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# Ibsen's *The Master Builder*

An older man is insensitive to his wife and takes up with a younger woman. He is desperate to keep death at bay. No Ibsen play is more autobiographical than *The Master Builder*, argues Toril Moi

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Gemma Arterton and Stephen Dillane in *The Master Builder* at the Almeida Theatre. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

In the autumn of 1891, the 32-year-old [Knut Hamsun](#) plastered Kristiania with posters announcing that he would give three lectures on Norwegian literature. This was in part a money-raising publicity stunt, in part a genuine attempt to challenge the literary establishment. The previous year he had published *Hunger*, a remarkable novel about a young writer starving in the streets of Kristiania. Immediately recognised as the voice of a new generation, Hamsun was the rising star of Norwegian letters. Today, *Hunger* is acknowledged as one of the first masterpieces of European modernism.

Hamsun knew how to create a buzz. On 7 October the lecture hall was filled to overflowing. In the front row sat the greatest names of contemporary Norwegian culture: Fridtjof Nansen (the polar explorer), Edvard Grieg and, above all, [Henrik Ibsen](#). Undaunted, Hamsun launched into a blistering attack on every venerated writer in Norwegian literature, including Ibsen. His plays lacked psychological depth, Hamsun declared, partly because Ibsen was a bad thinker and a bad writer, and partly because the theatre was a doomed art form, unsuited to subtle psychological analysis. Whenever Ibsen tried to be profound, Hamsun claimed, the result was wooden, unclear, overly symbolic and plain boring. Ibsen was fascinated: two days later, he returned for the second lecture.

The 63-year-old Ibsen attended Hamsun's lectures with Hildur Andersen, a 27-year-

old concert pianist, the daughter of family friends. His wife Suzannah had left for Italy, and would not return until January. According to Ivo de Figueiredo's biography (unfortunately not yet available in English), Ibsen's marriage had recently taken a dramatic turn for the worse. The reason was Norway, or rather the fact that, after 27 years abroad, Ibsen had suddenly decided to move back to his homeland. Suzannah, who suffered terribly from rheumatism and gout, found the climate unbearable, and could not forgive her husband for his insensitivity to her needs. Ibsen's infatuation with Andersen, which Suzannah had ample occasion to notice before she left, added to her distress.

For his part, Ibsen hardly suffered from her absence; Hildur was constantly with him. He called her his princess, and in January 1893 he sent her a note, which he signed "your, your master builder", in a deliberate reference to Hilde Wangel's last line in the play he had published only months earlier: "My – my master builder."

At first glance, then, no Ibsen play is more autobiographical than *The Master Builder*. It is all there: an older man, Halvard Solness, feels threatened by the rise of the younger generation, represented by the young architect, Ragnar Brovik, who works for him. Trapped in an empty marriage to his wife Aline, Solness enjoys toying with the affections of vulnerable young women (exemplified by his book-keeper, Kaja Fosli) until, inevitably, he gets seriously obsessed with one of them, Hilde Wangel. The parallels between Ibsen and Solness, Suzannah and Aline, Ragnar Brovik and Knut Hamsun, Hilde Wangel and Hildur Andersen seem only too clear. Yet we should beware of pushing a biographical reading too far: in my view these parallels help only to describe the initial situation of this notoriously challenging play; they contribute little to our understanding of the way in which the play transforms and transcends that situation as it hurls its protagonists towards their tragic end.

Actors, directors, critics and play-goers have always struggled to figure out what *The Master Builder* is about. In February 1893, at the height of the "Ibsen wars", the first London production at the Trafalgar Square Theatre met with puzzled incomprehension, even among Ibsen's supporters. His enemies had a field day. In the *Daily Telegraph*, the implacable anti-Ibsenite Clement Scott complained about the "dense mist which enshrouds characters, words, actions and motives". The experience of watching Ibsen's "strange dramas", he wrote, could only be compared to the "sensations of a man who witnesses a play written, rehearsed and acted by lunatics". The reviewer for the *Evening News and Post* called *The Master Builder* a "pointless, incoherent, and absolutely silly piece".

After the stridencies of the initial critics, the play's reception began to be dominated by three interpretations. Figueiredo elegantly summarises them as readings that cast the play as (1) a psychological investigation of a powerful man's fall; (2) a critique of a cynical capitalist; or (3) an allegory of the ageing artist's relationship to his art. While these are convincing (and far from mutually exclusive) interpretations, they turn the women into mere props in Solness's drama. This strikes me as untrue to the attention Ibsen lavishes on Aline and Hilde. As if to remedy this situation, the Norwegian critic Frode Helland has suggested that Hilde is a Nietzschean character: brimful of vitality, aggressively sexual, she pursues her own dreams of power and glory, in powerful contrast to Mrs Solness's Kantian insistence on duty. The Nietzschean impulses seem

obvious: Ibsen can hardly have been unaware of his Danish friend Georg Brandes's 1890 essay *Aristocratic Radicalism*, the first book on Nietzsche in any language.

While Helland is right to call Hilde Nietzschean, it is a little unfair to reduce Aline to a Kantian caricature. In my view, Aline is the most widely misunderstood character in the play. I can't count the productions I have seen that make her out to be a desiccated woman of 60. But this is simply implausible, since she gave birth to twins only 13 years before the action begins. If she had her children at the usual age, she could be anywhere from 33 to 38. (In comparison, Hilde is probably around 23, and Solness can't be much over 50.) A ladies' man like Solness, moreover, would hardly have married an unattractive woman. Aline deserves to be played in a way that mobilises our sympathy for what she once was, and our sorrow for the living death she suffers now. There is ample opportunity for doing that, particularly in the scene in the third act when she confides in Hilde (as she never has in her husband), telling her about the fire that led to the death of her children, and about her irrational mourning for the nine dolls that burned. The challenge, in short, is to show what Solness means when he calls Aline "dead" without making her look like an elderly Greek widow.

*The Master Builder* is perplexing and fascinating because it systematically undermines the distinction between reality and fantasy. Audacious and flirtatious, Hilde turns up with a tale about the past that Solness at first does not remember at all. The only thing the two agree on is that 10 years earlier, Solness built a new church in her home town. According to Hilde, he climbed to the top of the church tower and sang as he stood there, strong and free as a god. At that point, she heard "harps in the air". Afterwards, Solness found her alone in a drawing room, grabbed her, and kissed her violently. Then he called her his princess, promised her a kingdom, and told her that he would come back for her in 10 years. Is this true? Or is it just an expression of the wild and alluring Hilde's own fantasy world? How far can we trust memory, and particularly memory about sex, violence and trauma?

Solness, too, is poised precariously on the borderline between fantasy and reality. Part Nietzschean superman, part guilt-ridden Christian slave soul, he has been driven to the brink of madness by the conflict between ambition and guilt. He is convinced that he is surrounded by uncanny powers capable of materialising even his most unconscious wishes. They are his "helpers and servants", he says, invisible demonic spirits who do his bidding without being explicitly asked. Thus Solness thinks that he "willed" Kaja Fosli to come and work for him, just as he "willed" Aline's childhood home to burn down 12 years earlier, indirectly causing the death of their baby twins.

Maybe Hilde imagines the harps in the air, and the kisses in the drawing-room, too. Maybe Solness imagines his "helpers and servants". But that makes them a fine pair: they both fear reality so intensely that they retreat into their fantasy kingdom at the slightest provocation. They don't fear the same aspects of reality, however. For Hilde, sex is the ultimate traumatic bedrock of existence that she at once fears and wants. Solness's sexual experience both attracts and repels her. On this point, she reminds me of the young Hedda Gabler who pulled a pistol on Ejlert Løvborg when he made sexual advances to her, an event Hedda later refers to as the moment "when reality threatened to enter our relationship". Hilde, like Hedda, also reminds me of the brilliant young women of the 1890s analysed by Freud and Breuer: Anna O and, above

all, Dora.

The ultimate reality Solness is desperate to keep at bay is not sex, but death. He is quite explicit about being afraid of youth. Ragnar Brovik is not just Oedipal competition but a reminder of the inexorable march of time. That Ragnar's father, Knut, dies during the play reinforces the point. Once the young Solness elbowed Knut Brovik aside, now the time has come for Solness to be displaced by Brovik's son. At first, Solness takes Hilde's youth to be the opposite of Ragnar's: he is aggression and death; she seduction and vitality. In the end, however, Hilde's absolute refusal to accept reality turns out to be far more dangerous to Solness than Ragnar's resentment.

Challenged and seduced to prove his virility to Hilde, Solness undertakes to "do the impossible": to defy his vertigo and carry a wreath to the top of the tall tower on his own new house. (The Norwegian tradition is to celebrate the completion of the roof of a new building by throwing a party for the workers after placing a festive wreath on the highest point of the roof.) Solness reaches the top of his high tower, but once he is there, he is overcome with vertigo and falls to his death. Hilde's frantic waving of Mrs Solness's white shawl contributes to his fall.

Solness falls, and Hilde is left to speak her last line. Ibsen stresses that she is to say them "as if in quiet, bewildered [*forvildet*] triumph". In Dano-Norwegian, *forvildet* can mean "lost", "confused" and "mentally disturbed". There is more than a hint of madness in this word. So there we are: at the very end of the play Solness is dead and Hilde is imprisoned in her fantasy kingdom, left alone to speak her bewildered words: "But he did climb all the way to the top. And I heard harps in the air."

*The Master Builder* is at the [Almeida Theatre](#), London N1, until 8 January.

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