IN ANY HISTORICAL account of the world’s greatest dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are followed after a long gap first by William Shakespeare, then by Jean Baptiste Racine, after whom, it seems, there is another break: for a hundred years after Racine’s death no one writes tragedies of any note, and it is scarcely thought proper that a man of the Enlightenment should even make the attempt. The eighteenth century, the century in which modern science began to establish itself, is untragic, and historians who take a very broad view—some would say too broad—see nemesis in this: the consolations of tragedy are denied to the world of rationalism and freethinking. We live today, the same historians continue, in an age when tragedy has died. But the skeptic, considering that the Greek dramatists are separated from the English and the French by about 2,000 years, and that however many tragedies were written in this period, only nine, all by Seneca, are extant, will not be persuaded that these speculations mean very much. And in any case, he will ask, was not the second half of the nineteenth century the age of Ibsen: is tragedy not restored to the heights in him?

Certainly Ibsen brings to the theater a way that was becoming more and more photographic and thus, arguably, “scientific” in its realism, themes linked with those of the Greeks. Hedda Gabler (1890) is Euripides’ Medea in modern dress; Hedda is the murderer of her lover’s child in a new guise. Ghosts (1881) translates the Fate of Greek tragedy into a scientifically verifiable equivalent, inherited disease. John Gabriel Borkman and Halvard Solness, one the owner of an ocean-steamship company, the other an architect, challenge whatever gods are available to their generation in a mood akin to what the Greeks would have called hubris, overwhelming pride. The form of the late plays, too, is akin to classical drama, both French and Greek, in its unity of subject, and often in its unity of time and place as well. The huge Shakespearean casts of Ibsen’s earlier plays are reduced sometimes to a mere half dozen, the stage often occupied by only two characters at a time. Yet the topics could not be more modern: women’s liberation in A Doll’s House (1879); Freudian longings in The Lady from the Sea (1888); ruthless profiteering in Pillars of Society (1877); “free love” in Rosmersholm (1886). True, Ibsen denied any propagandist intentions or even an interest in the rights of women; but although the ideas of his characters were not identical with his own, they helped to establish his reputation, which still stands almost as high as that of any dramatist before his time.

There have always been dissenters. Even in his native Norway, Ibsen has been seen by some as too international, not sufficiently Norwegian, too vaguely general to be anything in particular. More damaging potentially has been the charge that his characters are not
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Anstey, F. Mr Punch's Pocket Ibsen. London, 1893.


