

The Role of Women in the Reception of Ibsen in Finland in the 1880s and 1890s

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Abstract Before the First World War, Finland produced an astonishing number of theatre performances of Ibsen's plays and critical studies and essays on his works. Along with great actresses such as Ida Aalberg, female critics and writers played an important role in Ibsen's reception in Finland at the end of the nineteenth century. The most important female critic in Finland, who wrote about Ibsen, was Irene Leopold. In the 1890s she presented Ibsen and modern Scandinavian literature in the periodical *Finsk Tidskrift* (in Swedish). Irene Leopold reviewed *Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*, and discussed Georg Brandes's views about Ibsen. Like many other critics at that time, Irene Leopold was interested in Bjørnson. The leading woman writer in Finland in the 1880s and 1890s was Minna Canth. Her plays and stories were in many respects influenced by Ibsen. They also raised a lot of critical discussion which was clearly connected with the ideological debate around Ibsen and his works.

Key words Henrik Ibsen; Irene Leopold; Minna Canth; criticism

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I. Finland and Norway at the End of the Nineteenth Century

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, one of the most receptive countries to the works of Henrik Ibsen was Finland. The first article about Ibsen was published in Finland in 1871 and the first doctoral dissertation as early as in 1879. Three years later, the author of the dissertation, Valfrid Vasenius (1848 – 1898), also wrote an extensive monograph on Ibsen, concentrating on the leading ideas in Ibsen's plays (See Holmström; Liukko 8, 23; Varpio 100ff. ; Riikonen, “*Peer Gynt* in Finland” 81).

After Vasenius, several other academics and university professors were greatly interested in Ibsen, also participating in the ideological debate of the time. The most notable of these scholars was K. S. Laurila (1876 – 1947), who wrote a large monograph about Ibsen's political and moral ideas in 1922 (Riikonen, “*Politiikkaa*” 45).

Along with academics, such leading critics as the poets Eino Leino (1878 – 1926) and Kasimir Leino (1866 – 1919) discussed the Norwegian playwright in several essays and articles (Riikonen, “*Politiikkaa*” 35; id., “*Ibsenian Scholarship*”

518). Since 1878, Ibsen's dramas were regularly translated, performed and published in Helsinki.

We can say that before the First World War, Finland, a country with a very small population, produced an astonishing number of theatre performances of Ibsen's plays and, additionally, critical studies and essays on his works. Only Shakespeare could compete with Ibsen in the number of performances and scholarly works.

On the other hand, in the ideological debate of the time, two Swedish writers, August Strindberg and Gustaf af Geijerstam were attacked by those who were worried about public morals. Geijerstam, for instance, was called by a Finnish conservative critic "a miserable apostle of immorality with red cheeks" (On Geijerstam's visit to Helsinki, see Koskimies 59; Liukko 42). The debate around Ibsen and Strindberg was also closely connected with the coming of Darwinism and other new ideas to Finland; in other words, they all were important factors in the modernization process.

One reason why Finland was so receptive to Ibsen and other Norwegian writers was the social and political situation in these countries. It is easy to find several similarities between Finland and Norway in the nineteenth century. Both countries had a foreign ruler, the King of Sweden in Norway, the Emperor of Russia as the Grand Duke of Finland. Both were Lutheran countries with somewhat puritanical moral ideals, and in both countries the role of the middle class and its economic activity were growing. The social and moral problems which Ibsen dealt with in his plays were also deeply felt and eagerly discussed in Finland.

Along with male scholars and critics, great actresses, female critics, translators and writers held key positions in Ibsen's reception in Finland at the end of the nineteenth century. This article will focus on women's activities as actresses, translators, critics and writers.

As background information, I would like to first present some facts about women's position in Finland. Writings about the position of women were published in Finland many years before the first performances of *A Doll's House*, paving the way for a considerable increase in women's opportunities for obtaining higher education which took place in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Finnish women had access to university relatively early. The first woman, Emma Irene Åström, graduated from the Imperial Alexander University (now the University of Helsinki) in 1882. Moreover, Finland was the first European country and the third country in the world, after New Zealand and Australia, to extend the suffrage to women (1906, in Norway in 1913).

Even before these reforms in nineteenth century Finland, Women had started language education. Educated women usually had a very good command of several languages. In most cases, their native language was Swedish, which opened the doors to other Nordic languages. Such major European languages as French, German and English were also spoken and read by women. Usually coming from the upper classes, they were able to travel abroad and thus broaden their cultural horizons and language skills. A good command of foreign languages was the basic element in women's activities in the field of literature. It was soon discovered that women were capable of making foreign literature accessible to Finnish readers in the form of translations, critical essays and reviews.

II. Ida Aalberg and Other Actresses

The best known figures in the reception of Ibsen were, of course, the actors and actresses. The most famous of all actresses in Finland at the turn of the 19th century was Ida Aalberg (Baroness von Uexkull-Gyllenband) (1857 – 1915), “the priestess of Ibsen’s ethical art,” as she was called by a theatre critic. Her performances in the roles of Nora and Hedda Gabler were greatly admired. The first Finnish performance of *A Doll’s House* took place in Helsinki in 1880, soon after the world premier. A Finnish woman, who was living in Kristiania, had sent information about the Norwegian performance to the director of the Finnish theatre. A kind of climax in Ida Aalberg’s interpretation was the tarantella scene (Heikkilä 80). Later on, in 1892, she moved the climax from this scene to the final scene of the play (Liukko 65).

When Ida Aalberg played the role of Hedda Gabler, the critics’ opinions about Hedda’s character differed greatly. One critic maintained that Ida Aalberg had managed to make Hedda’s behaviour understandable, but to conservative critics Hedda Gabler was like a red flag. Agathon Meurman (1826 – 1909), for example, argued in his article “*Onko Hedda Gabler ihminen?*” (“Is Hedda Gabler a Human Being?”), that Hedda was a devil in woman’s clothes. However, the role of Hedda Gabler was a great artistic success for Ida Aalberg. In her interpretation, Hedda was “a female devil, a deeply unlucky and disappointed human being, who is ready to pay a full price for her doings and who in her death receives a spiritual beauty”, as her acting was eloquently characterized (See Liukko 56; Heikkilä 318; Riikonen, “*Politiikka*” 39).

Although Ida Aalberg was best known for her roles as Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler, she played many other Ibsenian roles as well (e. g. Åse, Rita Allmers, Ellida Wangel and Rebecka West). She also visited Kristiania, Bergen, Copenhagen, St. Petersburg and Berlin and had a tournée in Hungary. Together with Valfrid Vaseenius, she met Henrik Ibsen in Munich in 1880 (Heikkilä 98), and Bjørnson three years later in Paris (Heikkilä 172).

Other great Finnish actresses to be mentioned here are Katri Rautio (1864 – 1952), who played Selma in *The League of Youth* and Margit in *the Feast at Solhaug*, and Olga Poppius (1866 – 1939), who played Hedvig in *Wild Duck*.

It should also be remembered that the Swede Hedvig Charlotte Raa – Winterhjelm (1838 – 1907), who played in the first performance of *Ghosts*, had played Lea by Aleksis Kivi in Finland and spoke and wrote Finnish.

III. Irene Leopold’s Essays on Ibsen

The most important female critic in Finland, who wrote about Ibsen, was Irene Leopold (1860 – 1940). In her obituary in a Swedish newspaper, she was called “en ambitiös och fint bildad andens arbeterska”. It is very difficult to find any adequate translation for this lively phrase; it is something like “an ambitious and refined maid in the realm of spirit”.

In the 1890s, Irene Leopold presented Ibsen and modern Scandinavian literature in the periodical *Finsk Tidskrift* (in Swedish). Her essay “*Strödda drag ur Ibsen-kri-*

tiken i Helsingfors” (“Occasional remarks on Ibsen criticism in Helsinki”) was published in the Festschrift for Ibsen in 1898. One sign of the great enthusiasm for Ibsen in Finland is the fact that out of the 26 contributions in the Festschrift, six were from Finland. Along with Irene Leopold, the other Finnish contributors were the novelist, short story writer and playwright Juhani Aho, the literary scholar Werner Söderhjelm, the actress Ida Aalberg, the writer and artist Jac. Ahrenberg and the critic Ernst Grästen (Liukko 90).

In her essay, Irene Leopold enumerated several Finnish contributions to the study of Ibsen, beginning with the first articles which were published in 1871 and 1874. Irene Leopold also discussed the two monographs by Valfrid Vasenius and articles by other academic critics. Among the academic critics referred to by Irene Leopold was the philosopher Hjalmar Neiglick (1880 – 1889). It was a great loss to Finnish philosophy and criticism that he died while young. Neiglick criticized *Rosmersholm*, which, in his ironic opinion, was a play “the dialectic obscurity of which probably would make Ibsen immortal”. On the other hand, as Leopold reminds us, Neiglick regarded, for example, *The Pretenders* as a work with as great a subtlety as Hamlet or *Faust*. In her presentation, Irene Leopold also discusses the first performances of Ibsen’s plays in Finland.

In her articles in *Finsk Tidskrift*, Irene Leopold reviewed *Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*, and discussed Georg Brandes’s views about Ibsen. *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen’s last play, inspired several writers and critics. Another essay, by the young James Joyce, was noticed by Ibsen himself. In Finland, the play was reviewed by the Finnish poet Eino Leino (Riikonen, “Ibsenian Scholarship” 519). While Leino mainly described the plot of the play, Leopold was more concerned with the characters. According to her, Ibsen had, like Émile Zola and the Swedish writer Per Hallström, touched upon the dark side which the individuality of the artist reveals in its relation to other values of life. Irene Leopold also drew attention to the subtitle of *When We Dead Awaken*, “epilogue”, arguing that the play as a whole, with all its three acts, is a dramatic finale, the last act in a tragedy, preparation for the final catastrophe. Despite her admiration for the play, Irene Leopold had some reservations about the play as a drama. To be true to its nature, a drama demands action. In this sense, *When We Dead Awaken* is removed from the fundamental principle of dramatic art (Riikonen, “Ibsenian Scholarship” 519).

Although Irene Leopold often referred to Ibsen’s female characters, she never wrote any comprehensive essay about women in Ibsen’s plays. However, in one of her essays, she presented Lou Andreas-Salome’s book about women in Ibsen’s plays; she also discussed women in the works of the Danish writer Peter Nansen (1861 – 1918). Being a versatile critic, Irene Leopold also wrote an extensive essay on women in the tragedies of Aeschylus.

IV. Minna Canth’s Plays and Novellas

The leading woman writer in Finland in the 1880s and 1890s was Minna Canth (1844 – 1897). Minna Canth’s plays and stories were in many respects influenced by Ibsen. Although she was by no means an imitator of Ibsen, we can often find traces of

Ibsenian characters in her stories and plays. Canth's tragedy *Kauppaneuvos Toikka* (Commercial Councillor Toikka) is to some extent based on *Pillars of Society*. The female characters of her far better play *Sylvi* have some common features with Nora, Rebecka West and Hedda Gabler (Rossi, *Le naturalism* 87; id., *Against Naturalism* 142). The play, where a woman married to an older man murders her husband by poisoning him, is of course more melodramatic than Ibsen's plays.

Canth's novella *Salakari* (Pitfall) includes a passage where two men discuss *Rosmersholm*. Canth's ethical views can be considered as a combination of Ibsen's ideas in *Brand* and *Rosmersholm* (Liukko 44). In Canth's novella *Köyhää kansaa* (*Poor People*) we find a doctor, who presents ideas, which are in accordance with the views of Dr. Rank in *A Doll's House*, while in the novella *Hanna*, the father of the title person is very similar to Captain Alving in *Ghosts*. Moreover, the characterization of the title person in the novella *Agnes* is influenced by Canth's reading of *Hedda Gabler* (Liukko 66).

Minna Canth's works also raised a lot of critical discussion which was clearly connected with the ideological debate around Ibsen and his works. For instance, the Governor of the county where Minna Canth lived, called her "a decomposed maggot" and "a whore of the worst kind". It should be mentioned that Ida Aalberg, the great interpreter of Ibsen on stage, made a great success in the role of the gypsy girl *Homsantuu* in Canth's play *Työmiehen vaimo* (*A Worker's Wife*).

Keeping in mind the great interest in Ibsen among educated Finnish women and Ibsen's great female characters, it is not surprising that when the Finnish Women's Association celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1924, there were lectures by K. S. Laurila on Ibsen and women on the programme. As I have noted in an earlier essay (Riikonen, "Ibsenian Scholarship" 520), Laurila's flowery style becomes almost enthusiastic when he describes the figure of Solveig, calling her "the Holy Virgin of the Protestant imagination, a Nordic Madonna, the ideal woman of Nordic men's desire". Laurila castigates the immoral men in Ibsen's plays, and at the same time idealizes women as kinds of holy figures. Like Agathon Meurman, Laurila was a typical representative of moralistic criticism, but, of course, on different grounds.

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