having written the play on the basis of *Svend Dyrings Hus* by Henrik Hertz, but obviously rejected the criticism) contains the following scene: Margit who has married without love (similarly to other of Ibsen's strong women) has performed a song about the mountain king who married Kirsten (1<sup>st</sup> act):

Red gold rings! The belt around my life! With gold the mountain king married his woman! (in despair, sinks onto the bench at the table to the left). Woe is me. I'm the bride of the mountain king – and nobody will release me.

(Signe, full of joy, running from the back).

SIGNE (shouting): Margit, Margit, he is coming!

Ibsen thus applies the overused melodramatic trick of letting someone or something being called upon or mentioned to underline high importance or fear and then to be entered or take place, and he does this several times as we shall see in the following. The man with whom Margit is really in love, Gudmund Alfsøn, the poet, is the person whose arrival Margit is joyfully informing us about, and he truly releases Margit from the “mountain” but not in the manner that she has been hoping for, i.e. by telling her that he loves her. The

woman he loves is Signe; she herself becomes the bride of Christ to pay the penalty for the suicide attempt by her husband, but it is the arrival of Gudmund that triggers the events. When she realises that she has sold her soul for gold she drops onto a bench to the left. In the next act we see that Solhaug, with her home, the “mountain” with gold and a night so long, being placed to the left. A birch grove adjacent to the house, which is partially seen to the left.

That evil or something that represents evil, in Ibsen’s view, should belong to the left side is confirmed by the window in the play *Fru Inger til Østråt*: “The great hall. A high, curved window in the back; a smaller window at the front to the left. Several doors on both sides....” (3<sup>rd</sup> act). The window is introduced during a conversation between Nils Lykke, Danish envoy and womanizer, and Eline who is the daughter of Ms Inger and gradually becoming under Danish influence:

ELINE: ... I assume you will go to Denmark? Didn’t you say so?

NILS LYKKE: I will go to Denmark.

ELINE: Can I look towards Denmark from here?

NILS LYKKE (pointing at the window to the left): Yes, from this window. There, to the south, you’ve Denmark.

ELINE: And, is that far from here? More then a hundred miles?

NILS LYKKE: A lot more. The sea lies between you and Denmark.

ELINE (for herself): The sea? Thoughts fly by on wings. The sea won’t stop them.

Besides the small window to the left, there is a window with a curtain in an anteroom to the hall, where the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> acts take place, and there is the high curved window in the back. When you think about the setting, it is obvious that Henrik Ibsen – who later becomes a very realistic playwright – has not taken too much reality into account in this conjunction. Although the castles of the middle ages often were equipped with “overgrown” extensions, it is hard to understand why there are windows at all three sides, including doors to the left and the right in the anteroom and the hall that are leading to other internal and external rooms. These doors and windows are simply the windows and

doors of an effective theatre decoration. Each window serves a particular purpose. In front of the window to the right in the anteroom, Ms Inger is standing and watching for the son who was born following concealment of birth and sinful love with Sten Sture. The son emerges in the curved window in the back in a highly impressive tableau scene:

NILS LYKKE (restlessly walking to and fro):....If I don't act...I'd become a laughing stock here and in Denmark! Would trap Ms Inger, and then make her case benefit as much as possible. O, I'd be tempted to give in to the evil in me if he'd make me get my hands on earl Sture...

(and then Ibsen cannot resist the temptation of the following trick) “(The window in the back is pushed up. Nils Stensson is seen outside).

NILS LYKKE (grabs his sword): Now what?

NILS STENSSØN (jumping onto the floor): Well, now you're finally here!

NILS LYKKE (silently): What do you mean?

NILS STENSSØN: God's peace, my lord! (3<sup>rd</sup> act).

The window to the left is used a few more times later in the play; they listen by the window when the knights are riding through the gate, and the window to the right in the anteroom is used in the same manner! But the main reason why the window is found here, I believe, is that it is facing Denmark, the evil empire of the occupying force. It should be emphasised, however, that when Ibsen needed to make use of a window he had to place it to the left because the right side was already occupied by “a high seat, cut in an old-fashioned manner”. The reason why the seat is in the right side and not the left side, where it truly belongs, is that Ms Inger will receive the coffin with the body of her dead son, Nils Stensson at the end of the play (she has initiated the killing in the belief that he was the legitimate son of Sten Sture). The killing is done behind the top left door, in an internal room and according to conventions, and the people carrying the coffin are crossing the scene from the back (left) to the front (right) because this produced the most effective action.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> act of the Pretenders there is a window to the left (the true view is one of incarnate evil). “A hall in the king's courtyard. A low window in the

front to the left. An entrance door to the right. A larger door at the back, leading to the king's hall. There's a table by the window, and chairs and benches. Ms Ragnhild and Margrete are entering via the small door. Sigrid follows immediately. Margrete has not yet married Håkon.

MS RAGNHILD: Enter here.

MARGRETE: Yes, it's darkest here.

MS RAGNHILD (walks to the window): And here we can look down on the banks.

MARGRETE (looks out): Yes, they're all gathered down there behind the church (turns around in tears). Down there it will now happen, and it will have great consequences.

MS RAGNHILD: Who's ruling here in the hall tomorrow?... Do you see Sigurd Ribbung? How treacherously he's sitting, just like a wolf in chains...

MARGRETE: How ugly he's laughing.

MS RAGNHILD: He knows that no one will promote his case: that is what makes him evil... Look, Margrete – Dagfinn Bonde is putting forward a golden chair for Håkon.

MARGRETE: Pål Flida is placing a similar chair behind the earl.

MS RAGNHILD: Håkon's men will try to prevent that!

MARGRETE: The earl is holding on to the chair!

MS RAGNHILD: Håkon speaks angrily to him (escapes from the window, screaming): O, Jesus! Did you see his eyes – and the smile – ! No, that wasn't the earl!

MARGRETE (has followed the events, in a terrified state): Or Håkon. Neither the earl or Håkon!

SIGRID (by the window): O, how low, low!... So low they have to go to gain on the king's seat.

It should be stressed that the window from where the three terrified women are following the meeting at the banks is a low window, and it is scowling as a

genuine villain would do, with frowning eyebrows, it has the looks of a villain as does Sigurd Ribbung on the banks. There is also a clear example of personification in Brand. Owing to Brand's uncompromising character, his wife Agnes has buried their son Alf. The play takes place on Christmas Eve in the living room at the home of the priest. Agnes has just brought in the candlesticks and says:

Now their light falls / On his – on the – ! Now from where he sleeps, / He can see their warmth through the window pane. / Now he can peep quietly in, and / The bright glow of our Christmas room / But the window pane is misted. Wait a moment. / Wait a moment! It will soon be clear. / She wipes the window<sup>19</sup>, (4<sup>th</sup> act.).

When we follow the assumption that the left side of the scene is representing evil in every shape in the dramatic plays written by Ibsen onto his realistic contemporary plays, there is one play that stands out as it deals with evil in particular (a woman is performing several apparently evil acts in *Hedda Gabler*). There is an unforgettable scene when she is burning “the child”, “the child” of Eilert Løvborg and Thea Elvsted his irreplaceable manuscript and her pretending that aunt Julle's hat belongs to the servant-girl. How is the left side laid out and how is it used? The window has been expanded into a full glass door with a view to the veranda and trees in autumn colours. Immediately at her first entrance (from the left via the room at the back) she sits next to the glass door: “(looking towards the left). Oh, there the servant has gone and opened the veranda door, and let in a whole flood of sunshine.”. Every time that Hedda feels a threat to her integrity she is looking for comfort in the solid objects of the room, the large porcelain stove to the right and the whatnots in the back, but most frequently (and most noticeably) it is the glass door to the left. “(In the meantime, Hedda walks about the room, raising her arms and clenching her hands as if in desperation. Then she flings back the curtains from the glass door, and stands there looking out.)” (1<sup>st</sup> act). This is where she is standing, holding a pistol in her hand, and welcomes Brack, a friend of the family. Hedda wants, she says, just once in her life to have power to mould a human destiny; she is so occupied by this that she completely ignores that Brack's intentions are identical (“diamond cut diamond”):

It is afternoon ... She stands by the open glass door, loading a revolver. The fellow to it lies in an open pistol-case on the writing-table ... (Raises the pistol and points). Now I'll shoot you, Judge Brack!

BRACK (Calling unseen): No, no, no! Don't stand aiming at me!

HEDDA: This is what comes of sneaking in by the back way. (She fires.)”

During the following conversation between the two, she goes to the glass door several times, for instance during this exchange of lines:

BRACK: Are you so unlike the generality of women as to have no predisposition for a vocation which –

HEDDA (Beside the glass door): Oh, be quiet, I tell you! – I often think there is only one thing in the world I have any for.

BRACK (Drawing near to her): And what is that, if I may ask?

HEDDA (Stands looking out): Boring myself to death. Now you know it. (2<sup>nd</sup> act)

When she has her pianoforte moved, it is moved into the left side of the room in the back: “Hedda, dressed in black, walks to and fro in the dark room. Then she goes into the back room and disappears for a moment to the left. She is heard to strike a few chords on the piano.” (4<sup>th</sup> act). She is “preparing” her suicide by taking the redundant pistol into the room in the back and leaving it on the piano: “She has drawn out an object, covered with sheets of music, from under the bookcase, places several other pieces of music upon it, and carries the whole into the inner room, to the left.” She then makes the final performance in her life, playing on the piano: “Hedda goes into the back room and draws the curtains. A short pause. Suddenly she is heard playing a wild dance on the piano.” Shortly after, the shot that kills her is heard.

It is a well-known assumption that the expression of “vine leaves in his hair”, the pray or request made by Hedda to Eilert Løvborg, asking him to come home from the party at Brack after having conquered himself, flushing with vine leaves in his hair, is inspired by Emperor and Galilean<sup>20</sup>, among others. But both Julian and Eilert suffer defeat in their fight for a new empire of the future. It is fascinating to establish that Henrik Ibsen probably has also taken the big left window of Hedda Gabler from Emperor And Galilean. The 4<sup>th</sup>