

THE ART OF TRANSFORMATION:¹

ART, MARRIAGE, AND FREEDOM IN *THE LADY FROM THE SEA*

Toril Moi (Duke University)

RESUMO

A peça, *The Lady from the Sea*, se propõe responder a pergunta: o que é necessário para uma relação tornar-se um casamento. Entretanto, para acompanhar a análise que Ibsen faz da questão, precisamos observar que a peça pode ser lida como uma crítica de Ibsen às fábulas românticas de sacrifício feminino. A peça também entrelaça a história das conquistas de liberdade de Ellida com uma investigação de arte, teatro e música, em que a questão principal é como a pintura, a escultura e o teatro podem expressar aquilo que a crítica chama de “espírito interior”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Henrik Ibsen, teatro, modernismo, liberdade, escolha

Introduction

The middle play of the so-called Munich trilogy, *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) follows *Rosmersholm* (1886) and precedes *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Whereas *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler* end with suicide, *The Lady from the Sea* has a happy ending. For this reason this remarkable play has often been treated as one of Ibsen's least convincing and most light-weight works. Errol Durbach rightly comments that “the positive ending of *The Lady from the Sea* has opened it to ‘charges of artistic deficiency, of being somehow not *echt* Ibsen’—defying, as it does, the

stereotypical image of Ibsen as the prophet of doom, while affirming the bourgeois carp-pond of marriage and family and distressing those modern Romantics for whom the *dénouement* betrays the vigorous Romantic spirit"². (I take it that romantic here means something like the dramatic, existential, heroic, and idealist, as opposed to the ordinary and the everyday.) Examples of the dismissive attitude provoked by the play's happy ending abound. Maurice Valency, for example, claims that "[The optimistic outcome] was an unusual departure for Ibsen, and the result is singularly unconvincing"³. The last act, in particular, he claims, is "quite without vitality"⁴. Bjørn Hemmer adds that many critics of *The Lady from the Sea* try to reinterpret the offending end, for they "prefer to consider Ibsen's choice of a harmonizing end as ironic, or at least as clearly ambiguous"⁵. Coincidentally or not, irony and ambiguity are core aesthetic values of the ideology of modernism: it would seem that the specific kind of modernism and modernity that we find in *The Lady from the Sea* has the power to annoy ideologues of modernism as well as romantic idealists.

Since *The Lady from the Sea* remains a relatively neglected play in Ibsen's *oeuvre*, I shall briefly introduce it here. The protagonists are an estranged couple, Dr Wangel and his wife Ellida. The local parson used to refer to her as "the heathen", because her father, the lighthouse-keeper out in Skjoldvigen, did not give her a "Christian name of a human being" (II: 66), but named her after a ship instead. Precisely because there is no self-martyrizing saint Ellida in Christian history, the name may perhaps be read as a hint that Ellida herself will refuse to conform to Christian-idealist demands for female self-sacrifice⁶. The Wangels' newborn son died three years before the play opens, and since then, Ellida has lived in her own fantasy world, completely withdrawn from family life, neither noticing how much her husband loves her nor how much her younger stepdaughter Hilde yearns for her affection. Leaving the household duties to her grown-up stepdaughter Bolette, Ellida spends her time taking sea baths and dreaming about the ocean and about the Stranger, a mysterious sailor and a murderer, to whom she feels bound as if in marriage. Further stressing Ellida's connection with the sea, Ibsen tells us that the people in their little town call her *fruen fra havet* ("the lady from the sea"); the name is a deliberate transposition of *havfruen* ("the mermaid"), which for a while was Ibsen's working title for the play (see II: 170).

In *The Lady from the Sea* the fantasmatic intensity of Ellida's inner life coexists with a starkly realist analysis of marriage, not least in the subplot concerning Ellida's stepdaughter Bolette and Arnholm, a headmaster who now lives in the capital, but who once was her teacher. The play also contains a comedy of art and artists involving Ballested, painter, musician, choirmaster, hairdresser, and general jack-of-all-trades, and Lyngstrand, a consumptive sculptor full of idealist illusions about art and women, constantly teased and taunted by Bolette's wild younger sister, Hilde. All this is enfolded in Ellida and Wangel's conversations about her life, her dreams, her aspirations, often read as a striking anticipation of Freud's psychoanalytic therapy.

In *The Lady from the Sea* the shadowy figure of the Stranger is surrounded by uncanny, melodramatic elements. Ever since her baby died, Ellida has been obsessed by the memory of the moment when, as a young girl, she willingly let the Stranger—a man she knew to be a murderer—throw their two interlinked rings into the ocean, in a wedding-like ceremony. Although she sent him three letters breaking off the relationship as soon as he had left, he never acknowledged receiving them. (The Stranger's deafness to Ellida strikes me as an extreme version of Rosmer's deafness to Rebecca.) Ellida is convinced that her baby had the eyes of the Stranger, a sign, I think, that she feels that the baby ought to have been his. Since the baby's death she has refused to share Wangel's bed: I take this to be an act of absurd and terrified fidelity to the Stranger, an effort to protect herself against further revenge for her unfaithful behavior, an expression of her fear that any future children will also be stricken by the Stranger's revenge.

Through a tale told by Lyngstrand, a tale which is never fully corroborated, we get the impression that Ellida's psychic suffering started on the very night the Stranger (or someone who could have been him), on board a ship on the North Sea, learned that she had married another man. Ellida herself insists that when she was with him, the power of his will completely overwhelmed her own. For her, the power of the Stranger and the power of the sea are intertwined: the Stranger is "like the ocean", she says to Wangel (II:112). The Stranger and the sea, then, are barely disguised metaphors for Ellida's yearning for the infinite and the absolute. Stressing her desire for the endless and the unbounded, the play sets up a series of oppositions between the closed and the open (the fjord/the sea; the carp pond/the ocean; the small town/the wide

world), and between the outer and the inner (the body/the soul or the mind; reality/dreams), all of which help to establish the play's two most fundamental thematic oppositions: finitude and infinity, necessity and freedom.

The Lady from the Sea, then, continues the exploration of the melodramatic register that began in *Rosmersholm*. When *The Lady from the Sea* was first produced in London in 1891, Clement Scott, the Ibsen-hating theater critic of *The Daily Telegraph*, ironically commented that Ibsen could only save this boring play from disaster by drawing on the most hackneyed theatrical tricks: "It was not until the 'master' became absolutely conventional; it was not until the apostle of originality borrowed without blushing the stalest tricks of despised melodrama; . . . it was not until Ellida, in true old-world Surrey transpontine fashion, flung herself between her spouse and the cocked revolver, that the audience woke up from its despondent lethargy"⁷. What Scott failed to see is that all these uncanny elements are there to contrast with the everyday and the ordinary, and thus to convey Ellida's neurotic fears.

Ellida, then, hides secrets in her soul, secrets that she feels incapable of expressing. Ever since her baby died, she has been haunted by *det uutsigelige* ("the inexpressible", "the unsayable", "the unutterable"), and terrified by *det grufulde* ("the horrible or terrible thing"). The main action of *The Lady from the Sea* consists in the conversations between Ellida and Wangel, during which Ellida comes to realize that she can in fact find words for her feelings, and—even more importantly—have those words acknowledged by her husband. By Act 4 she has become capable of boldly inviting Wangel to listen to her: "Wangel, come and sit down here with me. I have to tell you all my thoughts" (II: 127). Through her own version of Freud's "talking cure" she comes to find human society (the theme of acclimatization) and marriage (including sex) possible again.

The Lady from the Sea contains all the principal features of Ibsen's modernism that I have established in this book, but in a new and challenging combination. Thus idealism, which was such an enormous preoccupation in *Rosmersholm*, is here ironically reduced to the sculptor Lyngstrand's egocentric ravings about the pleasures of having a woman sacrifice her youth for him. Ibsen's rejection of idealism, however, also surfaces in the play's pointed rebuttal of two famous romantic texts: Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid".

Like *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea* is profoundly concerned with theater and theatricality, but here the investigation of theater is connected with the other arts: painting, sculpture, and, in a minor way, music. The play's concern with skepticism also emerges in the same way as in *Rosmersholm*: as a preoccupation with the possibilities of expression, the power of language and the acceptance of human finitude. The parallels between the two plays do not stop there: both deliberately explore the melodramatic mode; both plays tell us that the inability to find a voice, to make sense to others, leads to madness; both plays focus on the contrast between outer and inner, body and soul; both explore the consequences of trying to escape human finitude.

Although *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea* have much in common, the outcome of the respective protagonists' confrontation with skepticism could not be more different. At the end of *A Doll's House* Nora considers that she has never been married to Helmer. Nora tells Helmer that she would only return if they both were *forvandlet* ("transformed") to the point that their life together could become a marriage. In *Rosmersholm* Rebecca declares that she is transformed, but Rosmer's skepticism makes it impossible for him to believe her. *The Lady from the Sea* returns to the question left unanswered by Nora: namely, what constitutes a marriage? If legally binding ceremonies, the birth of children, or the fact of living together do not suffice, then what will it take for Ellida to recognize herself as married to Wangel? *The Lady from the Sea* shows, among other things, that the agents of the transformation that will make marriage possible are freedom and choice, particularly for women. In this way, *The Lady from the Sea* closes the investigation of marriage that began in *A Doll's House*.

In this essay, then, I shall discuss the most striking aspects of Ibsen's modernism in *The Lady from the Sea*: the critique of idealism, the play's reflections on theater and the other arts; the relationship between love and skepticism. I shall also show that this play is a self-conscious meditation on the power of art to express the plight of the soul. Above all, however, I shall pay attention to Ibsen's investigation of love, marriage, and the everyday, and his radical analysis of freedom and choice.

Faithlessness or Freedom? Idealism Rebuffed

Set on the west coast of Norway, *The Lady from the Sea* features a heroine haunted by her fear and longing for a half-ghostly, half-real sailor. Richard Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman* is also set on the coast of Norway and tells the story of a ghostly sailor doomed to sail the oceans of the world until he finds true love. Like Ellida, Wagner's heroine, Senta, dreams of a mysterious sailor. One day, her father, a sea-captain, returns with the Flying Dutchman, who turns out to be the man she has been dreaming of, and Senta immediately and joyfully agrees to marry him. After a silly misunderstanding, her Dutch fiancé wrongly concludes that she is unfaithful to him, and immediately sails away on his ghostly ship. In despair, Senta throws herself off a cliff to prove her faith and her love. Her noble self-sacrifice lifts the curse on the Dutchman's soul, and the opera ends with the image of the two lovers' entwined souls ascending up to heaven.

Senta, then, is the quintessentially idealist heroine: she is young, she is pure and virginal, and, above all, she is heroically ready to give up her life to save the man she loves. Wagner's opera was first performed in Dresden on 2 January 1843. It is difficult to believe that Ibsen, who by the time he wrote *The Lady from the Sea* had lived in Germany for almost twenty years, had managed to remain entirely ignorant of this famous work. (In the *Wild Duck*, Hedvig says that the old sea captain who once owned the strange things kept in the loft was called "The Flying Dutchman" (10: 97).) *The Lady from the Sea* can certainly be read as a deliberate, and quite ironic commentary on Wagner's unbridled idealism, as a strong statement of Ibsen's difference from the famous composer.

The titles of *The Lady from the Sea* and Hans Christian Andersen's "Den lille Havfrue" ("The Little Mermaid") (1837) already signal a connection. As we have seen, Ibsen even considered calling his play *Havfruen*, and Ellida is explicitly compared to a mermaid on several occasions. In Andersen's tale, the pure and innocent mermaid falls in love with a human prince on her fifteenth birthday. In order to be with him, she willingly exchanges her fish tail for human legs even though it means letting the sea-witch cut out her tongue and accepting that she will suffer horribly whenever she uses her lovely legs. Deprived of speech, the little mermaid nevertheless expresses herself by dancing in spite of the excruciating pain of every step.

One day, however, the handsome prince marries a beautiful princess. Because he did not marry the little mermaid, she will never have an immortal soul. At his wedding, she dances more beautifully than ever, but she “laughed and danced with the thought of death in her heart”, for she had decided to kill herself once the party was over: “She knew it was the last evening she saw the man for whom she had left her family and her home, given up her beautiful voice and daily suffered infinite agonies, without him ever having realized it”⁸. Ellida is not unlike the little mermaid: she has left her home out in Skjoldvigen, lost her capacity to express herself, and suffers daily agonies of which her husband knows nothing.

Ibsen’s allusions to these two romantic tales of female sacrifice, however, have a deeper point. Senta and the little mermaid are both absolutely pure, absolutely loving, absolutely faithful. The evidence of their love and their faith is their willing death for the sake of the man. (Rosmer’s gruesome demand that Rebecca die for his sake is clearly related to this idealist tradition.) In response to these tales, *The Lady from the Sea* also foregrounds the theme of faithful and faithless women, but in a radically different way. Already in Act 1, Lyngstrand tells Ellida about his plan for a great sculpture:

Ellida. And what would you model? Will it be mermen and mermaids?

Or old Vikings—? Lyngstrand. No, nothing like that. As soon as I get the chance, I’ll try to do a large work. A group, as they call it.

Ellida. Well—but what will the group represent?

Lyngstrand. Oh, it’s supposed to be something I have experienced.

Arnholm. Good—better stick to that.

Ellida. But what will it be?

Lyngstrand. Well, I had thought that it would be a young sailor’s wife who is strangely restless in her sleep. And she is dreaming too. I definitely think I will be able to manage it so one can actually see that she is dreaming.

Arnholm. Won’t there be more?

Lyngstrand. Oh, yes, there is to be another figure. More like a shape or appearance. It is to be her husband, to whom she has been unfaithful while he was away. And he has been drowned at sea.

Arnholm. How do you mean?

Ellida. He has been drowned?

Lyngstrand. Yes. He was drowned while away at sea. But the strange thing is that he has returned home anyway. It is night, and now he

stands by the bed and looks at her. He is to stand there as soaking wet as if he had been dragged out of the sea.

Ellida [*leans back in her chair*]. That is extremely strange. [*Closes her eyes.*] Oh, I can see it so vividly before me. (II: 72)

Later, Lyngstrand refers to his characters as the “faithless sailor’s wife” and the “Avenger”, and claims that he can see both of them clearly, as if they were alive before him (II: 74). At that point, Ellida is overcome by a sense of suffocation and gets up to leave (II: 75). Lyngstrand’s motif exactly translates Ellida’s unspoken fears: that the Stranger will return to exact his revenge for her infidelity to him.

While Lyngstrand considers his story of faithlessness and revenge as something like a morality tale, Ibsen shows us that Ellida has been driven to the brink of madness precisely by such idealist notions of a woman’s absolute fidelity. When the Stranger turns up for the first time in Act 3, he goes straight for the jugular, as if he knows how guilty she feels for breaking her vows to him: “Both Ellida and I agreed that this business with the rings should remain in force and be as binding as a wedding ceremony,” he says to Wangel. Ellida’s instant response to this line is revealing: “But I don’t want to, you hear! Never in the world do I want to have anything more to do with you! Don’t look at me in that way! I said I don’t want to!” (II: 108). Against the Stranger’s insistence that she owes him her faith, Ellida insists on her *will*.

Where Ellida breaks off, the Stranger continues. In the next few lines, he says two crucial things: that he has kept his word to her: “I have kept the word I gave you,” and that if she is to come with him, it has to be of her own free will: “If Ellida wants to come with me, she has to come of her own free will” (11: 108). Here the Stranger offers Ellida precisely the concept she needs: namely, freedom. At the same time, he highlights the key philosophical and ethical question at stake in this play: namely, the relationship between a promise—specifically the kind of promise we call a wedding vow—and freedom. Does a solemn promise of the marriage-like kind always bind us for life? Under what circumstances is a woman justified in breaking such a promise?

Such questions were simply not thinkable for idealism: Senta and the little mermaid are *absolutely* faithful. In 1888, however, divorce was rapidly becoming a legal option all over the Western world, and, as *The Lady from the Sea* shows, the time of idealist heroines was definitely past. Neither Bolette nor Hilde feels inclined to do anything

but laugh when the naïve Lyngstrand reveals that he would like Bolette to spend her youth faithfully waiting for him to become a great sculptor abroad, but that when he returns as a famous artist, he will discard her for someone younger, perhaps someone like Hilde.

The very fact that Ibsen's investigation of marriage in *The Lady from the Sea* fully incorporates the question of when a woman may be justified in breaking her vows to a man tells us how far beyond idealism he has moved. In this context Wagner's sublime Senta and Andersen's selfless mermaid come across as old-fashioned masculinist fantasies. By raising the question of women's emotional, sexual, and economic freedom, by investigating the destructive power of absolute promises (including the vows of marriage), *The Lady from the Sea* shows how dangerous idealist absolutism can be when it is allowed to distort the relationships of modern men and women⁹.

“Externalizing the inner mind”: Theater and Other Arts

To James McFarlane, one of the finest Ibsen scholars of his generation, *The Lady from the Sea* is the drama of Ellida's mind, and so, fundamentally, a play about an intense, obsessive, half-mad love triangle involving Ellida, Wangel, and the Stranger. If one looks at the play in this way, the presence of all other characters appears puzzling, even clumsy; the two artists appear entirely superfluous, the subplot involving Bolette and Arnholm becomes a heavy-handed parallel to the marriage of Ellida and Wangel, an obvious illustration of the “traffic in women”, or the kind of sordid bargaining and trade-offs imposed on women in a sexist society; the character of Hilde serves only as a foil for Lyngstrand's unbridled sexism:

[Ibsen] weight[s] the drama with such naturalistic solidities as his stuttering odd job man, his consumptive artist, his careworn schoolmaster. . . . Translate the action of the play into choreographic terms . . . , and one discovers that the central conflict in Ellida's mind is of a kind that can, using techniques akin to those of the expressionist theatre, be successfully and economically communicated without any great need of these subsidiary characters. Here is perhaps an index of how firmly, despite his innovations, Ibsen was rooted in the naturalistic tradition¹⁰.

The technical problem facing Ibsen, McFarlane writes, is to “externalize this kind of inner drama of the mind”, and he could have

succeeded only by choosing a more thoroughly expressionistic form¹¹. In other words: if Ibsen had been capable of abandoning his old-fashioned allegiance to naturalism (or realism), he would have written a better play.

But this logic is flawed. Ever since Hamlet declared that “I have that within which passes show”, Western playwrights have dealt with the question of how to “externalize the inner drama of the mind”. Unless we want to claim that Shakespeare entirely failed to show us what was going on in Hamlet’s mind, expressionism can hardly be the only correct formal solution. As I have tried to show in this book, Ibsen’s modernism offers us a long series of self-conscious explorations of the powers of theater to express and to make us acknowledge the pain and joy of the human soul. (It is unnecessary to speak of “inner” pain or about the “inner” drama of the mind. Is there an “outer” joy or an “outer” pain that we have no trouble perceiving or trusting?)

Ibsen’s modernism shows us that there is nothing wrong with the powers of expression of the theater; it is modern skepticism that makes us feel that ordinary language and everyday actions fail to provide good enough expression of pain and joy. Even the formulation used by McFarlane—the inner drama of the mind—shows that he shares the skeptical picture of the soul as a mysterious inner realm, one that is, as it were, hidden by the body. McFarlane really poses the skeptical problem: how can I trust a person’s attempts to express (to say or to show through gesture or action) what he or she thinks, feels, or believes? The question of how to “externalize” the human mind is really a question about how we can know others, and how we can trust that knowledge. This is not just a question that arises in connection with the theater, it is a question for all of us, for it is surely no easier to read other people’s minds in everyday life than it is onstage¹².

In *The Lady from the Sea*, however, Ibsen does not just reflect on the powers of theater to “externalize the inner mind”, he also turns to other arts. Are the references to art in *The Lady from the Sea* superfluous attempts at providing local color, a deplorable effect of Ibsen’s naturalism, as McFarlane implies?¹³ If so, the opening scene of *The Lady from the Sea* is particularly likely to produce offense, for the first thing it offers us is a conversation between the two artists, the jack-of-all-trades Ballested and the consumptive sculptor Lyngstrand, concerning Ballested’s unfinished painting:

Lyngstrand. There's to be a figure as well?

Ballested. Yes. In here by the reef in the foreground there is to be a half dead mermaid. **Lyngstrand.** Why is she to be half dead?

Ballested. She got lost and can't find her way out to the ocean again. And now she lies dying here in the brackish water, you see.

Lyngstrand. Yes, right.

Ballested. It was the lady of the house who made me think of painting something of the kind. **Lyngstrand.** What will you call the picture when it is finished?

Ballested. I intend to call it "The Mermaid's End".

Lyngstrand. That sounds good.—I think you really can make something good out of this. (II: 54)

Ballested's dying mermaid will strike most modern readers as a quite absurd motif. Surely, we think, Ibsen must be intending this to be an ironic illustration of amateur painting at its worst. If so, this scene is, as McFarlane assumes, mere comic relief, of no importance to the main plot. But we should not leap to conclusions. When Ellida asks Lyngstrand about his work, she begins by asking, "And what would you model? Will it be mermen and mermaids? Or old Vikings—?" (II: 72). In Europe in the late 1880s, artists still commonly painted Vikings, mermaids, and mermen—that is to say, historical and mythological motifs requiring narrative explanation, based on Lessing's theory of the "pregnant moment". It is even possible that Ibsen was inspired by Arnold Böcklin's anguished mermaid in *The Play of the Waves* (*Im Spiel der Wellen*) for his conception of Ellida¹⁴.

Ballested, moreover, is not just an amateur. When he arrived in town seventeen or eighteen years earlier, we are told, it was as a painter for Skive's traveling theater company. His name, as well as that of the theater company, reveals that he is Danish, thus a stranger in the true sense of the word, yet one who has "acclimatized himself", as he keeps repeating. There is, surely, a distance between Ibsen's point of view and Ballested's, but there is no need to imagine this as hostile or disdainful, for Ballested represents something of Ibsen's own past: the Danish traveling theater companies that toured the south coast of Norway in his childhood and youth, and perhaps also his encounter with the theater painter in Bergen in the 1850s, Johan Ludvig Løsting, himself quite a jack-of-all-trades. Ballested's painting, moreover, echoes *his* theatrical past, for he explains that although he has painted the background, he

has yet to place the figure in the foreground. It is as if he is waiting for the actress playing the mermaid to turn up, just as we are waiting for the actress playing the lady from the sea to turn up.

The problem with Ballested's painting, then, is not that it is of a mermaid, or that it is narrative and mythological, but that he is not bringing the tradition after Lessing to its fullest potential. It would seem that he has chosen a fairly undramatic moment, which explains why his narrative about the lost mermaid is more than a little flat. At the same time, however, the absence of dramatic tension and the emphasis on the brackish water in the inner reaches of the fjord indicate hopelessness, stagnation, and closure. Whatever its aesthetic flaws, Ballested's painting is a pretty effective rendering of Ellida's state of mind, and is intended to be taken as such by the audience, since we learn that it was Ellida who gave Ballested the idea for the painting in the first place.

Lyngstrand's planned group uniting the "Unfaithful Sailor's Wife" and "The Avenger", on the other hand, is squarely melodramatic, even Gothic, and reminds me not a little of Fuseli's famous *Nightmare* paintings. Like Ballested's painting, it presupposes a narrative, but Lyngstrand has an altogether firmer grasp than Ballested of how to choose a maximally dramatic moment. We should note, too, that neither the painter nor the sculptor strives for everyday realism: Ballested has a mermaid, Lyngstrand a ghostly avenger. In this respect, there are obvious parallels between these works and the play in which they appear.

Tormented by the thought that the death of her child was punishment for her faithlessness, Ellida is like both Ballested's half-dead mermaid and Lyngstrand's dreaming, unfaithful wife about to be confronted by the Avenger. It is significant, moreover, that both works are described right at the beginning of the play: they express Ellida's feelings at a time when she cannot yet express them herself. In so doing they set in motion the process that will transform her from a woman threatened by suffocation to a woman with a voice of her own.

There is also another art present in *The Lady from the Sea*: namely, music. Even in her depressed and neurotic state, Ellida often goes up to the view point to hear the local brass band (*hornforeningen*) (see II: 56 and II: 79). Only in Act 5, however, is music given a relatively strong theatrical presence, for there the very last moments of the play take place to the accompaniment of the brass band playing to salute the

departure of the English steamer, the last tourist ship of the season¹⁵.

The Lady from the Sea, then, begins with painting and sculpture, and ends with music. Although it is difficult to judge this precisely from Ibsen's text, I get the impression that the audience never sees Ballested's painting, which in any case remains only half-finished throughout the play. Describing it to Lyngstrand in Act 1, Ballested is at once describing his actual canvas and telling us what it is going to become (II: 53–4). Existing only as a projection into the future, Lyngstrand's sculpture remains purely linguistic. The music at the end of the play, on the other hand, is a finished composition, heard by all the characters and the audience, too. As long as the visual works remain projected and unfinished, they remain enclosed in the fantasy world of their creators (completely so in the case of Lyngstrand, partly so in that of Ballested). The music, on the other hand, is shared by all. Thus the transition from project to work, from vision to hearing, from painting and sculpture to music that accompanies Ellida's transformation, signifies a transition from isolation and inwardness to community and externality.

Painting and sculpture, moreover, are static—I mean atemporal—arts. Theater and music, on the other hand, unfold in time. The reason why the half-dead mermaid and the unfaithful sailor's wife express Ellida's inner state at the beginning of the play is that, like them, she has remained frozen in a desperate, more or less melodramatic, moment. Perhaps we can see her immobility and stasis as profoundly antitheatrical, as a negative version of the immutable Ideal. Against this, *The Lady from the Sea* posits the idea of acclimatization, adaptability, changeability, and—ultimately—transformation. There are shades of *The Winter's Tale* here: like Hermione, Ellida is transformed so as to again become part of the ordinary course of time, and an ordinary marriage. Perhaps Ibsen wants to tell us that only theater can give life and voice to human transformation. At the end of *The Lady from the Sea*, we celebrate not just Ellida's powers of transformation, but the powers of theater, too.

Disavowing Finitude: Ellida and the Stranger

In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell notes that “in seeking for the representativeness of your life you have to watch at the same time for your limitedness, commemorating what is beyond you”¹⁶. If we cannot acknowledge our own limitedness, our finitude, we will not be able to

acknowledge the existence of others. Ellida knows no boundaries. To her, the ocean is boundless, and so is the Stranger. “That man is like the ocean,” she says after seeing him again for the first time (II: 112). He represents infinity, absolute freedom that tolerates no human limitations¹⁷. In the ceremony that keeps haunting her, he compelled her to marry both him and the ocean by throwing their entwined rings into the sea. In his presence she feels as if she has no other will than his: the Stranger comes across as a Nietzschean creature of compelling will, a murderer beyond good and evil. Ellida’s achievement is that she comes to realize that she has the power to defy this will, not by mobilizing some superhuman effort of resistance, but by choosing finitude. (I shall return to this.)

But if the Stranger is like the ocean, so is Ellida. “Ellida—your mind is like the ocean,” Wangel says to her at the end of the play (II: 154). The Stranger, then, is both internal and external to Ellida; he is her, she is him; he is a figment of her imagination, as well as a real man. If the audience has trouble deciding whether the Stranger is real or imagined, it is because Ellida herself cannot quite work this out. Whatever he is, he is not *other* to her (I use the word in the ordinary sense of acknowledging that other people are—well, *other* : not identical with us, not a part of us, not an extension of us). In this respect it is significant that when Ellida first sees the Stranger in Act 3, she does not recognize him at all: he has existed so much in her mind that she has no recollection of what he looks like. But Dr Wangel is not an other to her either, for he simply doesn’t figure in her imagination: “When he isn’t here, I often can’t remember what he looks like. And then it is as if I truly had lost him” (II: 103). It is as if Ellida has not fully discovered Wangel’s existence, so that she perceives him either as pure externality or as a void.

The Lady from the Sea, then, is about a woman driven to the edge of madness by her refusal of finitude. She is unable to acknowledge the separate existence of others; she takes refuge in melodramatic fantasies about the Stranger’s revenge so as not to have to acknowledge death (the death of her baby); she avoids sex so as not to have to acknowledge sexual finitude. The result is a sense of being completely lost, an increasing sense of isolation from human community, a conviction that she is fundamentally unable to make herself known. As long as she remains bound up in her fantasy about the freedom of the

unbounded horizons of the ocean, Ellida will remain a stranger in the world of everyday commitments. No wonder we find it difficult to tell whether the Stranger is inside or outside Ellida's mind.

Towards the end of the play, in the highly dramatic scene in which Ellida makes her choice, Dr Wangel finally comes up with his diagnosis: "Your craving for the boundless and the infinite,—and for the unattainable—it will drive your mind completely into the darkness of night in the end." His acknowledgment of her state of mind appears to come as a liberation and a relief to Ellida, for she replies, "Oh yes, yes,—I feel it—like black, silent wings above me—." This exchange enables Dr Wangel finally to acknowledge Ellida's freedom to choose: "It won't come to that. There is no other salvation for you. I can't see any at least. So therefore—therefore I let—let our bargain be unmade, right now.—Now you can choose your path—in full—full freedom" (II: 153). (The reference to the "bargain" is to Ellida's claim that her marriage to Wangel was a commercial transaction, in which she traded her freedom for economic security.)

Wangel acknowledges Ellida's freedom because he sees that if he doesn't, she will surely go mad. Against the Stranger's absolute, infinite, unbounded, mad freedom, he offers concrete, finite, ordinary human freedom. This is a stroke of genius, for to choose is to embrace finitude, to accept that we are no more, but also no less, than human. Not to choose is to refuse definition, identity, limitation. As the existentialists never tired of pointing out, to choose entails acceptance of loss. Choice frees us, but it also defines us. If Ellida were to leave with the Stranger, she would have to follow him as she did once before, in the marriage ceremony with the rings—that is to say, as in a trance, compelled by his unbending will. Had she *chosen* the Stranger—I mean, had she gone with him knowing that she did so as the result of her own free choice—the Stranger would be stripped of his mysterious allure, he would no longer be the infinite to Ellida, but just another man. This is precisely why Ellida chooses not to leave with the Stranger, for considered as an ordinary man, as a husband or lifelong partner, he is no match for Dr Wangel, as I shall now show.

Choice, Freedom, Marriage

Choosing Wangel, Ellida chooses human community, in all its fragility. But how does her transformation come about? How does Ellida

manage to transform herself from half-mad metaphysician of the absolute to a woman reasonably—not wholly, totally, or absolutely—at peace with her choices and her identity?

Ellida's transformation is brought about by Dr Wangel, but he in turn is transformed by her. The instruments of their mutual transformation are their conversations. If Ellida slowly learns to reveal herself, it is because Wangel shows himself to be a loving, patient, and generous man making a genuine effort to listen to his wife, reacting honestly and spontaneously to her words. On this point he could not be more different from Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House*. Clearly, Wangel is no romantic hero, but then he doesn't imagine that he is one, either. He is much older than Ellida. He lacks energy and ambition. He has a tendency to drink too much. But that is the point: Dr Wangel is an ordinary man, capable of patience and love, at home in his everyday world. He is the antidote to the romantic absolutism represented by the Stranger. Wangel is never metaphysical, never melodramatic, but his very groundedness in the everyday courts ridicule, at least in the eyes of those who expect more grandeur and more anguish in a modern(ist) hero. I have seen productions in which Wangel has been played as a half-drunken clown, a comic figure entirely incapable of rising to the sublime heights of his tormented wife. Needless to say, this entirely fails to explain why Ellida would choose him over the Stranger.

Wangel is a man capable of accepting human finitude. This is made particularly clear in a scene that contains a striking reference to *Emperor and Galilean*. In Act 4, Arnholm asks Wangel how he explains the power of the Stranger over Ellida's mind:

Wangel. Hm, dear friend,—there may be aspects of this case that don't admit an explanation.

Arnholm. Something in itself inexplicable, you mean? Completely inexplicable?

Wangel. Inexplicable right now, at least.

Arnholm. Do you believe in such things?

Wangel. I neither believe nor deny. I just don't know. That's why I let it be for now.

(11: 122)

They go on to discuss whether or not the baby had the Stranger's eyes (Wangel, the child's father, says he absolutely does not want to believe this), and whether Ellida actually fell ill the very night of the

shipwreck in the English Channel that Lyngstrand described. Wangel thinks that, on the whole she didn't, although she did have a kind of nervous attack at about the right time. Arnholm's conclusion is "Sign against sign, then" (II: 124), an exact echo of Maximus, who uses the phrase in *Emperor and Galilean* I.3 to tell Julian that because the omens are contradictory or silent, he will have to *choose* rather than to look for guidance from supernatural powers (see 7: 106–8; *EG*, 53–4). Wangel's response to Arnholm is telling: "[*wringing his hands intensely*] And then not to be able to help her!" (II: 124). This is exactly the opposite of Julian's reaction: Julian wants absolute truth in order to fend off the uncertainty that accompanies human choices. Wangel, on the other hand, accepts and acknowledges the limits of his reason, and goes straight to what really matters in this case: namely, how to *help* Ellida. If Wangel deserves Ellida, it is because, unlike Julian, he realizes that when it comes to human relationships, love is far more important than absolute knowledge.

Through Wangel's patient talking cure, Ellida starts to build up faith in the powers of human language to connect us to others, to "externalize the inner mind", as Northam puts it. Slowly, Ellida starts to express herself to him, and slowly, he starts to realize that he too has been to blame for the state of Ellida's soul. The truth is that he has behaved exactly like Torvald Helmer: like Helmer, Wangel has been happy to "buy" a sexy plaything for himself, happy to keep his wife as his irresponsible playmate, happy to let her remain the outsider in the family.

It is common to interpret the end of *The Lady from the Sea* as if the climactic final scene simply shows us Wangel giving Ellida permission to choose the Stranger. If this were the case, Ellida's choice would not represent much of a liberation. But this is a misreading. At the beginning of Act 5, just before the Stranger is to return for the last time, Wangel and Ellida have the following exchange:

Ellida. I *must* speak to him myself. For I am supposed to make my choice freely.

Wangel. You have no choice, Ellida. You won't be allowed to choose. I won't let you.

Ellida. You can't prevent my choosing. Neither you nor anyone else. You can forbid me to go away with him—to follow him—if that's what I choose. You can keep me here by force. Against my will. You can do that. But that I choose—choose in my innermost mind—choose

him and not you,—in case I will and must choose that way—you can't prevent that.

Wangel. No, you are right. I can't prevent that. (II: 137–8)

Ellida, then, knows perfectly well that she is free to choose. What she requires of her husband is that he should *acknowledge her right to choose*. That is what it takes for her to recognize that he too is transformed, that he has learned to consider her a free and equal human being, that he is qualified to be her husband:

Wangel. . . . Now you can choose your path—in full—full freedom.

Ellida [*staring at him, as if speechless, for a while*]. Is it true,—true,—what you are saying? Do you mean it—in your innermost heart?

Wangel. Yes, I do mean it—in my innermost, suffering heart.

Ellida. And *can* you do it, too? Can you let this *happen*?

Wangel. Yes, I can. I can—because I love you so much.

Ellida [*slowly, tremulously*]. I have come this close—so deeply inside (*så inderligt*) your heart?

Wangel. The years and our life together brought it about.

Ellida [*clasping her hands*]. And I never noticed it! (II: 153)

Ellida's questions are quintessentially skeptical: Are you really speaking the truth? Do you really mean it? In your innermost heart? And even if you say you mean it, and really think you do, you may still be mistaken, so the question is, can you really let it happen? Can you let me go off with this stranger standing here with a gun in his hand? When Wangel claims that he does and he can, Ellida strikingly replies by talking about closeness and intimacy, about having come “close and deeply inside [his] heart”. Like the German *innerlich*, *inderlig* is notoriously difficult to translate, for it means internal, but also heartfelt. This closeness, this intimacy, is established by the years, their life together (*samlivet*). This is closeness, but it is not merger. The love that is here being acknowledged has nothing to do with the romantic absolute. It is finite and human, and certainly will not rescue us from failures and misunderstandings, as the very last lines of the play show:

Ellida [*smiling, but serious*]. Well, you see Mr. Arnholm—. Do you remember—we talked about it yesterday? Once one has become a land creature, it is impossible to find a way to return to the ocean. And not to the life of the ocean, either.

Ballested. But that is just like my mermaid!

Ellida. Well, more or less.

Ballested. Except for the difference that *the mermaid dies of it*. Human beings, on the other hand—they can acclam-acclimatize themselves. Yes, I assure you, Mrs. Wangel, they *can* acclimatize themselves!

Ellida. Yes, if they are free they can, Mr. Ballested.

Wangel. And responsible, dear Ellida.

Ellida [*quickly, takes his hand*]. That's exactly right.

[*The great steamer glides silently out over the fjord. The music can be heard closer to the shore.*] (11: 156–7)

Ballested here pronounces Ellida's humanity: to him, as to us, she is no longer like his mermaid; she is truly transformed. But how are we to take Ellida's last line? I read Wangel's "and responsible" as a rather over-eager and slightly thoughtless rejoinder, a line that demonstrates his wish to say something, perhaps a moment where he falls back into his usual role as the unquestioned *pater familias* who always gets the last word. Yet his line is harmless: human freedom does entail responsibility; there is no choice without consequences. But surely there is no point in telling Ellida this now, for she has just demonstrated that she knows all this by embracing her family, and particularly by opening her heart to the young Hilde's need for love (Ellida addresses her as "dear Hilde" (II: 156) when she announces that she will stay with them after all). Wangel's last line, in short, is not his finest moment, and Ellida knows it. She rescues him from saying more silly things by quickly claiming to agree, perhaps with a smile that at once conveys her understanding, her judgment, and her love. But more importantly, she gives him her hand. They are together. They acknowledge each other's freedom. They understand each other. They are close. But they are not one. There is still plenty of space in which to disagree, to quarrel, and to make up. This, Ibsen tells us, is what it takes to have a marriage. This is why Ellida and Wangel are the antithesis of Rebecca and Rosmer.

The Meaning of Freedom: Bolette's Choice

This reading of the end of the play may sound naïve. Do I really believe that Ellida chooses freely? Should I not at least consider that Ibsen may here be pushing a liberal ideology that wildly exaggerates the possibilities of free choice in modern society? This question might have some force were it not for the fact that the very question of what might count as free choice receives close attention in *The Lady from*

the Sea. Let us begin by recalling that this is a play fundamentally concerned with the force of a woman's promise of marriage. In a key exchange in Act 4, in which Ellida tries to explain how she came to marry Wangel after the death of her father, the issues at stake are brought out:

Ellida. And I for my part—. There I was, helpless, not knowing where to turn, and so completely alone. So it was only reasonable to accept—when you came and offered to provide for me for the rest of my life. Wangel. I didn't see it as providing for you, dear Ellida. I asked you honestly if you would share with me and the children what little I could call mine.

Ellida. Yes, you did. But I shouldn't have accepted it anyway! Not for any price should I have accepted! Not have sold myself! Rather the most wretched work and the most miserable circumstances—freely—and by my own choice!

Wangel [*gets up*]. Then the five-six years we have lived together have been completely worthless to you?

Ellida. No, don't ever think that! I have been as content here with you as any human being could wish for. But I did not enter your home of my own free will. That's the point.

Wangel [*looks at her*]. Not of your own free will!

Ellida. No. I did not go with you of my own free will. (11: 128)

Ellida here challenges the notion of “free choice” just as profoundly as Nora challenges the notion of marriage. “I asked you honestly if you would share with me and the children what little I could call mine,” Wangel says. He means that Ellida can hardly say he forced her: she *chose* to marry him. By rejecting this idea, Ellida shows that to her the verb *ville* (“will” or “would”) is not at all synonymous with “i frivillighed—og efter eget valg” (“freely—and by my own choice”). If a promise has been made under coercion, it is worthless. This is precisely why Ellida is inclined to think that only her *first* promise (to the Stranger) could have turned out to be a “complete and pure marriage”, for, as she puts it, “a promise freely given is just as binding as a wedding ceremony” (II: 129).

To figure out exactly what *The Lady from the Sea* has to say about these crucial issues, I shall turn to the scene between Bolette and Arnholm in Act 5. Arnholm has just offered to help Bolette to get out in the world, to travel, to get the education she is longing for. Although

she is a little dubious about whether she can receive such a great gift from *noget fremmed menneske* (“a stranger”, in the sense of someone who is not a member of the family; literally: “some strange human being”) (II: 142), she soon expresses her delight: “Oh, I could both laugh and cry for joy! For happiness and bliss! Oh, then I’ll really get to live after all. I was beginning to be afraid that life would pass me by” (II: 142). But her joy is short-lived, for Arnholm quickly explains what he has in mind:

Arnholm. . . . Well—since you are free, Bolette, since no relationship binds you—. So I ask you then—if you could want (*kunde ville*)—could want to join me—for life?

Bolette [*recoils in horror*]. Oh,—what are you saying!

Arnholm. For your whole life, Bolette. If you will (*vil*) be my wife.

Bolette [*half beside herself*]. No, no, no! This is impossible! Completely impossible! (II: 143)

Twice Arnholm says not just *ville*, but *kunde ville* (“could will”, which here means something like “could you bring yourself to want”)—as if he knows that Bolette will have to overcome a resistance in order to want to marry him. The third time, however, his proposal has come to sound like a simple choice (“will you”), and Bolette recoils in horror. But Arnholm does not give up: stressing the economic and sexual facts, he reminds Bolette that when her father dies, she will need money (just like Ellida once did), and that if she refuses him, she may one day have to accept someone she likes even less. These are scare tactics, and it is not surprising that in the end, Arnholm’s proposal sounds more like a threat than a promise:

Arnholm. Then will you (*vil De*) rather remain at home and let life pass you by?

Bolette. Oh, it is so terribly painful to think of it!

Arnholm. Will you (*vil De*) renounce the opportunity to see something of the world outside? Renounce taking part in all those things that you say you have been yearning for? . . . Think carefully, Bolette.

Bolette. Oh yes,—you are so completely right, Mr. Arnholm. (II: 145)

Playing the phrase *vil De* (“do you want to”, “will you”) like a virtuoso, Arnholm makes it look as if, by refusing him, Bolette freely chooses to renounce all her dreams and ambitions. His final “Think carefully, Bolette” is pure menace. And it works: a moment later, he

gets his wish. In this sequence, Ibsen handles all the different expressions for choice and will in a particularly masterful way:

Arnholm. Do you mean that you perhaps nevertheless could be willing to (*kanske dog kunde være villig til*)—? That at least you could want to allow me (*kunde vilde unde mig*) the pleasure of helping you as a faithful friend?

Bolette. No, no, no! Never that! For *that* would be completely impossible now.—No,—Mr. Arnholm,—then you'd better take me.

Arnholm. Bolette! You will, after all!

Bolette. Yes,—I think—I will.

Arnholm. Then you will be my wife!

Bolette. Yes. If you still feel that—that you ought to take me. (II: 146)

As the dialogue develops, Arnholm moves from his hesitant *kunde vilde* (“could bring yourself to want”) to the triumphant *vil*. The repetition of “will” reinforces the ideology, making it look as if Bolette here freely chooses to marry him. Her repetition of the phrase “take me”, on the other hand, signals not only that she feels sexually threatened, but also that she knows that she is here agreeing to commodify herself. Does Bolette freely choose to trade her body and her life for financial security, travel, and an education? What powers does she have to ensure that Arnholm keeps his part of the bargain? Ibsen’s subtle and striking analysis of the ways in which what looks like free choice may be the result of coercion embedded in a particular social situation is matchless.

The juxtaposition of the brutality of Arnholm’s proposal and the individual happiness achieved by Ellida and Wangel is unsettling, to say the least, for it provides a glimpse of the sexist power relations with which any marriage in this culture will have to deal. The juxtaposition, moreover, has a double edge. Because Ellida, who also sold herself when she married, chooses Wangel all over again, we know that there is hope. (Human beings *can* acclimatize themselves.) On the other hand, we have just seen that Arnholm is a man capable of using barely veiled threats to get his way, something that Wangel shows no signs of ever having done. We also note that Bolette prefers not to announce her engagement before the end of the play. This is not, so far, a marriage made in heaven. Perhaps love, good will, and infinite patience can save this marriage; but given this beginning, one has to question whether there is going to be enough love.

Whatever we think Bolette and Arnholm's future will be, *The Lady from the Sea* asks whether we want a society which regularly stacks the odds against marriage in this way. If the answer is no, then *The Lady from the Sea* tells us that the only way to improve the conditions of marriage is to improve women's social and economic situation. In 1888, then, both Ibsen and Ellida realize that until marriage ceases to be women's only way of earning a living, it will never be a genuine choice. Ellida's understanding of what counts as a marriage is that she should have chosen the man, freely and knowingly¹⁸. As we have seen, "freely" here does not mean absolutely freely: as I have shown, Ellida's "responsible choice" is posited precisely as the only alternative to the demand for the absolute, which may drive us mad. Ibsen understands that one always chooses in a human situation, not in the abstract and the absolute. The contrast between Ellida's and Bolette's choices tells us that even within a sexist society there are degrees of freedom and degrees of responsibility. Ibsen, then, is alert to the social and economic pressures that undermine women's freedom of choice. That Ellida chooses to reconfirm her commitment to Wangel is not incompatible with such critical insights: Wangel has earned her respect, and her love. Had Wangel been anything like Arnholm (whom Ellida herself once rejected), the outcome might have been very different.

Make It New

In September 1887, half-way between *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen gave a brief speech at a dinner in Stockholm:

It has been said that I too . . . have contributed to the creation of a new era in the world.

I believe, on the contrary, that it would be just as reasonable to designate the era we now find ourselves in as an end, from which something new is now about to be born.

In fact, I believe that the scientific theory of evolution is also valid with regard to the spiritual elements of life. . . .

One has on different occasions said about me that I am a pessimist. And so I am, in so far as I do not believe in the eternity of human ideals.

But I am also an optimist, in so far as I fully and firmly believe that ideals are capable of reproduction and evolution. . . .

I for my part will be content with the yield of my life's work, if this work can serve to prepare the mood for tomorrow. (15: 410–11)

Destroyer of the old, fervent believer in the new: this is a quintessentially modernist attitude. As in his 1870 letter to Brandes about the Franco–Prussian War, Ibsen sounds positively cheerful about the destruction of old regimes and old ideals. Like the dinosaurs and the do-do bird, they are doomed to extinction: this is cause for joy, not sorrow. What matters to Ibsen is the birth of the new, which he explicitly compares to the utopia of the “Third Empire” in *Emperor and Galilean* (see 15: 411), but which he also—as usual—refrains from defining more closely. Whatever the new will be, however, it will contain the “conditions of humanity’s happiness” (15: 410).

Many features of this speech are echoed in *The Lady from the Sea*, which, as we have seen, is a play finely balanced between the constructive and the destructive, between utopia and critique. In *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen demolishes the old, idealist clichés of love, marriage, and female self-sacrifice. From his acute analysis of freedom and choice, we learn that the new, modern kind of marriage that is about to be born will only come about when women are given full freedom, concretely as well as abstractly, in social and personal life. This, surely, is one ideal that might have the power of further evolution, as Ibsen put it in his Stockholm speech. But *The Lady from the Sea* also tells us that this apparently simple idea has enormous ramifications. For if the key insight of the play is that love requires the acknowledgment of the other’s freedom, the play also tells us that we will never get that far unless we are willing to think through a host of other questions: the necessary destruction of idealism; the relationship between freedom and constraint; the force of promises and marriage vows; madness, skepticism, and the desire for infinity; the power of art and theater; and—not least—the healing power of ordinary human conversation.

ABSTRACT

The play, *The Lady from the Sea*, sets out to provide an answer to the question: namely, what it takes for a relationship to become a marriage. In order to follow Ibsen’s analysis of this question, however, we also need to notice that the play can be read as Ibsen’s rebuff to romantic tales of female sacrifice. The play also

intertwines the story of Ellida's achievement of freedom with an investigation of art, theatre, and music, in which the main question is how painting, sculpture, and theatre can express what some critics have called the "inner mind".

KEY WORDS: Henrik Ibsen, theatre, modernism, freedom, choice

NOTES

¹ Este artigo foi previamente publicado no livro *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism – Art, Theatre, Philosophy*, de Toril Moi.

² Durbach, "Ibsen the Romantic", 154. Durbach quotes Fjelde, "The Lady from the Sea", 379.

³ Valency, *Flower*, 188.

⁴ Ibid. 190.

⁵ Hemmer, *Ibsen: Kunstnerens vei*, 367.

⁶ In *Text and Supertext*, Johnston takes the reference to Ellida as a "heathen" to mean that she must be named after a Viking ship (see p. 196). Fjelde also thinks the name refers to a Viking ship (see "The Lady from the Sea", 390). *Ellide* [old Norse *Ellidǫl*] is the name of the exceptionally good ship owned by Fridtjov den frøkne ("Fridtjov the brave"), in the saga of that name, first translated into Norwegian in 1858. In the second half of the nineteenth century, several Norwegian ships were named Ellida, and the name, which was—and still is—used as a man's name in Iceland, began to be used as a woman's name in Norway. (I am grateful to Inge Særheim from the University of Stavanger for this information.)

⁷ From an unsigned review by Clement Scott, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 1891, 3; repr. in Egan (ed.), *Ibsen: Critical Heritage*, 247.

⁸ Andersen, "Den lille Havfrue", 90.

⁹ I note that Hemmer in *Ibsen: Kunstnerens vei* declares that *The Lady from the Sea* really argues for "fidelity as an ideal" (p. 371), because Ibsen here lets "longing and sexual drives find their natural and satisfying place within the safe framework of marriage" (p. 400). I hope this chapter will show that although I think Hemmer is right to bring up the theme of fidelity, I think his conclusions are completely wrong.

¹⁰ McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning*, 277–8.

¹¹ Ibid. 277.

¹² In *Fangs of Malice*, Wikander makes the mistake of beginning from the premise that theater has a special problem (i.e. one not present in ordinary human relationships) when it comes to expressing the soul.

¹³ In her Lacanian reading of the play Rekdal argues that the play's concerns with art and with psychoanalytic therapy are unified by the concept of *sublimation*, but the implications of these suggestions are not pursued (see *Frihetens dilemma*, 226).

¹⁴ My argument is *not* that Ballested's painting of the half-dead mermaid is intended to be Böcklin's mermaid; it is rather that the anguish of Böcklin's mermaid, her isolation from the merry mood of the other mermen and mermaids, may have played a role in Ibsen's conception of Ellida.

¹⁵ I get the impression that we are to imagine that the band is in a boat that accompanies the ship for a while before turning back towards town, for first we learn that Hilde and Lyngstrand are going down to the quayside to listen to the music (II: 151), and then, in his very last stage directions, Ibsen writes that while the steamer glides soundlessly away, the music is heard closer to the shore (II: 157).

¹⁶ Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 12.

¹⁷ Many critics have noted that Ellida is yearning for the absolute. Although Johnston's Hegelian readings of Ibsen usually strike me as problematic, on this point his approach is consonant with mine, for he sees in *The Lady from the Sea* "a contrast between consciousness of the limitless and of the humanly limited, . . . of the lure of an absolute freedom, which at once terrifies and attracts and which will be relinquished for a freedom with responsibility" (*Text and Supertext*, 197).

¹⁸ *The Lady from the Sea* has much in common with Cavell's remarriage comedies, as discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness*. Yet it also contains many of the features of Cavell's melodramas of the unknown woman as they are set forth in *Contesting Tears*. I am inclined to think that Ibsen, particularly in *A Doll's House* and in *The Lady from the Sea*, produced something like the common prototype of *both* these Hollywood genres.

Data de recebimento: 15 julho 2008

Data de aprovação: 27 agosto 2008