Ibsen and Fatherhood*

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Throughout Henrik Ibsen's dramatic works, fatherhood and issues related to fatherhood occupy a central position. In his historical and romantic dramas, as well as in his contemporary dramas, Ibsen writes about fathers, the role of fathers in relation to their children, and how adult men are impacted by their relationship to their fathers. I can hardly think of a more pervasive motif in Ibsen's works than fatherhood.

However, fatherhood is not what most of us associate with Ibsen's dramas. Most of us think of women who fight for the right to a life of freedom or heroic men who become embroiled in great moral battles related to truth, freedom, power, suppression, and bourgeois double standards of morality. The reason for this is rather obvious. Ibsen's dramas do not explicitly deal with fatherhood. It is not the relationship between fathers and their children that comprise the dramatic plot. Fatherhood lies in the background, ahead of the drama and underlying the dramatic interactions and scenes. Fatherhood is pervasive, yet kept discreetly in the background. This makes it even more fascinating to study. What is it that leads Ibsen to dramatize so consistently the relationship between father and child without fully developing it as a theme? In what ways are issues of fatherhood part of the realistic discourse on truth, freedom, and other issues under discussion? How and to what degree does he allow fatherhood to play a role in his dramatic works, and how does this play out in relation to motherhood, family, and masculinity, both within and beyond Ibsen's works?

In this article, I will try to show that it is no coincidence that fatherhood is a kind of axis in his dramas. I also want to point out that Ibsen's dramatizations of fatherhood are part of a contemporary social debate in which fathers and paternal authority are subjected to a sweeping critique. The spotlight is placed on the father, both on and off stage, and he must explain himself. The role of the father is no longer taken for granted.

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Of course, I am not the first to comment on fatherhood in Ibsen's dramas, but I am surprised by how few critics and analysts have addressed issues related to fatherhood in Ibsen's dramas, including the fathers' sometimes unethical and ruthless behavior toward their children. Except for a few articles over the years, I have found just a few references that discuss fatherhood in Ibsen's works.[1] These articles address this topic as a minor element in analyses dealing with and discussing other aspects of the dramas. The commentaries on Ibsen both in Norway and abroad are so numerous, however, that I will not attempt to refer to all of these.

I will mention two books, though, that take a broader perspective on issues related to fatherhood. In his book *Questioning the Father* (1999), Ross Shideler analyzes several of Ibsen's dramas from a post-Darwinist perspective.[2] Shideler examines Ibsen in relation to a number of other important European authors of the time who replace a religious paterfamilias structure with a biocentric and conflicted bourgeois family, in which the father's power is unstable and insecure. Shideler shows how these authors are part of both a post-Darwinist and a feminist discourse on the family, patriarchal power, women's fight for a new freedom, and conflicting reactions toward the democratization of the family. In the chapter on Ibsen, Shideler discusses *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1879), and *Ghosts* (1881), three dramas in which fatherhood occupies a central position. In Shideler's interpretation, these plays are an expression of the struggle between the patriarch-oriented men and the biocentric-oriented women who argue in favor of a new social order through references to a new knowledge-base founded on human freedom and equality. Consequently, in these three dramas, Ibsen emerges as one of the most important advocates for the improved status of women in the second half of the 1800s.

In the newly released book *Skolens gjenganger* (The School's Ghosts), Anne Marie Rekdal also chooses fatherhood as one of the main perspectives in her commentaries on *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*.[3] As the book has an explicitly pedagogical purpose aimed at the discussion on Ibsen in high schools, it emphasizes a presentation of different perspectives on and possible readings of the various Ibsen dramas. Nonetheless, the book offers new approaches to and understandings of the individual dramas. In the analysis of *Ghosts*, Rekdal focuses on the fathers and their absence from the family drama, and, in *The Wild Duck*, she presents the two father-son relationships—Werle-Gregers and Ekdal-Hjalmar—as mirror images, in which the two sons have different crosses to bear due to their fathers' misdeeds.

There are several reasons that *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck* in particular invoke this perspective on fatherhood, but one obvious reason is that these two dramas are the most clearly family-oriented of Ibsen's dramas.[4]

Subtitled *A Domestic Tragedy in Three Acts*, *Ghosts* is the only one of Ibsen's dramas with a subtitle such as this, while *The Wild Duck* is associated with an often quoted notation by Ibsen on the play's thematic structure. "Gregers' knowledge of children's first and deepest sorrows. They are not sorrows of unrequited love; no, they are family sorrows—painful home circumstances—" (6: 434). In a letter to publisher Frederick Hegel, Ibsen addresses this same topic as he is about to finish writing the play: "This play does not concern itself with political or social questions or with public matters in general. The action takes place entirely in the area of family life."[5] Quite simply, Ibsen wanted to explore the dramatic workings of the family in both these dramas, specifically the relationship between mother, father, and child—not just between the woman and man or the relationship between the adults. The children occupy a deliberate and central place in both plays, with an emphasis on how children are wounded to their core in the bourgeois family drama.

However, many critics have taken Ibsen's use of the term "family" too literally. It is not so much the family as such that is reflected in Ibsen's two dramas, but rather fathers and fatherhood in particular. In these two dramas, the word "father" is used far more often than in any other works by Ibsen, and the role of the father is importunate in both works. Even though the mother is without a doubt the protagonist on stage in *Ghosts*, it is her relationship to society's father figures that lies at the heart of her despair and ultimate self-knowledge. To talk about the family as such can easily conceal the fact that it is fatherhood being examined in these two plays.

In some respects, *Ghosts* is a precursor to *The Wild Duck*. These family dramas are tied together not only because they are Ibsen's two explicitly family-oriented dramas, but also because *Ghosts* establishes the preconditions for issues related to fatherhood in *The Wild Duck*. *Ghosts* represents Ibsen's first fundamental critique of the patriarchal family. *Brand* (1866), *Pillars of Society*, and *A Doll's House* problematize the father's role. Brand sacrifices his son, Alf, out of pure romantic idealism, while Bernick is willing to sacrifice his son, Olaf, for his own personal and financial interests. But in both these works, the possibility is left open for the men to make restitution by the end of the plays. In *A Doll's House*, the father and mother build a patriarchal home of illusion for the children, but when Nora has had enough and leaves, the father remains with both children—a conclusion that makes possible a new and different kind of fatherhood. First in *Ghosts*, the patriarchy is stripped of all its dignity. This is pointed out by both Rekdal and Shideler. Rekdal writes: "Mrs. Alving's radical rebellion and fight for freedom in *Ghosts* is directed toward all types of ghosts, toward all types of defunct opinions and beliefs, but first and foremost toward those fathers who are bearers of the patriarchal social order" (*SG* 122).

One of the most important preconditions for laying bare the symbolic power of the patriarchy is the disclosure of the father as a representative of the divine within the family. The father's position in the family as the extended arm of God was strengthened by the Protestant church. The father had an obligation to represent both the Christian patriarchal view of life and, to a certain extent, to help carry out the church's duties related to evangelizing and establishing the faith within the family. Through Pastor Manders's role in *Ghosts* and the relationship established between Pastor Manders and the "diabolical" carpenter Engstrand, the church's natural authority becomes disengaged, and the church's unequivocal fight for the old family order becomes clear. The church is shown as integrally involved in the maintenance of the traditional patriarchal authority and a part of the established phallic order.

Engstrand provides the most elegant presentation of the church's position when he states in a conversation with Regine at the beginning of the play:

> ENGSTRAND. All right, I'm going. But you just have a talk with him, coming in there. He's the man to tell you what a child owes its father. Because after all I am your father, you know. I can prove it from the Parish Register. (5: 354)

The one coming is Pastor Manders, who has allowed Engstrand to be recorded in the parish register as Regine's father (rather than Captain Alving, the real father). The parish register, the official church record, is thus stripped of its credibility. It is "false" in its defense of Captain Alving's patriarchal order, and it becomes a defender of Engstrand's patriarchal exploitation of Regine. In the second act it is revealed that Mrs. Alving sought refuge with Pastor Manders when she discovered her husband's amoral behavior, but at that time Pastor Manders nearly chased her back to Captain Alving with these words: "Woman, go back to your lawful husband" (5: 385). Consequently, the Pastor shows that the "lawful order," as he calls the destructive marriage, takes precedence over all other concerns. In *Ghosts* Ibsen drives a wedge in the relationship between patriarchal authority and Christianity. Reference to the parish register can no longer spare the father at any price.

The problematization of fatherhood is reinforced a few years later in *The Wild Duck*, and it is this work I will focus on in the remainder of this article. Many have discussed the question of who the protagonist actually is in *The Wild Duck*. The play does not have one clear protagonist, as do several other Ibsen dramas. Is it Gregers Werle or is it Hjalmar Ekdal? Or is it Hedvig? Which of the characters possesses a sufficient tragic dimension to emerge as a representative of the central gestalt in the work? The title of the play makes us immediately think of Hedvig,

but there is not just one wild duck in this drama; there are many, as we shall see. For this reason the play is difficult to interpret based on the traditional theory of tragic drama, which often takes the tragic hero's role as its point of departure.

In *The Wild Duck*, however, the focus is not on the individuals, but on particular relationships between people and the consequences these have. The family relationships, or the "family sorrows," are the focus, and, more precisely, the family represented through the father-child relationship. In the play we meet three real father figures in three father-child relationships: Werle-Gregers, Ekdal-Hjalmar, and Hjalmar-Hedvig. Through the drama, Ibsen illustrates three fathers by presenting three different forms of fatherhood. I call these three forms *the patriarchal father*, *the fallen father*, and *the loving but helpless father*. These are three significant forms of fatherhood in Ibsen's drama that correspond to actual father roles in Ibsen's time. One key aspect of Ibsen's dramas is the manner in which he weaves together these father roles. He does not separate them as three distinct forms of fatherhood, but instead demonstrates how they are interconnected through relationships, dissolutions, continuities, and discontinuities. *The Wild Duck* is especially effective at illustrating the significance that the various father roles may hold for the next generation. As in a novel, we can read of the life connections between three generations in this tightly constructed drama.

The Patriarchal Father

The patriarchal father appears in almost all of Ibsen's works. We meet him in an idealized form in the grand megalomaniac, Brand. He acts as a social pillar as Consul Bernick, who governs societal development, supposedly in the best interests of society, along with the other public officials. Their decisions regarding important communal benefits, however, prove to be guided more by their own interests than by social solidarity, and in the process the children are nearly destroyed. The patriarchal father is also present as the caretaker of idyllic dollhouses, more reminiscent of fragile glass menageries than solid families. We also find him in the character of Dr. Stockman, who rebels in the name of truth against the outdated ideas and false games of society and the state, believing in the division between society and family, in blind faith, and that he stands alone when in reality he stands stronger as part of a community at the conclusion of the play than he ever had before.

The patriarchal father is also present in the characters of Johannes Rosmer, Dr. Wangel, Solness the contractor, Alfred Allmers, and John Gabriel Borkman, but he becomes increasingly unstable and more akin

to the fallen father. It may be said that there are no pure, untarnished patriarchal men in Ibsen's dramas. Some are more reliable than others, such as Dr. Stockmann, or Helmer at the conclusion of the play when he begins to see the truth, or Consul Bernick, who is saved in the end and thus is able to maintain his status in society. Indeed, it appears that Bernick is on the verge of becoming a genuine pillar of society when the curtain falls. But even Stockmann, Helmer, and Bernick do not leave the stage without a tarnished reputation, and in all three works it is the women who emerge as strong, free seekers of truth.

Reminiscent of Helmer and Bernick, old Werle in *The Wild Duck* is a patriarch willing to do anything to save his own skin, including abandoning his own son. But at the conclusion of the play, Werle emerges as the only one who seems capable of changing both his attitudes and perspective on life and, in his new marriage to Mrs. Sørby, the only one capable of creating a relationship of truth and openness in his marriage. As we will see later, though, there is reason to believe that in this phase of his life Werle has so little to lose that even truth and openness can serve his own selfish purposes.

In this phase of his career, Ibsen has a duel attitude toward patriarchy. He deprives the men of their dignity while he seems to want to give them the potential to create another type of masculinity, one that is both open and capable of listening. Werle represents this type of duality. He is a typical authoritarian patriarch, who, in blind faith in the necessity of maintaining the patriarchal order, does whatever he likes at the expense of his loved ones, but when he is on the verge of literally going blind, he turns himself around and realizes his mistakes. It may appear that Ibsen gives Werle a second chance, but as we shall see, this is hardly the case.

At the opening of the play, we become acquainted with Werle, both as a "stud" who has had erotic escapades and as a father who, in his instrumental reason, has not publicly acknowledged for the past sixteen years that he actually has a son. The hired waiter Jensen says: "I never knew old Werle had a son" (6: 131). His estrangement from his son is demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, Werle has not written one personal word to his son during their sixteen-year separation; instead, their correspondence has been strictly businesslike. The family life Ibsen writes about is also rejected quite harshly by the son, Gregers, when in a conversation with his father in the first act he exclaims: "When has there ever been any family life here? Never as long as I can remember!" (6: 149).

Their family life has consisted of an ongoing battle between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, and the most important fight between the couple is for power over their son, Gregers. In this fight we recognize gender-

oriented positions: Mrs. Werle is emotional and long-suffering, "sickly" and "high-strung," as Werle calls her. Werle is rational and authoritarian. The rationality emerges since the marriage was not based on love, but on economic motivation. Later it becomes apparent that Werle had miscalculated, and a large dowry did not accompany the marriage. The economic motivation is clear in Werle's persistent hate, as expressed in the drama by his bitter comment:

> WERLE. . . . From being a child, you've always had a sickly conscience. It's a heritage from your mother, Gregers . . . one thing she did leave you.
> GREGERS, *with a contemptuous smile.* That must have been a bitter pill to swallow when you found you had miscalculated, after expecting her to bring you a fortune. (6: 196)

In the same conversation between father and son at the end of the third act, the father's authoritarian role also emerges. Gregers says: "I didn't dare. I was scared . . . too much of a coward. I can't tell you how frightened of you I was then and for a long time after, too" (6: 196). Because Gregers was so frightened of his father, he stayed away from him for sixteen years.

From their respective sides of the Aristotelian gender dichotomy, Mr. and Mrs. Werle have fought their bitter fight—a fight that Mrs. Werle lost when she succumbed to alcoholism and an early death, although she won the fight for her child. She convinced Gregers to side with her. In the end, the loss of his son has cruel consequences for Werle, who loses his heir when Gregers rejects all his inheritance rights out of contempt for his father. It is often overlooked that Werle loses even more than this. He also loses his other potential heir, his illegitimate child, Hedvig. When Werle leaves a letter with the Ekdal family in which he offers old Ekdal one hundred kroner a month for the rest of his life, he also makes this offer to Hedvig, who would inherit this right and receive one hundred kroner a month thereafter. Through this act it appears that Werle wants to bind Hedvig closer to him and almost advance the inheritance. When Hedvig dies, this opportunity is also lost, and Werle finds himself completely alone again. His loneliness is also expressed in particular passages when he touches upon his own suffering. In a conversation with Gregers, he says: "I'm a lonely man Gregers; I've always felt lonely, all my life; but especially now that I'm getting on a bit in years" (6: 148). He also says later: "Laughter doesn't come so easily to a lonely man, Gregers" (6: 150). Werle's authoritarian and economic rationality has not achieved any results. On the contrary, he has failed miserably. Lonely and nearly blind, he becomes marginalized and moves to Høydalsverket along with his housekeeper, who has obviously hobnobbed with several of the city's upper-class and now will care for Werle until he dies.

The fact that he moves to Høydalsverket is an important cue for the interpretation of Werle's circumstances. Høydalsverket occupies a central position in the play. The place has a clearly negative connotation, both as the place where old Ekdal lived when he lost everything and as the place to which Gregers fled when he felt totally lost within his own family. Høydalsverket is the place of outcasts, and it stands in contrast to and undermines the truth and openness that old Werle and Mrs. Sørby associate themselves with at the conclusion. If Werle is analyzed apart from the other characters in the play, it may appear that he undergoes a process of self-discovery, but in relation to the others, and especially from the perspective of fatherhood, it is clear that he loses everything and becomes marginalized. The fight between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, or a family drama based on economics rather than love, leads to loss for both husband and wife, to the son's blind, unrealistic idealism, and, ultimately, to the death of the illegitimate child.

At this point, I want to digress by viewing the drama in relation to a contemporaneous debate in order to emphasize how this issue pertained to many other figures other than Ibsen. In 1884, the same year that *The Wild Duck* was published, a fight about the family occurred on the political level. The Norwegian National Assembly debated the issue of separate property rights for married women. The issue of women's rights in general was being hotly debated at the time. That same year women were granted the right to pursue higher education, and the fight was at hand for the right of political participation and equal rights for women and men in marriage, both economically and legally. The issue of separate property rights was one of the important topics; the right of the mother to keep the children following divorce was another. In 1883, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson had published his drama *A Glove*, and the fight over morality had also begun. In Bjørnson's drama, the housewife Svava demands complete reciprocity between the spouses and a new regimen for the relationship between women and men. As Ibsen had done in *A Doll's House*, Bjørnson had also taken sides, fighting the battle for women's rights and equality along with the first Norwegian feminists.

In 1884, the four central male voices for feminism in Norway united and wrote to the Norwegian National Assembly regarding the issue of separate property rights for married women. In a petition dated April 12, 1884, Bjørnson, Ibsen, Jonas Lie, and Alexander Kielland wrote to the Norwegian National Assembly requesting that women be granted separate property rights. They also criticized the Assembly for its unwillingness to go all the way and make these rights automatic—this in response to the Assembly's proposal that women *may* have the right to separate property. In the petition, the four critics focus on the relationship between economics and love, using it as the basis for their critique

of the committee's proposal. The petition states the following about women: "She must know and feel that she enters into the marriage with the same rights as her husband. Not only she, but her husband as well, will morally benefit from this, and from the very beginning, their lives together will assume the proper sense of dignity. Also love, if it exists, will be supported by the feeling of equality."[6]

Ibsen endorsed this petition to the Norwegian National Assembly just a few weeks earlier in a letter to Bjørnson dated March 23, 1884. Suffused with a lack of faith in men, politicians and farmers, the letter concludes with the following political vision: "If I could have my way at home, then all the unprivileged should unite and form a strong, resolute, progressive party, whose program would include nothing but practical and productive reforms—a very wide extension of the suffrage, the statutory improvement of the position of woman, the emancipation of national education from all kinds of medievalism, etc." (*LS* 229). The right to vote, the position of women, and the enlightenment are three key components of Ibsen's philosophy at this time. However, it is not only in Ibsen that we find this philosophy; all four Norwegian authors who signed the petition to the Norwegian National Assembly asserted similar ideas in their political and literary agendas. The position of women is not an isolated problem, but must be seen in the context of the desire of these modern, groundbreaking authors for a departure from age-old conceptions and for movement toward enlightenment and a more genuine world.

In April of the same year that the petition was sent to the Norwegian National Assembly, Ibsen had also begun writing *The Wild Duck*. Its theme was the consequences of a failed marriage, in which the issue of economics and love played a key role. Let me attempt for just a moment to follow the flow of gender-political reflections that occur from one text to another. Just one month after the letter to Bjørnson dated April 21, Ibsen writes to his publisher, explaining that he has finally started work on his new play. The first act, which he soon will finish and which forms the exposition of the drama, deals with a marriage based not on love, but on economic motivations. In a letter to Hegel in June, Ibsen is finally able to report that his family drama is finished: "Dear Councilor Hegel, I am pleased to be able to inform you that I finished the draft of my new play [*The Wild Duck*] yesterday. . . . This play does not concern itself with political or social questions or with public matters in general. The action takes place entirely in the area of family life. It will certainly provoke discussion, but it cannot possibly give offense to anyone" (*LS* 231). Ibsen was correct. Although the work is a harsh critique of the bourgeois family's falseness and the patriarch's mendacity, the transition from politics to literature is actually a transition from argumentative to dialogical language. Because of the play's symbolic form and contradic-

tory characters, the contemporary audience was confused and uncertain as to how to interpret the drama.

Nevertheless, a correspondence does exist between the social and literary events. The battle was over marriage and the survival of the patriarchal family structure. In this context, it is interesting that the patriarchy was fundamentally altered first in literary form. Intellectuals and authors led the critique of the authoritarian father and hastened his fall in the coming century.

The Fallen Father

The other form of fatherhood in *The Wild Duck* consists of the relationship between old Ekdal and Hjalmar Ekdal. This father-son relationship is closely tied to Werle and the patriarchal father, both in that the Ekdal family belonged to the traditional patriarchal bourgeois elite and because the Ekdal family in Ibsen's play is continually positioned in direct relation to old Werle, symbolically as well as literally.

The fallen father has received little attention in research, although this form of fatherhood was probably not too unusual in the 1800s. This omission has a likely cause: the patriarch who does not master the task of building a masculinity that is solid, acceptable, and strong, and who thus falls by the wayside, leaves little source material about his own demise. While bourgeois men write autobiographies about their masculine achievements, there are very few who write extensively about their own failures and unmanliness. Rather, the act of falling is addressed in terms of what happens to you if you do not maintain a masculine character, an extremely important issue for men in bourgeois society of the 1800s.

In his book *A Man's Place*, John Tosh, one of the foremost international researchers on the history of fatherhood, does not offer any reflections on those men who do not succeed, whose life is characterized by unmanliness. Instead, he operates with four forms of fatherhood in the bourgeoisie of the 1800s: the absent father, the distant father, the tyrannical father, and the intimate father.[7] According to Tosh's work, Werle would be a typical distant father, emotionally reserved, with a touch of the tyrannical father. I will return to the intimate father in the next fatherhood relationship in Ibsen's play.

There is a much-discussed fallen father in the Norwegian material from the 1800s, though, namely Ibsen's own father, Knud Ibsen, a successful businessman in Skien, who married Marichen, the daughter of the well-to-do John Andreas Altenburg. When Knud Ibsen received an inheritance following the death of his father-in-law in 1830, the Ibsen family became one of the most prosperous in Skien. However, just a few

years later in 1834–35, Knud Ibsen lost the entire fortune. Partly due to overinvestment and poor management and partly due to an economic recession, the family was forced to give up all its property. The family had to move from their patrician villa in Skien to a smaller house in the country. The father never recovered from this fall from their economic and social class. He held a few odd jobs after this until he died a poor, lonely alcoholic in Skien in 1877. No documents were left that indicate how this must have felt to the young Ibsen, only how his father struggled to provide for his family economically.

Henrik Ibsen, who was the family's eldest son, left his father immediately after his confirmation in 1843 and traveled to Grimstad. He probably made a visit home in 1850 before leaving for Christiania. After this, father and son never saw each other again. Nor did Henrik ever send a letter or greetings directly to his father. In fact, it appears that in the twenty-seven years from the time that he moves until his father dies, he sends only two real letters to his family in Skien, one to his sister when his mother dies in 1869 and one to his uncle when his father dies in 1877.[8] This must be regarded as very seldom from a talented author's hand, and it could be seen as evidence of the pain the father's downfall inflicted on the son. However, nowhere does Henrik write about his relationship to his father, and it seems that Henrik attempts to extinguish his father and his family from his own history rather than trying to restore his father's honor.[9]

While historical documentation on Knud and Henrik Ibsen lacks reflection on the downfall, it nonetheless tells indirectly of the great emotional cost of such a downfall: social marginalization, loss of face and position, isolation and loneliness, cooling of family relationships (between mother and father, as well as between father and son), and finally alcoholism and abject poverty. In this context, the term *unmanliness* is relevant. Through loss of social position, the father loses both his masculine strength and his patriarchal authority within the family, which when combined with alcohol abuse reinforces the father's unmanliness. Strength, endurance, steadfastness, and decisiveness were essential characteristics for men in the 1800s, and men who showed these characteristics were viewed as strong and moral, while men who lost their strength or steadfastness were quickly seen as morally weak. This made it difficult for men such as Knud Ibsen to regain their position.

Henrik Ibsen's relationship to his father emerges, though, in the continual problematizing of fatherhood throughout his works, making his dramas fascinating reading from the perspective of fatherhood. The fallen father is a pervasive figure in Ibsen's works. In *Peer Gynt* he is the father of Peer, John Gynt, who drinks and loses his entire inheritance, making his son fatherless and heirless. The contractor Solness falls liter-

ally into a highly effective Ibsen-like irony combining megalomania and acrophobia. Ibsen is most earnest in his description of the fallen father through his characterization of John Gabriel Borkman, who locks himself in his own house for seven years following his catastrophic financial escapades. He sits just as deadlocked in his patriarchal self-understanding as the ore in the mountain, and he is only willing to see his son if he promises to restore his father's honor. The most amenable of the fallen fathers is possibly old Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*.

Old Ekdal experiences a greater fall than Knud Ibsen. He is prosecuted for illegal logging, imprisoned for several years, and returns a broken man. His punishment is even harder to bear because his partner and friend, Werle, lets him down by allowing him to take all the blame for the illegal logging. He has been both punished and betrayed, and upon his return he finds that the man who betrayed him has become one of the city's most prominent men. His opportunities for restitution are few. He does get some odd jobs, even from Werle, but he seeks isolation in the attic and drowns his sorrows in alcohol. Old Ekdal has lost his masculinity and tries to restore it metaphorically by putting on his old lieutenant's uniform once in a while and going on an illusionary hunt in the attic.

His son, Hjalmar Ekdal, is also greatly affected by his father's downfall. In a conversation with Gregers, he explains that it was like a solar eclipse when his father was imprisoned. "When they had taken him away, and he sat there under lock and key—oh, that was a terrible time for me, I can tell you. I kept the blinds lowered at both windows. When I looked out and saw the sun shining the same as usual, I couldn't understand it. I saw people walking about the streets, laughing and talking about things of no importance. I couldn't understand it. I felt that all creation ought to have come to a standstill, like an eclipse" (6: 187). The comparison to a solar eclipse is an apt picture of the life he has lived since his father's downfall. The eclipse overshadowing his life has touched both the external and internal aspects of his life. He withdrew behind the blinds when his father was imprisoned, he has since moved into the dark attic with his own family, and we come to know him as a person with amazingly little self-insight and inflated notions of his own role as provider and of his masculinity. Over the years the critics have used many different adjectives to describe Hjalmar's helplessness. Jørgen Dines Johansen calls his language form "egocentric and self-pitying," thus emphasizing how self-pity and egocentrism are bedfellows.[10] Hjalmar's self-absorption falls into a totally different category than old Werle's authoritarian egoism. Therefore, it is not his striking egocentrism, but his comical way of taking himself too seriously that makes him a rather pathetic and wretched fellow.

Hjalmar's comical features are so obvious that when these are combined with Dr. Relling and the theologian Molvik the work nearly tips over into a character comedy. Hjalmar is exposed to the public, who smiles and laughs from the first moments at Hjalmar's lack of self-insight and pitiful attempts to be something. Ibsen is so aware of this fact that in a letter to theater director Hans Schrøder upon the first production of the drama at Christiania Theater, he stresses that Hjalmar must not be played in an explicitly comical manner; otherwise the tragic aspect of the drama will easily be lost: "This part must definitely not be rendered with any touch of parody not with the faintest suggestion that the actor is aware that there is anything funny about his remarks. He has a warm and sympathetic voice, as Relling says, and that should be maintained above all else. His sentimentality is genuine, his melancholy charming in its way—not a bit of affectation" (*LS* 242). This creates a strong ambivalence in the character. Clearly comical, but utterly without self-insight into his own comic effect, and at the same time, clearly pathetic, but apparently with great self-confidence. In the middle of this ambivalence hang the blinds Hjalmar talks about, which he has drawn closed over his being and which make his inner life bear the traces of a solar eclipse. These blinds also seem to make their mark on the public and readers. The parody is so striking that one smiles knowingly and patronizingly with the self-pitying Hjalmar. Most critics also stop their analysis with the persistently helpless character of Hjalmar, seeing little of the vulnerability and pain in the figure behind the blinds.[11]

Like Gregers, Hjalmar feels excluded by society. Both view themselves as the thirteenth person at the dining table, unwanted and without a place in the social network. Gregers has hidden in Høydalsverket for sixteen years, while Hjalmar has hidden behind the blinds his entire life. And they are both strongly affected by their relationship to their fathers. Both are deeply wounded personalities who have partially sunk to the bottom and partially done what they can to resurface: Hjalmar with his fabrication of a great discovery he is going to make, and Gregers by saddling others with the claim of the ideal. Hjalmar intends to earn back the money and restore his family's lost honor through material restoration while Gregers intends to restore the Werle family's lost morale through the good cause. They are both wounded ducks, and Ibsen's drama does not give them the opportunity to rise up from the depths. The influence of their fathers is so powerful that the sons cannot liberate themselves from it.

However, there is an essential difference between Hjalmar's and Gregers's relationships with their fathers. While Hjalmar shows caring and love toward his father, Gregers hates his father so much that he could imagine spitting on his grave. Hjalmar uses many different terms

of endearment for his father, but generally he addresses him as "father," acknowledging the relationship between them. Also, since his father was released from prison, Hjalmar has housed him and partially provided for him. Hjalmar's plan to restore the family honor is also aimed directly at his father, so that he can once again live a life of dignity. Hjalmar behaves exactly the opposite of what we saw in Ibsen's relationship to his own father. While Ibsen leaves his father at an early age and never sees or contacts him again, Hjalmar and his father seek out each other in their sorrow over the father's downfall. Hjalmar's helplessness is not caused by a damaged relationship to this father, but rather by the father pulling his son down with him so that Hjalmar does not have the ability to see either himself or the world in a realistic way. The relationship between them and their flight from the world are shown clearly at the beginning of the third act when together they seek refuge in the attic, a protected little paradise far from the difficult demands of the outside world. It also turns out to be a place where Hjalmar can work, be active, and create something, while leaving most of the real work—photography—to Gina and Hedvig.

Hjalmar's relationship to both his father and Hedvig is unusual. He is the only man in the drama, and one of the few in all of Ibsen's works, who openly expresses love. For this reason, this part must be taken seriously, and I will attempt to do just that in the next aspect of fatherhood brought forth in *The Wild Duck*.

The Loving but Helpless Father

Many Ibsen critics have taken Gregers's plan in relation to the Ekdal family too literally. That is, a genuine idealism lies at the bottom of his playacting, and he knows the truth about the Ekdal family's false foundation. Although Hjalmar believed that it was true love that brought him together with Gina, according to Gregers it was his father who brought them together to save his own skin. The child whom Hjalmar loves is not his own, but rather old Werle's. Nobody doubts that Gregers wants the truth to be revealed and through this revelation to form the basis for a genuine marriage. Not even Gina doubts Gregers's good intentions at the end of the fourth act, after his plan becomes clear and the Ekdal family begins to unravel.

GREGERS. You do believe I meant it all for the best, Mrs. Ekdal?
GINA. Yes, I dare say you did. But may God forgive you, all the same. (6: 219)

However, there is a much better reason to doubt that Gregers's discourse is the truest one in this work. Everything suggests that Werle is Hedvig's

biological father and that Werle has actively manipulated the situation so that Hjalmar is prepared to marry Gina, but this is not the only true discourse in the drama. The other true narrative is, in fact, that Hjalmar clearly married Gina for love and that he has always regarded Hedvig as his own daughter, loving her more than anything else in the world. Viewed from his perspective and the opportunities available to him, Hjalmar has achieved a good marriage based on love rather than economic motives, in stark contrast to the marriage of old Werle.

Rekdal has pointed out how *The Wild Duck* is constructed in spatial terms, building upon Erik Østerud's thorough explanation of how the play is visually constructed in tableaux.[12] Two houses are set up facing each other: Werle's house with a dark workroom in the foreground and a large, well-lit, elegant living room in the background, and Hjalmar's house with a workroom and living room in the foreground and the dark attic in the background. The green lampshades in both houses tie the stages together. While the one house has plenty of food and drink, the other house saves on butter to make ends meet. The rooms, therefore, connect the two houses, but the Ekdal family house is an inversion of old Werle's.

The question is what kind of meaningful conclusions can we draw from this? Rekdal points out how Hjalmar oscillates between the two stages. In the one, he is practically a clown for the others at the party at Werle's house. At home, he turns everything around and becomes a hero in his own narrative of how he put everybody in their place. Hjalmar's position as a social outcast is obvious, but it is questionable whether it is possible to draw the conclusion that Rekdal does; that is, that the Ekdal family home is a "dramatization of the family ideal as illusion . . . a counterfeit of reality" (*SG* 141). Nothing in Ibsen's stage descriptions suggests that home is a counterfeit of reality. On the contrary, his stage descriptions clearly indicate that even though this home is indeed poor, it has a good atmosphere. The stage directions at the beginning of the second act state: "The studio is cheaply but pleasantly furnished" (6: 151). The same applies to the attic. The stage directions consistently invoke positive associations. The moon shines in clearly, or the sunshine streams through the windows. Not until the beginning of the last act, after Gregers has committed his fatal act, does the atmosphere change. The stage directions now state: "Hjalmar Ekdal's studio in the cold grey light of morning, wet snow is lying on the large panes of the skylight" (6: 222). Gregers's story of truth brings sadness into the home.

Similarly, the relationship between Gina, Hedvig, and Hjalmar (and old Ekdal) is characterized by solidarity and a great deal of trust and care. There is love within the Ekdal family, in contrast to the Werle family. In a conversation with Gregers in the fifth act, after Gregers has disclosed Werle's plot against the family, Hjalmar exclaims:

HJALMAR. I can't tell you how I loved that child. I can't tell you how happy I felt every time I came home to my modest room and she would come running across to me, with her poor sweet, strained little eyes. (6: 235)

HJALMAR. . . . Oh, I can't tell you how much I loved her! How it would have given me supreme happiness just to have taken her by the hand and led her along, as one leads a child that is afraid of the dark through a great empty room! (6: 236)

There is little in the play to suggest that Hjalmar is not telling the truth.[13] In the second act, after he has come home from the party at Werle's, he says: "What though we have to pinch and scrape in this place, Gina! It's still our home. And this I will say: it is good to be here" (6: 161).

Hedvig's relationship to her father is also shown in a clearly positive light. She runs to meet him, sits on his lap, expresses love for him, and demonstrates this in her actions. Hedvig represents what Anders Wyller calls "the longing for love in Ibsen."[14] She manifests purity and goodness, always seeking out love. Hedvig is a product of the family she grows up in, and her feelings of love are spawned from the Ekdal family and no other. While Gregers and Hjalmar are each in their own way negatively affected by their childhoods, Hedvig is the exact opposite. She has grown up with love and expresses love.

Gregers does not see this. He is so deprived of love that he is not able to see love when it is present. His admission of the truth is, therefore, based on blindness to the truth that is right in front of him—the Ekdal family's relative happiness. And it is in this context that we must understand the inversion of the stage rooms. The Werle family is wealthy, but loveless, while the Ekdal family is poor, but filled with love and warmth. Werle is characterized by a patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, overemotional, and nonrational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love.[15]

This meaningful inversion is shown in several contexts in the drama. The wild duck is shot by Werle, but saved and given life by the Ekdal family. Old Ekdal is destroyed by his collaboration with Werle, but is given a certain dignity in the attic with Hjalmar and Gina. Gina is abused by Werle and saved by Hjalmar. Hedvig is Werle's illegitimate child, but is given a genuine and sincere father through Hjalmar. Even Gregers wants to be saved by the Ekdal family. He is completely destroyed in the Werle house. Fleeing from his father's house, he becomes a tenant of, and wants to be picked up by, the Ekdal family. In a conversation with Gina, he says: "I hope I shall be like the wild duck and . . ." (6: 171). Wounded, he is thrown out of Werle's house and seeks to enter the warmth of the Ekdal family. He also wants to be picked up and given warmth and comfort, in the same way as all the other wild ducks taken in by the Ekdal family.

Everyone taken in by the Ekdal family enjoys being there. This is also underscored in the drama when the wild duck is introduced to Gregers for the first time, with special mention that the bird thrives so well in the attic. It is this contentment that Gregers both seeks out and destroys. In some respects, we can talk about Hjalmar's fatherhood as a form of "intimate fatherhood," to use Tosh's characterization of fatherhood forms in the 1800s. "The intimate father set more store by the transparency of spontaneous relations than by the disciplines of restraint. Through anxieties about the future and tensions between the parental roles, the intimate father held to the value of tenderness and familiarity, both to himself and his children."[16] It is clear that familial values are the only thing of significance to Hjalmar. Within the family he has value; outside he is practically nothing.

Hjalmar thus plays a double role in the drama. On the one hand, he is the unintentionally comical, self-absorbed, unhappy clown that most of the critics focus on. On the other hand, he has helped to create a family of warmth and love, where all types of wild wounded ducks seek refuge. It is this other role that no Ibsen critics have commented on and that becomes clear only through the perspective of fatherhood.

However, it should not be ignored that Hjalmar's ability to care is limited at times. His self-pity sometimes makes it difficult for him to show real caring. He forgets to bring something tasty to Hedvig from the party at old Werle's as he promised, and asks her to be satisfied with a menu instead. He is not willing to take responsibility for her eyes when she takes over his job to earn money for the family, so that he can go up to the dark attic: "But don't ruin your eyes! D'you hear? I'm not taking any responsibility; you have to take the responsibility yourself. Understand?" (6: 179) Hjalmar is not a mature, responsible father. He likes to be seen as the father in the house, but he does not act with the authority that would indicate that he, in fact, is the father. In many ways, he is truly "a man with a childish disposition," as Relling points out. He trusts others with an absolute naïveté and changes according to whom he is talking. Dines Johansen makes a crucial point when he brings up this point about Hjalmar's dialogue: "However, even if the properties, function, and purpose of his way of speaking are definable, the content of his speech, in contradistinction to the other characters, changes according to the other party to the dialogue. Especially Relling and Gregers influence him by suggesting subjects and even vocabularies that are mirrored in his thoughts and speech. In this respect Ekdal is a successor of Peer Gynt, and one can peel the onion without finding any core."[17] The consequence of this is that it becomes difficult to talk about Hjalmar as egotistical in the true meaning of the word since we can hardly speak of the presence of any ego in Hjalmar at all. When Hjalmar pulled down the blinds, his mind

and soul remained undeveloped, and thus we meet a childish disposition with the same longing for love as Hedvig. As a grown person who tries to act like an adult, he becomes cowardly and helpless, largely guided by the whims and suggestions of others. Hjalmar does not only believe in Relling and Gregers. He believed just as much in Werle. Throughout the entire drama, we meet a person who is generally subject to the whims and lies of others (which he does not manage to see through), except at home, where he attempts to play the role of the father. It is thus a loving, but helpless father role that he plays.

A reading such as this, emphasizing Hjalmar's ability to love, makes the tragic aspect of the play emerge even more clearly. Hjalmar becomes more than a self-absorbed idiot without the ability to understand what is happening. In his own way he has tried to achieve a genuine marriage and give Hedvig a life of love. Gregers not only leads Hedvig into death—he also kills the attempt to establish a family based on love. Hjalmar thus becomes even more of a tragic figure, first subjected to old Werle's game, then exposed to Gregers's game, which he believes in just as much.

This plays out most tragically when Gregers cannot restrain himself, but must immediately claim victory when the shot is heard from the attic: "She wanted to sacrifice the most precious thing she had in the world, for your sake. Then, she thought, you couldn't help loving her again" (6: 238). Hjalmar accepts this fatal sacrifice and immediately forgives Hedvig. He believes just as easily in Gregers's proposition as in Werle's. The tragedy lies in this combination of Gregers's false idealism (when he says "she thought," as if it were her own mad idea) and Hjalmar's lack of inner strength and sense of responsibility.

As Dines Johansen has pointed out, the result is that the play concludes with two lonely couples with no heirs and, consequently, two families that become extinct.[18] Therefore, the Ekdal family is the personification of the patriarchy as comic tragedy and a portrait of the infeasibility of the loving father role at the end of the 1800s.

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NOTES

1 See D. Russell Davis, "The Death of the Artist's Father: Henrik Ibsen," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 46 (1973); Linn Konrad, "Father's Sins and Mother's Guilt: Dramatic Responses to Darwin," in *Drama, Sex and Politics*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sydney Mendel, "The Revolt Against the Father: The Adolescent Hero in *Hamlet* and *The Wild Duck*," *Essays in Criticism* 14, no. 2 (1964): 171–78; and Wolfgang Sohlich, "Ibsen's Brand: Drama of the Fatherless Society," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring 1989). One would expect to find issues related to fatherhood in analyses of Ibsen like Atle Kittang, *Ibsens heroisme: Frå Brand til Når vi døde vågner* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2002); Joan Templeton, *Ibsen's Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1997); Fredrik Engelstad, *Kjærlighetens irrganger: Sinn og samfunn i Bjørnsons og Ibsens diktning* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1992); Vigdis Ystad, *"—livets endeløse gåde": Ibsens dikt og drama* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1996); and Per Thomas Andersen, "Stormen fra fjellet," in *Fra Petter Dass til Jan Kjærstad: Studier i diktekunst og komposisjon* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1997), but, in fact, these works do not discuss fatherhood.

2 See the chapter, "Ibsen: Do Fathers Know Best?" in Ross Shideler, *Questioning the Father: From Darwin to Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hardy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

3 Anne Marie Rekdal, *Skolens gjenganger* [The School's Ghosts] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2004) (hereafter cited in text as *SG*).

4 Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, in *The Oxford Ibsen*, vol. 6, trans. and ed. James McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *Oxford Ibsen*, vol. 5, trans. and ed. McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). All references to *The Wild Duck* and *Ghosts* are taken from *The Oxford Ibsen* (hereafter cited in text by volume and page number).

5 Ibsen, *Ibsen's Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 231 (hereafter cited in text as *LS*).

6 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen, Jonas Lie, and Alexander Kielland, *Skrivelse til Stortinget ang: gifte kvinners særeie* [Letter to the Norwegian National Assembly Regarding Separate Property Rights for Married Women] (Oslo: Stortinget, document no. 92).

7 John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 93 ff.

8 Else Høst comments on these letters in the last chapter of her comprehensive analysis of *The Wild Duck*. The chapter is entitled "Venstøp" and deals entirely with Ibsen's relationship to his own family. Høst, *Vildanden av Henrik Ibsen* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1967), 204 ff.

9 In addition to Høst, Robert Ferguson, Oskar Mosfjeld, and Bergliot Ibsen also stress that Henrik had a strained relationship with his father, filled with bitterness and pain. Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen, mellom evne og higen* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1996); Oskar Mosfjeld, *Henrik Ibsen og Skien: En biografisk og litteratur-psykologisk studie* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1949); Bergliot Ibsen, *De tre: erindringer om Henrik Ibsen, Suzannah Ibsen, Sigurd Ibsen* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1948).

10 Jørgen Dines Johansen, "*The Wild Duck*: A Play About Language and Understanding," in *Ibsen, Tragedy, and the Tragic*, ed. Astrid Sæther (Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2003), 85. This article operates with seven different ways of speaking in *The Wild Duck*, with Hjalmar's egocentrism being one of these.

11 Perhaps Else Høst goes farthest in her condescending view of Hjalmar, characterizing him as a "loafer, windbag and coward who does not dare to look reality in the eyes and cannot pull himself together to take resolute action." Høst, *Vildanden av Henrik Ibsen*, 52, my translation.

12 Rekdal, *Skolens gjenganger*, 138; Erik Østerud, "Henrik Ibsen's Theatre Mask: Tableau, Absorption and Theatricality in *The Wild Duck*," in *Theatrical and Narrative Space* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998).

13 Bjørn Hemmer is a good example of one of many critics who accepts Gregers's story and who does not see Hjalmar's perspective. Therefore, Hjalmar's ability to love must also be ridiculed. Hemmer makes the following comment to the quotation above: "As the audience we are first and foremost a witness to Hjalmar's selfish and rather pathetic attempt to explain to Gregers that Hedvig after all has been central to his life. It is understandable that he is shaken and fears that Hedvig will perhaps prefer a life with completely different opportunities, if the offer should come from her real father. All of this is reasonable enough. But in this fatherhood tragedy he tries to play, Hjalmar does not convince anyone. He reveals himself yet again as a rather banal, pompous person. And his rhetorical reversals still cannot conceal the fact that Hedvig means a great deal to him. He does not have

much else of real significance in his life." Hemmer, *Ibsen: Kunstnerens vei* (Oslo: Vigmostad Bjørke, 2003), 320, my translation.

14 Anders Wyller, "Villanden: En innledning og en kritikk" [*The Wild Duck*: An Introduction and Critique], *Edda* (1936), my translation.

15 If anyone should be subjected to Gregers's critique, it is Gina, who is the only true liar in the story (except for old Werle, who is exposed during the drama). Surprisingly, Gina escapes criticism, even by the critics, who discuss her in friendly, understanding terms. One example is Toril Moi, who, in her otherwise excellent article on *The Wild Duck*, turns Gina into a heroine: "In my view, Gina is a veritable saint of the everday . . . and I come very close to idealizing her." Moi does not recognize that one possible reason Gina is so cautious and timid compared to other female characters in Ibsen is that she carries with her a veritable lie. Moi, "'It was as if he meant something different from what he said—all the time': Language, Metaphysics, and the Everyday in *The Wild Duck*," *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 655–86.

16 Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 99.

17 Dines Johansen, "Play About Language and Understanding," 91.

18 Dines Johansen, "Play About Language and Understanding," 98. This assumes that Gregers does what he says he will do and takes his own life.