

IVO DE FIGUEIREDO:

Henrik Ibsen. The Man and the Mask.

Translated by Robert Ferguson.

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This mammoth biography of Ibsen was first published in Norwegian in 2009, and is now available in English from Yale University Press in a translation by Robert Ferguson, himself the author of a major biography of Ibsen. Such layering lends the work an additional interest, depth, and authority. In addition, this new Ibsen biography is part of a renaissance not just in the practice of life-writing but in Ibsen studies as well. The fascination with what it means to form a pattern and a structure out of a life in hindsight has never seemed stronger, while the scholarship on Ibsen over the past decade or so has yielded new insights into his early years, his theatrical apprenticeships, and the sophisticated publishing and bookselling networks throughout the Nordic region from which his career benefited. We also have new translations of Ibsen's plays from Penguin and the meticulously researched and comprehensive *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter* database (University of Oslo Library platform), spearheaded by the historian Narve Fulsås.

Like Fulsås, Ivo de Figueiredo is a historian, and he richly contextualizes Ibsen's peripatetic life, his struggles (economic, artistic, personal), and his achievements. His approach emphasizes social, economic, and historical contexts over literary analysis and interpretation; these are kept at a distance, with a few notable exceptions such as Toril Moi's work, heavily leaned on here. But Moi's complex argument is diminished by being invoked as the sole explanation for Ibsen's literary choices (i.e., everything he does has its basis in anti-Idealism). This ignores the multi-faceted impulses in literature and the arts in the second half of the nineteenth century; it was not a single battle between Idealism on the one hand and all other significant aesthetic tendencies ranged against it.

In de Figueiredo's hands Ibsen's life has a strongly developmental, linear, and causal narrative marked by 'turning points.' Indeed, there are so many turning points in this biography that it becomes slightly dizzying to keep track of them and difficult to assess the relative importance of each: the festival of song in Bergen in 1863 was a joyful turning point for Ibsen; so was 1866; indeed, the period leading to the publication of *Peer Gynt* includes three or four such pivotal moments.

Of course, the sense of a neat and tidy narrative of punctuated equilibrium is partly Ibsen's own doing. As de Figueiredo shows, Ibsen became extremely methodical, rigidly structuring his days around his routines of dressing, writing, eating, walking to the café, reading the papers, and going home again. He is famous for the regularity with which he produced a new play every two years, so much so that it was startling when he occasionally departed from that routine, as with *Ghosts*. He portrayed his own *œuvre* as neatly cyclical and best understood chronologically. He carefully managed his reputation, distancing himself from movements (like feminism or socialism) that sought to align him to their cause, so as to maintain his literary originality and autonomy. In this last area the biography excels, carefully delineating the multiple ways in which Ibsen managed the publication, dissemination, and publicity surrounding his plays and, as far as he could, their performances.

But there is a lot we still don't know about Ibsen's life, particularly his childhood. De Figueiredo imaginatively fleshes this out, paying close attention to what Ibsen briefly said in a fragmented but illuminating autobiographical sketch and speculating that Ibsen loved to stage plays with puppets as a child. The metaphor of the puppeteer becomes a useful, if at times overstrained, motif throughout the book.

Perhaps the book's most valuable contribution lies in redressing a persistent imbalance in the attention paid to different phases of Ibsen's career: most of the interest has been in his post-1875 work (from *The Pillars of Society* onwards), both from scholars and theatre makers, while—with the exceptions of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*—the earlier work has been largely ignored outside Scandinavia. De Figueiredo's account of this earlier phase will be revelatory for many readers. Jettisoning the conventional narrative by which Ibsen's early plays were failures, both critically and financially, he shows that certain early plays became favorites with Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and—crucially—German audiences, and made Ibsen's name as a playwright. De Figueiredo's lively delineation of this important early career reminds us that if we only ever see Ibsen's works from the Anglophone perspective, we get a very skewed and inaccurate picture indeed.

It is a credit to de Figueiredo's dynamic, engaging prose style that he can carry our interest through 650 pages. He has an appealing style, though the writing occasionally displays a fondness for the standalone, portentous sentence ("Was it here that he came to realise it? / That he could give life to the dead?"; "He wanted to create, and he wanted to create himself"; and "What is extraordinary is probably best explained by what is extraordinary"). But toward the end of the book, two strange

things happen. First, there is a belated and perfunctory discussion of Susannah's importance to Ibsen's life, a figure who is given surprisingly little space in the biography. De Figueiredo notes Susannah's increasing alienation from her husband and muses: "What was it that had come between Suzannah and Henrik? When had the marriage begun to fail?", questions that are left tantalizingly unanswered. Then the biography culminates in a disquisition on Ibsen's physiognomy as artists portrayed it in his time. In full Lavater mode, De Figueiredo lingers over each feature of Ibsen's famous face: mouth ("a serious mouth, as the whole face is serious"), beard, mane, and above all eyes ("And Ibsen's eyes really are something special"). This reading of character through physiognomy ties the biography firmly to its nineteenth-century contexts. Yet it also exemplifies a weakness in the 'man and mask' approach as a whole. After hundreds of pages analysing Ibsen's character in depth, surely de Figueiredo is not suggesting that studying his facial features is going to strip the mask off once and for all and explain what made him so difficult, touchy, taciturn, stern, rude, and ill-tempered as well as religiously punctual and enslaved to daily ritual and habit? The mass of evidence in the book itself points to more 21st-century explanations: that Ibsen was 'on the spectrum,' was a high-functioning depressive, and/or suffered from OCD (in addition to very likely being a high-functioning alcoholic, as de Figueiredo all but suggests), and that he was addicted to manipulating and exploiting women, from his exploitation of Laura Kieler to his dallies with a string of young female admirers more than half his age to his increasing coldness and emotional cruelty to Susannah. The true nature and extent of all this we may never know. De Figueiredo dutifully notes all of these things but remains in thrall to Ibsen's talent and originality, which somehow justify any failings of character—exactly the dilemma of art versus life and family that Ibsen explored in those last plays in the 1890s beginning with *The Master Builder*. This biography keeps Ibsen firmly on his pedestal, his sins laid bare and absolved, sphinx-like and enigmatic to the end.

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