



**Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*
(Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914; The Gorham Press, Boston, U.S.A.)**

THE SCANDINAVIAN DRAMA

HENRIK IBSEN



IN a letter to George Brandes, shortly after the Paris Commune, Henrik Ibsen wrote concerning the State and political liberty:

"The State is the curse of the individual. How has the national strength of Prussia been purchased? By the sinking of the individual in a political and geographical formula. . . . The State must go! That will be a revolution which will find me on its side. Undermine the idea of the State, set up in its place spontaneous action, and the idea that spiritual relationship is the only thing that makes for unity, and you will start the elements of a liberty which will be something worth possessing."

The State was not the only *bête noire* of Henrik Ibsen. Every other institution which, like the State, rests upon a lie, was an iniquity to him. Uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy, Ibsen consistently strove to uproot every stone of our social structure. Above all did he thunder his fiery indictment against the four cardinal sins of modern society: the Lie inherent in our social arrangements; Sacrifice and Duty, the twin curses that fetter the spirit of man; the narrow-mindedness and pettiness of Provincialism, that stifles all growth; and the Lack of Joy and Purpose in Work which turns life into a vale of misery and tears.

So strongly did Ibsen feel on these matters, that in none of his works did he lose sight of them. Indeed, they recur again and again, like a *Leitmotif* in music, in everything he wrote. These issues form the keynote to the revolutionary significance of his dramatic works, as well as to the psychology of Henrik Ibsen himself.

It is, therefore, not a little surprising that most of the interpreters and admirers of Ibsen so enthusiastically accept his art, and yet remain utterly indifferent to, not to say ignorant of, the message contained in it. That is mainly because they are, in the words of Mrs. Alving, "so pitifully afraid of the light." Hence they go about seeking mysteries and hunting symbols, and completely losing sight of the meaning that is as

clear as daylight in all of the works of Ibsen, and mainly in the group of his social plays, "The Pillars of Society," "A Doll's House," "Ghosts," and "An Enemy of the People."