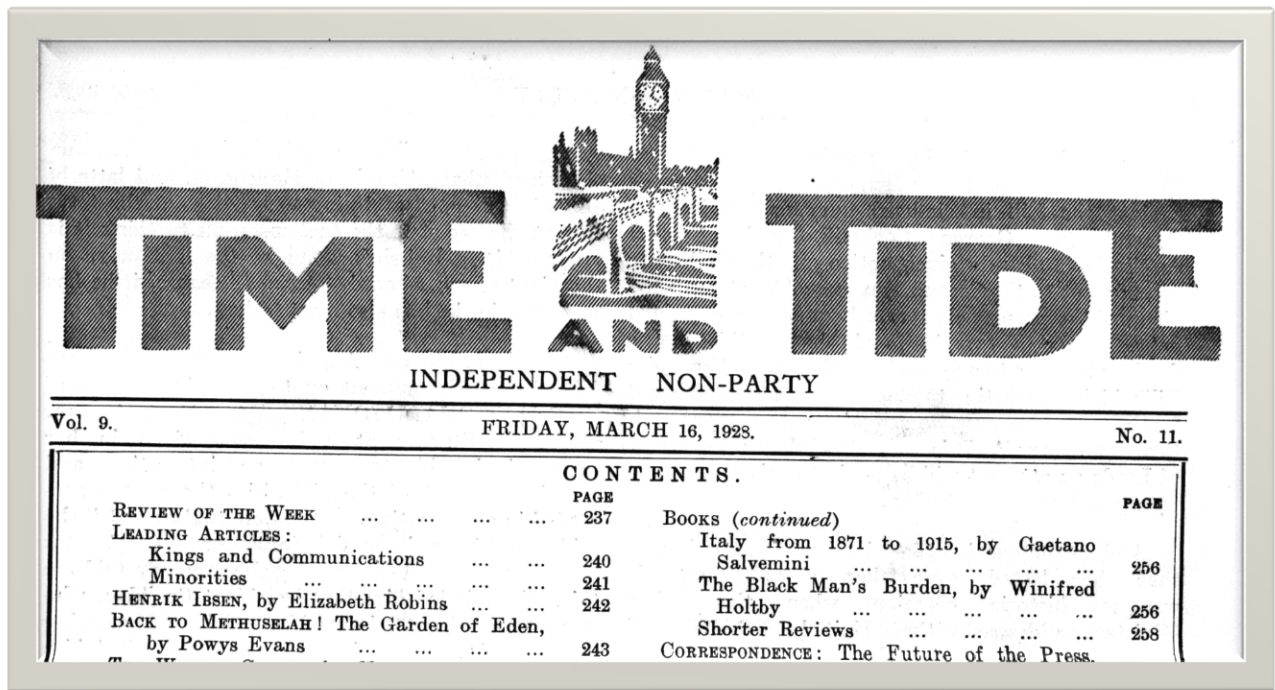


# "Henrik Ibsen" in *Time and Tide* by ELIZABETH ROBINS



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What, in sum, is the reason that we should join in the Ibsen celebration?

The answer is: Ibsen not only transformed dramatic art, he was an instrument used by the *Zeitgeist* to enfranchise the spirit of women.

To say this is not to maintain for a moment that anyone concerned with placing Ibsen's plays before the public, realized how great a thing was happening.

The first production of *The Doll's House* in this country must forever be connected with the name of Charrington and the fame of

Janet Achurch's Nora—incomparably the finest performance of that character that has been seen in English.

It has been said in print that Charles Charrington was so deeply impressed by his mission as to be indifferent to the means used for making Ibsen known. This has been justified on the ground that Mr. Charrington, being a Fabian and a thinker, saw that in no other way than by producing Ibsen could he hack out a breach in the Theatre dykes—the little breach that subsequently let in the flood of enlightenment. I have no knowledge of how Mr. Charrington found what money he did find, but one thing I am sure: he had no more idea he was hacking at a breach in the Theatre dykes than he had that there was a flood ready to pour in. He had tried many ways and many plays. He was certainly intelligent enough to see there was little or no future for him in the established Theatres, and he had not capital to run a Theatre of his own. Mr. Charrington had considerable "Theatre sense" and his wife had a very great deal.

Janet Achurch had besides, her own genius of personality, a fine generous temperament and a sound knowledge of her Art. Both the Charringtons, I am convinced, felt the magnificent actableness of *The Doll's House*, just as later Marion Lea and I felt the magnificent actableness of *Hedda Gabler*—just as I, by and by, felt the same thing about *The Master Builder*. Do not believe that any of us were concerned about the dykes or the flood. We were players. We wanted—passionately we wanted—plays that suited our capabilities and the opportunity to act such plays. Whether Janet Achurch was herself a Fabian I am not sure. Certainly through her husband and friends she was by way of hearing about and sympathizing with the Fabian point of view. She may quite well have been the more intelligent and the more reflective of the Ibsen actresses. But whatever else Janet Achurch was, she was first and foremost an artist. The idea of her being (outside certain plays) the New Woman is to laugh. Old Ibsen was the New Woman if you like!—and even he wasn't aware of it. With all, great and small alike, the World Will was having its way with us.

Two impressions come out strongest on re-reading Ibsen after more than a quarter of a century. First, the Poet-Dramatists's own growth in the intervals from play to play; and second, the astonishing modernity of his later work.

It would take too long to illustrate the second impression by citing the amazing parallel between certain scenes out of *The Master Builder* and others from Mr. Miles Malleon's *Fanatics*. Women in general will be more interested to notice the fact that practically all Ibsen's women (in common with practically all women in real life at the time) got at life through men. This is admitted by Ibsen's authorised biographer, Henrik Jaeger. "On the whole," he says, "Ibsen had

"shown woman only as enthusiastic for the achievements of man; her great and admirable peculiarity was that she was ready to sacrifice everything for the man she loved."

And the list of these ladies is long . . . .

"where it is not to their husbands that they sacrifice themselves, it is to their sons. What is it that twines the red thread with Lady Inger's life, but her son? What make Aase attractive in spite of everything, but her love for her son? And what is Inga fra Varteig, in *The Pretenders*, but simply the mother of 'the king—her great son . . . 'to love, to sacrifice everything and be forgotten—that is woman's saga."

But this view is only a part of Ibsen's own saga. He came to see the parasitic condition of those who draw their spiritual sustenance, their purpose, out of somebody else. He came to recognize the dizzy insecurity of such dependence. Ibsen's native greatness, and his power of growth, show nowhere more strikingly than in his gradual realization that the need forced on women to express their vital energy through men rather than through themselves must needs work out in tragedy. You see it in *Rosmersholm*. You hear Hedda Gabler at the pitch of her revolt crying out . . . "for once to have power to mould a human destiny!" You hear her saying of the despised Thea: "So that pretty little fool has had her fingers in a

man's Destiny!"—and herself confessing to Thea "Oh if you knew how poor I am!—and Fate has made you so rich!"

What, besides being a great dramatic poem, is *The Master Builder* but a showing how perilous for a man is the strain of living up to the ideal imposed upon him by an ardent girl. If this passionate need to get at life through somebody else, was bad for women, the degree of its badness for men could not be more tragically shown than in the fate of Lövborg, blowing out his brains; or the symbol of the Master Builder's body crashing down from his tower to lie behind the trees a bleeding, lifeless mass.

Those who miss the terrific repercussion upon Hilda of that fall, have not truly read their author. The girl stands looking skyward:

"I can't see him up there any more."

Ibsen came to realise that women must not only build their own towers. They must learn the joy of climbing, and the peril that awaits them in High Places.

And women are learning these things. Men have disputed and philosophized about Ibsen. Women have turned him into the stuff of life.

**[See the following page for full specs, context, and credits.]**

Originally printed on one full page in two columns, with column break after "strongest on re-read-"

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During the same month of this article, when the world celebrated the Ibsen Centennial, Robins authored a different article for the *London Times*, "Henrik Ibsen: The Drama of Ideas," reproduced at the Robins Web, <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/erplays/ER%20on%20Henrik%20Ibsen%20in%20Times.pdf>,

She also delivered an address, the only woman among other speakers, sponsored by the British Drama League, entitled "Ibsen and the Actress." Later that year it was published by Hogarth Press.