

Which Hedda Gabler?

All his life Ibsen stoutly denied that his plays were vehicles for his radical opinions. They were, he claimed, simply descriptions of life as he saw it. He prided himself in being able to see every problem from both sides. When his admirers claimed that one of his plays had supported their political or moral position, he would write another play demonstrating exactly the opposite. Apparently one of his favourite phrases in conversation was 'on the contrary'. Thus his plays often come in pairs. *Brand* shows the terrible cost of absolute commitment; but *Peer Gynt* shows the equally terrible cost of the refusal to commit oneself. The young Ibsenites claimed that *Pillars of the Community* and *An Enemy of the People* demonstrated that the full truth must always be told in both public and private life. So Ibsen wrote *The Wild Duck* demonstrating what havoc the truth can cause.

The continuing fascination of *Hedda Gabler* is due largely to the fact here these opposites are contained within the same play. That the two most convincing commentaries I have read on *Hedda Gabler* should be diametrically opposed is a measure of the richness of the play's ambiguity. The issue at stake is, to put it baldly, and in an extreme form, whether Hedda is a positive or a negative character; whether Ibsen expects us to understand and sympathize with her, possibly even admire her, or to react to her with unmitigated horror.

Certainly the latter was the almost universal response to her from the first audiences, who hissed, catcalled, and walked out, and the first critics. 'Hedda is a horrid miscarriage of the imagination, a monster I female form to whom no parallel can be found in real life', wrote one Norwegian critic, and the English critics echoed him when the play was performed in London in 1891: 'Hedda Gabler is manifestly a lunatic'; 'Hedda's soul is acrawl with the foulest passions of humanity'. What these critics could not cope with when they accused Ibsen of immorality, or, at best, amorality, was that the play has no unambiguously good or bad characters, that passing moral judgement on his characters is not for Ibsen in this play a priority.

Modern critics do not assume the moral high ground with the hypocritical banality of Victorian critics. Nevertheless some have passed harsh judgements on Hedda. Caroline Mayerson, for example, concludes her essay on the play:

Her colossal egotism, her lack of self-knowledge, her cowardice, render her search for fulfilment but a succession of futile blunders which culminate in the supreme futility of death. Like Peer Gynt she is fit only for the ladle of the button-moulder; she fails to realize a capacity either for great good or for great evil. Her mirror-image wears the mask of tragedy, but Ibsen makes certain that we see the horns and pointed ears of the satyr protruding from behind it.¹

But the great majority of modern critics, especially the feminists, have followed the now well-trodden path of responding to Hedda as a passionate, clever, independent woman stifled by the mediocrity and conformity of a puritanical, sterile, petit-bourgeois society.

The most extreme and yet most persuasive version of this position was stated by George Wilson Knight in 1962.² Having been brought up in a moribund

¹ 'Thematic Symbols in *Hedda Gabler*' in *Ibsen: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rolf Fjelde, Prentice-Hall, 1965, p. 138.

² *Ibsen*, Oliver and Boyd, 1962.

military/aristocratic class and motherless house (scarcely a home), Hedda, at the age of 29, has taken the only escape route which seems open to her – marriage into a respectable and secure middle-class/academic family. But this turns out to be even more claustrophobic and boring. She can find no possible role for herself there that would constitute a life. Hedda wants to ‘know’ everything, but keep herself clean of the world’s mess and above its pettiness. Wilson Knight is here certainly close to Ibsen’s own notes, where Ibsen says: ‘Hedda’s desperation is a conviction that life must offer so many possibilities of happiness, but that she can’t catch sight of them. It is the want of a goal in life that torments her’.³ Her cruelty to others is, like Heathcliff’s, a symptom and measure of the cruelty, in the form of deprivation, already inflicted on her.

Wilson Knight describes Hedda as ‘Dionysian’, by which he means that she is not cowed by the world of men; she refuses the role of submissive domesticity and the whole range of customary feminine virtues. Moreover she rejects the whole Apollonian nexus of values and goals which characterizes Western civilization. She has a lust for a larger life than her world can contain, for drama and beauty. But whereas the women of Athens could on occasion leave the city and their menfolk, take to the hills, and participate in the secret female rites of Dionysos, there was no such safety valve in Ibsen’s Norway. Hedda is too noble to accept the safety valve of cynical adultery offered by Brack. The values of her class and culture have so infiltrated her spirit that she is paralyzed by fear of scandal. Hedda has no alternative but to nurse unacted desires, and thereby, in Blake’s terms, murder an infant in its cradle.

The result is what Wilson Knight calls ‘volcanic boredom’, which erupts in acts of gratuitous cruelty, vicarious sexuality, and, most significantly, by firing her father’s pistols. She believes that artists and geniuses must be avatars of Dionysos, with vine leaves in their hair, but the only candidate in her acquaintance cannot live up to her high ideals. Lövborg first settles for the Apollonian laurel wreath of academic achievement Thea desires for him, then relapses into mere drunkenness and debauchery. Even after the fiasco of pub, warehouse and prison, Lövborg could redeem himself in the tragic mode with a sufficiently beautiful suicide. His failure to do so obliges her to provide that herself, to the music of a Dionysian tarantella – the only gesture for which she need not fear the aftermath of scandal.

The case against Hedda was made most strongly in 2005 by Nigel Hand.⁴ Hand argues that our dismissal of the Tesmans as representing a claustrophobic sterile respectability requiring to be rebelled against, is imported from other Ibsen plays, whereas in this play Ibsen is saying that, on the contrary, a respectable, academic, middle-class household can in fact embody essential human values of caring and cooperation. According to his reading, the household in which Hedda finds herself is a perfectly normal, humane household, characterized by a motherly selflessness conspicuously absent from Hedda’s upbringing. Every effort is made to accommodate Hedda in this ‘normal’ society, but she is as irredeemably perverted as Lady Macbeth or Iago. Iago is a particularly apt parallel, since he also, being unable to live creatively, or understand the nature of any of the creative virtues, can only express himself by manipulating others and attacking the virtues they are taken by others to embody.

³ *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane, Penguin, 1970, p.121.

⁴ <http://human-nature.com/free-associations/hand.html>

The Crucible is widely regarded as Arthur Miller's best play. But Miller himself was deeply dissatisfied with it on the grounds that he had tried to find excuses for the judges in the Salem witch trials, and had lacked the courage to portray motiveless evil, the courage to create an Iago. Hand's Hedda is destructive in the same way as Iago, attacking goodness because she cannot understand it, but he does not see her as evil, rather as a wonderfully realized example of a psychological type subsequently recognized and described by such psychologists as Melanie Klein and Winnicott.

Hand draws attention to the centrality of the image of the child, and the book as brain-child, and claims that 'the struggle within the play to constitute a realm within which the child-book might survive *is* the play'. :

The unborn child of the Tesman's marriage has been conceived but not conceived of, while the book-child of Thea and Lövborg has been conceived of, but is not a fleshly child. *Hedda Gabler* uses the intriguingly subtle theme of the imaginary child to explore what it means to live creatively, and more particularly, what it means when one is unable to find the clue to doing so. For Ibsen, as for Winnicott, there is no more fundamental theme. In *Hedda Gabler* Ibsen's most memorable character wages a life and death struggle to overcome her sense of futility, to escape from her despair at being unable to live creatively. For Hedda is no more able to create a living conception of her own life than she is to conceive of a life for the child she has conceived with Tesman.

According to Hand, 'Hedda's notion that she breaks up the Lövborg-Thea relationship in order to 'liberate' Lövborg is a transparent rationalization of the ruthless envy which impels her to destroy this creatively parental liason'.

Hedda's mother is never mentioned in the play. It is as though she had never had a mother to present the world to the child in a way which enables the child to link up its inner life with the outer life of objects and other people. As Hand writes: 'It is as if there has been some tear in the fabric of things whereby Hedda is denied access to this realm of experience. At a loss to find the gesture which would effect the transformation she yearns for, she will seek to animate her existence through manipulation of the lives of others'. Being unable to conceive a meaningful future for herself, she is 'caught up in the repetition of a ghost-filled past'. Hence the portrait of her father dominating the stage, and the fatal attraction of his pistols. This aspect of Hedda was clearly inspired by (Stringberg would have said stolen from) Stringberg's *Miss Julie*, which appeared the year before Ibsen began work on *Hedda Gabler*. In the Strindberg play it is the father's highly polished riding boots which symbolize his genetic and cultural stranglehold on his daughter.

In Ibsen genetics and early conditioning replace the ancient idea of fate, which is the opposite of fulfilling one's destiny. Hand quotes Christopher Bollas who writes in *Forces of Destiny*, not in relation to Hedda, but very appropriately:

A person who is fated, who is fundamentally interred in an internal world of self and object representations that endlessly repeat the same scenarios, has very little sense of a future that is at all different from the environment they carry around with them. The sense of fate is a feeling of despair to influence the course of

one's life. A sense of destiny, however, is a different state, when the person feels he is moving in a personality progression that gives him a sense of steering his course. ...

The fashioning of life is something like an aesthetic: a form revealed through one's way of being. I think there is a particular urge to fashion a life, and this destiny drive is the ceaseless effort to select and use objects in order to give lived expression to one's true self. Perhaps the creativity of a human lifetime is his talent in articulating one's idiom. If the person continues to be and feel true to himself (not living compliantly) and is surprised by the continuing elaboration of his self, then he is fulfilling his destiny.

This is what the existentialists called living 'authentically', or 'in good faith'. Hedda, like Peer Gynt, is a button without a loop, a pointless creature. It is some consolation to her to find that she can, at least, influence the course of other lives, and this becomes a substitute for a destiny. But when she fails in this too, fails to contrive a 'beautiful' ending for Lövborg, she is, in Hand's words, 'thrust back, even more deeply, into the void of her self-experience: it is as if life has no place for her, whether as begetter or begotten'. Perhaps she does find her belated destiny in suicide. Hands concludes his account:

It is when she destroys everything – that is to say herself and the future (her unborn child) – that Hedda finally succeeds in making her own idiomatic gesture. To destroy everything is to leave nothing left to want, nothing left to envy. If nothing is left to be reduced to nothing, something may begin to be. 'A terrible beauty is born', and a destiny is fatefully fulfilled.

* * *

Does this mean that actresses and directors have to choose between these diverse readings, or is it possible for a performance to capture both at the same time? The text certainly leaves considerable scope for the leading actress to impose her own personality and interpretation on the play. Many readers have formed a strong impression of Hedda from the text only to find her quite different in performance, and from one performance to another.

One can often tell from the appearance of Hedda alone – casting, make-up, costume, bearing – where the emphasis is going to lie. This is how Ibsen himself envisaged Hedda:

Slender figure of average height. Nobly shaped, aristocratic face with fine, wax-coloured skin. The eyes have a veiled expression. Hair medium brown, not especially abundant. Dressed in a loose-fitting dressing gown, white with blue trimmings. Composed and relaxed in her manners. The eyes steel-grey, almost lustreless.

I would like now to look at several of the most important Heddas on the English stage in chronological order.

The first English Hedda was Elizabeth Robins in 1891. From her photograph in the role one might suppose her a sister-spirit of Emma Bovary, sheltered, romantic, naïve. The production attracted the usual cretinous response from the English press. But Ibsen also had his sane and influential supporters, most notable William Archer, Bernard Shaw and Henry James.

According to Henry James,⁵ Ibsen found the ‘infinite of character’ ‘an endless romance and a perpetual challenge’. *Hedda Gabler* is a play, he says, about a condition rather than an action, a portrait of a nature, ‘a state of nerves as well as of soul, a state of temper, of health, of chagrin, of despair’; in short, ‘the study of an exasperated woman’. If we look for antecedents and explanations, ‘we must simply find them in Hedda’s character – complicated, strange, irreconcilable, infernal – playing themselves out’. James had read the play in proof and been puzzled by it, finding the subject dramatically unpromising, but in the theatre, in the 1891 production, he was completely convinced, finding it alive ‘with an intensity of life’.

The distinguished thing is the firm hand that weaves the web, the deep and ingenious use made of the material. What material, indeed, the dissentient spirit may exclaim, and what ‘use’ is to be made of a wicked, diseased, disagreeable woman? That is just what Ibsen attempts to gauge, and from the moment such an attempt is resolute the case ceases to be so simple. The ‘use’ of Hedda Gabler is that she acts on others and that even her most disagreeable qualities have the privilege, thoroughly undeserved doubtless, but equally irresistible, of becoming part of the history of others. And then one isn’t so sure she is wicked, and by no means sure (especially when she is represented by an actress who makes the point ambiguous) that she is disagreeable. She is various and sinuous and graceful, complicated and natural; she suffers, she struggles, she is human, and by that fact exposed to a dozen interpretations, to the importunity of our suspense.

Nearly forty years later Elizabeth Robins wrote an account of that production which reveals why she was one of the finest actresses of her generation, and why her performance as Hedda so transformed the play for James.

I had the best of reasons for not trying to mitigate Hedda’s corrosive qualities. It was precisely the corrosive action of those qualities on a woman of Hedda’s circumstances that made her the great acting opportunity she was – in revolt against those commonplace surroundings that the bookworm she had married thought so ‘elegant’; her unashamed selfishness; her scorn of so-called womanly qualities; above all, her strong need to put some meaning into her life, even the cost of borrowing it, or stealing the meaning out of someone else’s.

Hedda’s first and dearest dream had been to find contacts with life through the attractive young man of letters, Eilert Lövborg. That hope ended in driving him from her at the point of a pistol. Hedda drove Lövborg from her in disgust; disgust at the new aspects of vulgar sensuality which her curiosity about life had led him to reveal. She never denied it was her doing that he revealed these things; it was not her doing that he had them to reveal. They made her gorge rise. The man who had wallowed in that filth must not touch Hedda Gabler – certainly not fresh from the latest orgy. The effect of that experience, plus the conditions of her own life and upbringing, was to throw her into marriage with the least ineligible man she can find who is decent, and no one can deny that poor Tesman was entirely decent.

The result was not peculiar to Ibsen characters. In one form or another, as we all know, it is a commonplace in the history of people whose nervous system generates more force than the engine of their opportunity can use up. Hedda speculates, like many another woman, on the opportunity

⁵ McFarlane 130-1.

politics would give to her husband, and, through him, give to her; but she is too intelligent to have much hope of Tesman in that direction. She is no sooner home from her boring honeymoon than she finds that a girl she had looked down on and terrorized at school – shrinking, gentle Mrs Elvsted – has reclaimed the dissipated Lovborg. More than that, largely by her faith in him, she has helped him to write what they are calling a work of genius. The timid Thea Elvsted has actually left her husband and her home to watch over Lövborg, so that he may not fall into evil courses again. The pretty little fool has his dreams in her keeping; she has helped to turn them into reality. And Hedda has lost him – the man whose faith in his own genius, faith in life, had given Hedda the one respite she had known from mean standards, mean fears.

Lövborg in his moods of poetic exaltation had given her, too, a glorious sense of freedom, of daring. She had her phrase for those high moods of his. It was the phrase that, with a truly Ibsenite irony, became famous in England in a totally different sense. When Hedda asks eagerly, ‘Did he have vine-leaves in his hair?’ she was not enquiring whether Lövborg was drunk, but whether he had been tasting a diviner draught. She was using her symbol for his hour of inspired vision, which had had for her, too, its intoxication. Now she has lost all that – unless she can break the hold of this irritating little goose.

It is a commentary on actress psychology that though in those days I accepted, and even myself used, the description of Hedda as a ‘bloodless egoist’, I was under no temptation to play her like that. Here I was in debt to Ibsen’s supreme faculty for giving his actors the clue – the master-key – if they are not too lofty or too helplessly sophisticated to take it. Ibsen’s unwritten clue brought me close enough to the ‘cold-blooded egoist’ to feel her warm to my touch; to see Hedda Gabler as pitiable in her hungry loneliness – to see her as tragic. Insolent and evil she was, but some great celebrators of Ibsen have thought more meanly of Hedda than the text warrants.⁶

That must surely be one of the finest accounts of a role ever written by an actress.

Elizabeth Robins never achieved the celebrity status of Eleanora Duse, who played Hedda in 1903. One can see from her photograph in the role that Duse’s speciality was a pathetic soulfulness. If we are to believe Max Beerbohm, her monotonous performance entirely missed the rich spectrum of contradictions in Hedda so brilliantly perceived by Robins:

Signora Duse never stoops to impersonation. I have seen her in many parts, but I have never detected any difference in her. She is artistically right or wrong according to whether the part enacted by her can or cannot be merged and fused into her own personality. Can Hedda Gabler be so merged and fused? She is self-centred. Her eyes are turned inward to her own soul. She does not try to fit herself into the general scheme of things. She broods disdainfully aloof. So far so good; for Signora Duse, as we know her, is just such another ... But Hedda is also a minx, and a ridiculous minx, and not a nice minx. ... Duse was spiritual, statuesque, somnabulistic, what you will, always in direct opposition to eager, snappy, fascinating, nasty little Hedda Gabler. Resignedly she shot the pistol from the window. Resignedly she bent over the book of photographs with the lover who had returned. Resignedly she lured him to drunkenness. Resignedly she committed his MS to the flames. Resignation, as always, was the keynote of her performance. And here, as often elsewhere, it rang false.⁷

In 1911 Lydia Lavorska apparently, from her photograph, saw Hedda as both a minx and an outrageous vamp.

We will skip Mrs Patrick Campbell in 1922, and look at Peggy Ashcroft in 1954. One reviewer commented that she ‘set Hedda’s odious actions in an ironic light and at the same time forced them to yield their full theatrical flavour’. In her photograph she looks self-possessed, haughty, ironic and sophisticated – every inch a general’s daughter.

⁶ Ibid 414-6.

⁷ *Saturday Review*, 11 October 1903.

1970 saw Ingmar Bergman's production at the National, with Maggie Smith as Hedda. In his review of that production in *The Observer* Ronald Bryden gave an excellent account of the strengths and weaknesses of her performance:

Bergman's Hedda discloses her whole hand from the start. There is only one suit in it: Freud. Berman identifies Hedda firmly with Emilie Bardach, the elegant, bored young Viennese Ibsen met on a Tyrolean holiday in 1889. This Hedda could be one of Freud's early patients: a woman driven to neurotic hysteria by repressed sexual passion, unable to accept a woman's role because of shame for her sex, over envy of males. ... Maggie Smith is at her best playing society's game: edging politeness with scornful artificiality, smiling with a sweetness which conceals daggers. Company brings a glittering, fragile glassiness to her manner. Every banal remark, every vulgar threat to her image of herself, sends a tiny shiver through her. The threat of laceration, of splinters and blood, hangs in the air. But when her poise does crack, there isn't the power behind it to evoke the beast whose real tragedy is simply that she comes of a larger, more predatory species than the silly herbivores around her; the force which can't be explained psychologically, but is simply, as Ibsen said, 'daemonic'. Her Hedda remains Bergman's: a brilliant, pathetic case history.

Five years later Glenda Jackson played Hedda in an RSC production by Trevor Nunn. She, too, looks very much the part. But her determination to re-interpret the play led her to underestimate Hedda. Jackson insisted on reinterpreting Ibsen on the grounds that 'we're all indoctrinated about the classic roles'. She sees Hedda as a funny play, 'a mordantly black comedy about Norwegian society'. Hedda, she said, was not calculating or ruthless but stupid. No doubt to an intelligent, courageous, liberated and urbane woman such as Glenda Jackson, who has never suffered fools gladly, if at all, Hedda must have seemed foolish... But in her own time and society Ibsen, if he condemns her at all, does not condemn her for stupidity. It is the stupidity which surrounds her (usually in the guise of respectability) which exasperates her. William Archer, Ibsen's leading English advocate, spoke of Hedda's 'rapidity and subtlety of intellect', and Ibsen himself spoke of her as part of the 'female underground revolution in thought'.

Glenda Jackson claimed that Hedda has no courage and is none of the things she is told she is. Jackson admired her only because she actually acknowledges that there is no way out for her, and she chooses not to conform. It's the only element of choice she has. In the end she does what people least expect. Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879) had the courage to slam the door behind her, but not the intelligence to realize that the world outside that door is no better than that inside, and does not contain the possibility of a fulfilling life for her, or for Ibsen's succeeding heroines, Mrs Alving in *Ghosts*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, and Hedda. When the production went on tour of Australia, the USA and Canada it was panned by the critics as a travesty.

In 1989 Juliet Stevenson played Hedda at the National. Stevenson specializes in portraying neurosis, and found plenty of that in Hedda. In an interview after she had been playing the role for some months, she was asked how much of herself she put into the part. She confessed that she had caught herself half-deliberately screwing up her own relationships in order to generate the appropriate energy and emotional turmoil to play Hedda.

The next significant Hedda was Fiona Shaw in Deborah Warner's TV production in 1993. Shaw entirely lacked Glenda Jackson's aristocratic hauteur and disdain of all the other characters. Nigel Hand, who particularly admired this production, describes her as 'almost girlishly unsure of herself':

Hedda herself makes her first entry into the room by backing into it, carrying a chair. During the course of the play she continues to move the furniture about, and, at dramatic moments, to smash things or throw them across the room. In short it is as if she can make no sense of the relationship between herself, her environment, and the objects in it: the relationship remains beyond both her and the audience's grasp.

I began by describing two 'diametrically opposite' readings of Hedda. The crucial question is whether they are also mutually exclusive. Do actresses and their directors have to choose between them, or is Ibsen's Hedda both Heddas at once, and therefore one of the theatre's greatest challenges.

The latest Hedda I have seen is Eve Best in Richard Eyre's production at the Almeida in 2005. Of Hedda Richard Eyre wrote (in the Almeida *Newsletter*):

Is there any other dramatic heroine who possesses such an extraordinary confection of characteristics? She's feisty, droll and intelligent, yet fatally ignorant of the world and herself. She's snobbish, mean-spirited, small-minded, conservative, cold, bored, vicious; sexually eager but terrified of sex, ambitious to be bohemian but frightened of scandal, a desperate romantic fantasist but unable to sustain any loving relationship with anyone, including herself. And yet, in spite of this, she mesmerizes us and compels our pity.

Of course she's a victim (tragic or not) of her gender and social conditions and it's quite reasonable to conscript her to the ranks of fighters for the freedom of women while characterizing the men in her life as oppressors, but that might suggest a schematic character obeying the wilful dictates of her inventor. The person Ibsen has created, however, seems to exist independently of her maker: she's as ambiguous and unpredictable as anyone you might meet in life – and, in the case of Hedda, avoid.

While I was thinking about Hedda, I went to see a fine production of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and saw an actress, Eve Best, who seemed born to play Hedda. She has great intelligence, feline grace, patrician beauty, and an astonishing virtuosity. As important, she has that gift of showing strong emotions with the artlessness of flowing water and with the danger of naked flame.

Eve Best's immediate West End predecessor in the role was Harriet Walter in 1997. Best is very like a younger version of Walter. Best, quite apart from her versatility, had the advantage of age over almost all her predecessors. Hedda Gabler is one those roles (like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*) for which actresses are usually not considered good enough until they are too old. Hedda, we are told, is twenty-nine. Hope is not yet dead in her that she might still find a life, or a purpose, or a hero.

Eve Best's performance was, indeed, remarkable. Pulling no punches with Hedda's many selfish and cruel traits, she nevertheless became, as all her striving for at least vicarious freedom, beauty, nobility or genius brought nothing but disappointment and degradation, more and more desperate, trapped, and vulnerable. She finally found the courage to escape from domestic boredom and sexual servitude with her own unsullied gesture.