

SACRIFICIAL NATIONALISM IN HENRIK IBSEN'S *THE PRETENDERS*

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Even during his lifetime, the ambiguity essential to Henrik Ibsen's dramatic method gave rise to considerable interpretive debate. In the near century since his death new approaches to his work have steadily continued to arise in accord with the changes in critical and literary theory. We have had, writes Charles Lyons in a recent survey, Ibsen "the realist, the iconoclast, the successful or failed idealist, the poet, the psychologist, the romantic, the antiromantic" (4). The extraordinary "hermeneutic generativity" evinced by Ibsen's plays cannot be attributed, in my view, solely to their aesthetic excellence or to changes in critical fashion, but as much or even more to the fact that they touch in a prescient way on conundrums inherent in modern life that are both fundamental and particularly intractable.

In *The Pretenders*, for example, Ibsen composed an artistic meditation on the nature of nationalism which, seen from today's vantage point, can be called prophetic. The question the work implicitly poses might be formulated as follows: Is it possible for modern people to create a nation-state on a basis other than the threat of reciprocal violence? In other words, can a modern state attain to a condition of peace that would amount to something other than the mere stasis of fear? And if the answer to this question is negative—the work clearly asks—what will prevent the modern nation-state, which lacks the safeguards and restraints formerly supplied by various institutions of transcendent authority, from falling into desperate conditions?

These are questions that are easy, even unavoidable, to pose today when we witness with horror the fires ignited by nationalism around the world. In mid-nineteenth century, however, when Ibsen wrote *The Pretenders*, the situation was vastly different. Then was the high noon of nationalistic optimism in Europe and America and elsewhere, the euphoric cultural moment when in the wake of the French and American Revolutions small

elites in numerous countries were shifting their spiritual and philosophical allegiance from outmoded agencies of order (religious, humanistic, transnational) to the ethnically ordered collective. The story of this shift is a familiar one, no doubt, but one whose lessons only now are becoming fully apparent.

In mid-nineteenth century Norway, nationalist enthusiasm was the order of the day. Accorded its independence from Denmark in 1814, and with it the end to 400 years of subjugation, Norway had good grounds to be enthusiastically self-preoccupied. Its historians engrossed themselves in the fervent recital of the national past, its artists worked to create works that celebrated the Norwegian spirit and projected images of future national greatness. In short, as the literary histories designate it, this was Norway's period of National Romanticism, and it was in this atmosphere that Ibsen in 1850, age 21, began composing plays. For the first dozen years of his career all of his plays were written in the National Romantic mode.

It is true that his first play, *Catalina*, takes its subject matter from Roman history, but it is a Roman history largely stripped of its specificity and adapted for purposes of psychological allegory. Ibsen's next four plays all use material drawn from Norway's history and folklore. *The Pretenders*, begun in 1858 and completed in 1864, was the last and by common consensus the greatest of these. The most Shakespearean of Ibsen's plays, its plot material was taken from Norwegian historian P. A. Munch's account of Norway's civil wars in the thirteenth century. Ibsen chose the climactic moment when several of the deceased King Sverre's heirs were laying claim to the throne, directing his attention to the two major contenders, Sverre's grandson Håkon and his rival Duke Skule, his maternal uncle and former guardian. The play traces the course of their rivalry from its inception to the final confrontation in which Skule is killed and Norway is united under King Håkon.

From the early days of Ibsen criticism the biographical approach, later amplified by various thematic readings, has been the dominant one to *The Pretenders*. In this view Skule and Håkon are seen as vehicles for the intense feelings of rivalry which Ibsen, suffering from self-doubt, nourished for his extroverted and, at the time, more successful fellow dramatist, Bjornstjerne Bjornson. A number of remarks from Ibsen's notes and letters gives weight to this view. The main problem with this approach, however, is that, lying so close to hand, it tends to obscure other, larger aspects of the work. The point was made by Norwegian scholar Atle Kittang in an important essay where he argued that the play gains in scope from being seen as a reflection on the forces at work in Ibsen's contemporary Norway:

If we wish to understand *The Pretenders* as a historical drama, we have to take [the] general social and ideological context into

consideration. Ibsen tried to resolve not only the contradictions of his own personal life and of his own anthropology, but also attempted to make sense out of the inner tensions of his social milieu. He did this by choosing as his dramatic material a historical period with obvious structural resemblances to his own, with its political conflict around the issue of national unification, and by developing a dramatic reflection upon this situation. . . . (79)

The approach that I would like to use to read this play is a Girardian one, that is, one that considers both the psychological and the historical aspects of the work. By psychological, I am referring to those inter-psychological mechanisms of mimesis, rivalry, and scapegoating so penetratingly studied by René Girard; by historical, I mean the structural parallels to which Kittang refers, and to which Ibsen, in the conclusion of the play, explicitly calls attention. In my view, all of Ibsen's plays would reveal significant new facets of themselves if read in the light of mimetic theory, for none of them is concerned primarily with the psychology of the individual subject, nor the particular contemporary and historical material, as such, that serves as their subject matter. First and foremost they are works of profound and prophetic cultural analysis. Ibsen, like Nietzsche, sensed that he was living at the end of an epoch, that the "death of God" was an irreversible and implacable fact of pervasive consequence. In work after work he turned his art to study the interrelated effects of what in shorthand we can call God's demise: how on the one hand it worked to narrow, inhibit, and dehumanize the culture, and how on the other it opened an invisible but tangible void in which the demand for the *new thing* required to replace the sacred in the old sense¹ was becoming more and more pressing.

In other words, the deeper drift of Ibsen's dramatic art has much in common with René Girard's cultural analysis. In a way it would be strange if it didn't, for Girard has formulated much of his theory through a structural and anthropological reading of literature, drama not least. Ibsen, on his side, has his eye on exactly the same crux that intrigues Girard: the waning of the sacred and with it the inexorable decay of the polis. What I would like to suggest in this essay is that both thinkers, Ibsen as artist, Girard as critic and theorist, can appropriately be said to continue and carry into the present the

1 By "sacred in the old sense" I am referring to the prestige accorded to a thing, person or institution, thanks to its association with the surrogate victim. As Girard puts it: "All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual" (*Violence* 306).

ongoing revelation of the complex scapegoat phenomenon in which drama had its origin. Once that accord is perceived to be in place, we might then attend to something like a dialogue between the two, listening in particular for those necessarily fertile points where they disagree.

The Fading of Sacrificial Safeguards

The play opens in the churchyard of Christ Church, Bergen. A crowd has gathered to await the outcome of a trial by fire which is taking place inside the church. Håkon's mother, Queen Inga, has consented to the ordeal of carrying heated iron with her bare hands in order to prove that Håkon is the legitimate son of his father, and so, logically, the rightful heir to the throne. Inga passes the test, but the question is not thereby settled. In the envious eyes of the rival claimants Håkon's legitimate birth merely serves to establish him as *one* of the potential contenders for the throne. The struggle is engaged.

It's worth pausing for a moment at this opening ordeal. One might think that Ibsen uses it simply to inject a medieval note into his play, an establishing device for the spectator. But I think there is far more to it than that. A test by fire is one of those procedures for passing judgement whose aleatory nature reveals that it springs from an older religious or magical mode of thought. That it no longer carries conviction establishes from the very opening moments of the play that what we might call the resources of the sacred, i.e., the efficacy of rites, rituals, prohibitions sanctioned, in this instance, by the Catholic Church, have become exhausted. In effect this depletion means that although the epoch is medieval the underlying cultural premise is modern. For notice two things—first, that the ordeal *actually functioned*: Queen Inga miraculously carried the heated iron: and, second, that this *miracle made no difference whatsoever*. A sign which in former times would have been taken as conclusive is now merely waved aside, a casual dismissal which opens the door to all the ensuing violence. As Girard writes:

Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence. This is the case no matter what the consecrating institution may be. Only by opting for a sanctified, legitimate form of violence and preventing it from becoming an object of disputes and recriminations can the system save itself from the vicious circle of re\enge. (*Violence* 24)

The Rivals

Hâkon and Skule can each make a strong case for kingship based on heredity. What gives the advantage to Hâkon, however, is not the strength of his legal claims, which Skule can contest, but the quality of his desire, which appears whole and entire and, accordingly, for Skule irresistibly fascinating. From Hâkon's first words in the play, where he replies that he need not pray to God concerning the outcome of Inga's ordeal, because "I'm sure of Him," we understand that Hâkon's connection to the object of his desire is immediate and unreflective. Hâkon wants to be king, and feels that he should be king, in the way a fish wants to swim. He is, to the point of the implausible, master of his own desire.

Skule, by contrast, a more realistically drawn character, wants to be king because he has moved within the orbit of Hâkon's desire and become fascinated by its glow of godlike self-sufficiency. His desire is a copy of Hâkon's. Skule has no royal plan, no project, except perhaps, once the his appetite for power has been focussed, to withhold the prize from Hâkon. He is a classic example of a person caught in the Girardian double bind: his model has become his rival. Hâkon, in the very act of reaching for the prize, directs and frustrates Skule's desire at the same stroke. As Girard powerfully demonstrates in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, this interpsychological mechanism is the modern dilemma par excellence. As barriers of class and rank give way under pressure of democratization, the prospect of general mimesis looms: people start entangling themselves in each other's desires like a knot of serpents. Skule of course has no understanding of this mechanism, and his pain is intense:

The great curse this, that has shadowed all my life, to stand so near the highest—just a ditch between—one leap and I should be across. The other side the name of King, the purple robe, throne, power and all. It is there every day before my eyes, but I never reach it. (244)

At first Skule thought that death would hand the prize to him. He waited and watched as various contenders for the crown were either killed or died natural deaths. The last to perish before Hâkon came on the scene was Skule's invalid brother, Inge. In a crucial passage, Skule says of him:

Then I waited for my brother's death. A sick man from the first; each morning when we met at Mass I watched his sickness—whether it grew worse. Every twitch of pain that crossed his face was as a breath of wind to my sails bearing me nearer to

the throne. Every sigh that eased his agony sounded to me **like** distant horns, like a messenger from a far-off land, coming to tell me that I should soon be king. Thus I rooted out every thought of brotherly love—and Inge died. Then Håkon came—and the Birkebeiners took *him* as their king. (244)

With the incidental mention of brotherly love Skule hands us, I think, the central key to this play. Ibsen's negative demonstration consists in showing us as a matter of course that brotherly love, the fundamental principle of Christian morality, in this Roman Catholic world is nowhere to be found. Instead it is murderously betrayed at every opportunity. Not that this, by the way, is a point that Ibsen is interested in making only with reference to the Catholic Middle Ages. In one form or another, in play after play, Ibsen will indite his nominally Christian culture for its lack of charity, of *agape*, or whatever term we choose to designate a general principle of unselfish cooperation among human beings. Ibsen never names it by name, choosing to have his characters refer to it by non-referential terms like 'the miracle', or 'the Wonderful,' so as not to taint the notion with familiar reference, but perhaps far more than is generally realized the provenance of this Utopian hope is Biblical. For it was the Bible, the only book Ibsen admitted reading with passionate interest, that gave him the basis for his ethics and, I think it can be shown, his anthropology. In a word, it was the touchstone with which he tested his culture. Skule is ultimately undone, to return to his case, as he himself tells us, because he "hardens his heart" and allows himself to be tempted to envious emulation. The biblical basis for Ibsen's case against him could not be plainer.

The next step in Skule's undoing is to turn Håkon into a god. In Shakespearean tones, Skule asks:

Then Håkon is made of different stuff from me? He is one of Fortune's children? Of course. Don't all things prosper at his touch, and all things turn out well where he's concerned? Even the peasants notice it. for they say the trees bear twice the fruit and birds lay twice as many eggs since Håkon has been the king. The Vermeland country which he burned and harried, now stands adorned with new-built houses and its fields are rich with corn. It is as if blood and ashes manure the land where Håkon leads his men. It is as if the Almighty blesses with fresh growth the land that Håkon tramples. Holy Powers attend to right the wrongs he leaves behind him Even the kingship—how easily obtained! He

needed Inge's early death—and Inge died. He needed guarding—and his men guarded him unasked. He needed the ordeal by fire and mother bore the iron for him. (246)

In a word, Håkon possesses *Kudos*, which "is best defined in terms of semi-divine prestige, some mystical election attained by military victory" (Girard, *Violence* 152). He can bless or kill because of his magical ability to exert power over large masses of people, which is to say that he has the force of the collective behind him in a way that transcends Skule's rational grasp. Overwhelmed and fascinated by this "imminent transcendence," Duke Skule is drawn ever closer to rivalrous combat. The only thing that temporarily restrains him from actually taking up arms against Håkon is a vestigial respect for order.

The figure who removes this minimal barrier is Bishop Nikolas.

Bishop Nikolas, Evil Mimesis

Like Håkon and Skule, Bishop Nikolas is a figure whom Ibsen took from history and charged with large allegorical significance. Indeed so utterly and one-dimensionally treacherous is Nikolas that the aesthetic effect of the character is weakened. Putting aesthetics to one side for the moment, we need to pay close attention to Nikolas, for he represents in allegorical concentrate the spirit of rivalrous mimesis itself. What lingo is to jealousy, Nikolas is to envious mimesis. A conniver who will stop at nothing to retain his grip on power, Nikolas's method is to pit individual against individual, group against group, so that a situation of strife remains constant. He is, I think, Ibsen's nutshell presentation of how the World works, the counterforce to brotherly love. Indeed, to incite Skule to rise against Håkon Nikolas explicitly invokes Lucifer:

Bishop Nikolas. Mere words! There is no such thing as good and evil. No such things as up and down, high and low. You must forget such words or you will never take the last step; you will never leap the ditch. (*In a low voice, urgently.*) You must never hate the Party, or the cause for which it fights, because the Party, or the cause, stand for *this* and not for *that*. But you must hate every man who rallies to a cause, because the cause will not forward your desire. Everything you can use is good—everything that obstructs your path is bad.

Earl Skule (*looking thoughtfully before him*). What have I not sacrificed to gain that throne which I have yet to reach? And

what has Haakon sacrifice, he who now sits there so securely .
 . . Yes. Everything goes right for Hâkon.

Bishop Nikolas (*follows him*). And you? Are you content to be outlawed from fortune all your life? Are you blind? Don't you see that stronger powers than the Birkebeiners stand behind Hâkon guarding him in all he does? His help comes from above, from them—those who are against you—from those who have been your enemies ever since you were born. And you bow before those enemies? Brace yourself, man! For what other reason were you given your immortal soul? Remember that the greatest of all deeds was done by one who rebelled against the strongest kingdom!

Earl Skule. Who?

Bishop Nikolas. The Angel who rebelled against the light.

Earl Skule. And was hurled into the lowest depths.

Bishop Nikolas (*wildly*) And created there kingdom, became king, a mighty king—mightier than any of the ten thousand earls up there!

Earl Skule (*looks at him for a long time and then says*) Bishop Nikolas, are you more or less than human?

Bishop Nikolas (*smiling*) I am in a state of innocence. I do not know the difference between good and bad. (248)

If we hear a premonitory note from Nietzsche here, we are not mistaken. Bishop Nikolas is a Nietzschean before the fact, urging Skule to be pitiless, to throw away conscience, to give himself over in Dionysian unconsciousness to the will of the crowd. In much the same spirit as Nietzsche was to speak of the Over Man, Nikolas proposes the notion of *the luckiest man*. Such a man is not the bravest, he says, as a chief would claim:

A priest would say 'the one who has most faith': a philosopher, 'the man who has most learning'; but it is none of these, Earl. The *luckiest* man is the greatest man. The greatest deeds are done by him on whom fortune smiles, who feels the needs of the times on his pulse, whose intuition outstrips his reason and points a way for him he knows not where, which nonetheless he takes, and *must* take, until he hears the people shout with joy, and looking

around with dazed eyes, perceives he has achieved a noble deed.
(245)

Bishop Nikolas is vague as to how one might attune oneself to the 'needs of the times,' but we the readers and spectators know what they are; namely, to unite Norway into a nation-state, explicitly in the thirteenth century, implicitly in the nineteenth.

How is this to be accomplished?

The play proposes two ways, an old and a new. The new way is Håkon's, which will be discussed below. The old way is Nikolas's, which has served from time immemorial. The scene he vaguely conjures in the above passage is reminiscent of a bullfight or gladiatorial contest. We sense an arena or site of sacrifice. Norway, chafing from internal discord and on the brink of civil war, is in much the same psychic state as a dangerously excited crowd. What it needs to focus its energies, to unite all of its members into a single body, to purge itself of its contradictions and achieve a grand release, a catharsis, is one thing: a sacrificial victim. The justified killing of this person will both unite the country and block real awareness of how it happened.

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Who is the victim to be? Irony of ironies, when tempting Skule with talk of *the luckiest man*, Nikolas withholds from him that it is going to be he. Skule, and that the crowd's great shout of joy will be given at the moment when they cut him to pieces.

Håkon's Kingly Thought

The counterforce to Nikolas is not so much Håkon as it is his "kingly thought." Up to now, as he explains to Skule in Act III, Norway has cohered as an interlocking set of warring units. Henceforth it needs a new kind of coherence, one that will be blessed by God because it will not be maintained by force of fratricide.

Håkon. And you wish to be king. . . . You could have a capable chieftain in Earling Skakke's day; but times have changed since then and you no longer understand them. Do you not see that the kingdom of Norway as Harald and St. Olaf have created it is like

church which has not yet been consecrated? The walls rise on their strong foundations. The vaultings are stretched wide, the spire points upward, like a pine tree in the forest; but the life, the beating heart, the healthy bloodstream does not pulse through the work; God's living spirit has not yet breathed into it. It has not been consecrated. . . . I will bring about the consecration! Norway was a *kingdom*, it shall become a *nation*. The men of Trondelag fought the men from Viken. The men of Agde fought the men of Hordaland, the men of Haalogaland the men of Sogn; now all must be united and know themselves and realize that they are one! *That* is the task which God has laid upon my shoulders; that is the high calling which faces Norway's king. That deed, Duke, you had better not attempt, for of a truth you are not strong enough to do it. (284)

A non-fratricidal union is clearly the *new thing* that needs to replace the violent national cohesion of old. The problem, however, as the further unfolding of the play and the final killing of Skule indicate, is that Håkon has no idea how to accomplish it. Despite his vision of Norway as a holy church, he is, when pushed, a conventional warrior with a conventional belief in military power. The question then becomes: Does Ibsen himself have a better idea?

To a certain extent, of course, Ibsen's hands are tied here by historical fact. The killing of Skule is in fact what put Håkon in power. And no doubt it was a good thing, in terms of thirteenth century Norway, that it did so. But then what in his rendition of this historical case is Ibsen's lesson to his contemporaries?

To answer the question we need to look at a moment shortly before the end of the play when Skule has a conversation with the ghost of Bishop Nikolas, who died in Act 11. It is night and Skule is debating with himself whether to allow his son Peter to murder Håkon's infant son, thereby cutting off the royal line, or choose the greater good of Norway and offer himself and his son up for slaughter. The ghost of Nikolas, returned from hell in the form of a monk, urges him of course to make the former choice, but Skule, recognizing that Nikolas is simply trying to ensure his damnation, refuses. Whereupon Nikolas cries "Damnation." but then quickly consoles himself with a vision of Norway's future. It is one which is immensely pleasing to him because its motivating principle is going to be the one he incarnated, envious mimesis. He calls it a *perpetuum mobile* and predicts that it will operate into the far distant future, leveling, homogenizing, destroying:

The Monk. Damnation! With everything going so well.
 I was quite convince I had him caught.
 But the forces of Light were a shade too quick,
 and this sly little move has lost me the trick!
 Ah well ! Why fret at a little delay,
 now *perpetuum mobile's* well under way.
 My authority's valid for centuries yet
 over those who elect to deny the Light!
 Such are my creatures, such is my rule
 —a mystery even to those it embraces.
 (*Comes forward*) Whenever the men of Norway go
 drifting aimlessly to and fro. . .
 Whenever hearts shrivel, whenever minds cringe
 and bend like willows before the wind. . .
 On one thing alone they are united
 that all greatness must be pulled down and stoned . . .

(331; translation modified)

With this glance into the future, the evil spirit has at the same time looked backward in time, as Girard has argued in work after work, to the very founding mechanism of social cohesion, the collective killing of the scape goat. Nikolas knows that it is a device that has always worked in the past, that it is going to work the following day when Duke Skule will be cut down by the rabid crowd, and that, in covert form it will continue to work in the future. In Ibsen's day it will make itself felt not through the outright shedding of blood but through the unchallenged rule of what Ibsen's called "the compact majority." Fear, envy, small-mindedness will be its characteristics. Nikolas's spirit will continue to carry the day for the simple reason that, in its limited and limiting way, it works.

But what about Hâkon's momentary vision of a new and holy order to replace the dead weight of the waning sacred? Is it never to be realized?

Obviously Ibsen leaves the question unanswered in *The Pretenders*, but it will continue to haunt his work. It will shape his plays not only conceptually but also on the level of craft, challenging him to discover how to turn his art, which had been founded in sacrifice, to a vision of non-sacrificial social practice. Perhaps the medium itself precludes a view of the answer for which it searches?

These in my view are the dilemmas, conceptual and artistic, that generate the invincible ambiguity that was to characterize Ibsen's plays from this point forward.

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