

## THE DE-DRAMATIZATION OF HISTORY AND THE PROSE OF BOURGEOIS LIFE

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There has been a remarkable rise in interest in *Emperor and Galilean* during the last decades, and this new interest has been accompanied by a re-evaluation of the play. *Emperor and Galilean* has traditionally been held in high esteem by some idealists and historians of ideas, but generally not by literary critics. Northrop Frye is representative: “When Ibsen maintains that *Emperor and Galilean* is his greatest play [...], one can only say that Ibsen is an indifferent critic of Ibsen” (Frye, 1957/1971, 5).

The rehabilitation of the play in our times has been accompanied by different views on continuity and discontinuity in Ibsen’s work and how to locate *Emperor and Galilean* in such a perspective. Atle Kittang maintains that Ibsen’s work is most fundamentally characterized by inner unity and continuity (Kittang, 2002, 27). He reads *Emperor and Galilean* as one of Ibsen’s many elaborations on the theme of heroism, starting with *Brand* and finishing with the last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. Toril Moi is convinced, and in this respect I agree with her, that a major reorientation is taking place in Ibsen’s authorship during the 1870s. She interprets this as a change from the question of Norwegian nationality and idealist aesthetics to a European orientation and to modernism, making *Emperor and Galilean* the turning point. She claims that “*Emperor and Galilean* is pivotal in Ibsen’s work, literally as well as figuratively” (Moi, 2006, 188).

Moi and Kittang agree that *Emperor and Galilean* deserves more attention. Kittang calls it a “great work of dramatic art” (Kittang, 2011, 136). Lisbeth Pettersen Wærp has convincingly shown that Ibsen’s poetic mastery can be enjoyed also in this play (Wærp, 2002, 27–112). My attitude is more critical partly because my interests are different, more concerned with the ideology of the play, that is, the directions it gives for “taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it” (White, 1973, 22). I hold that to be a highly relevant concern, since “history” seems to be a major topic of the play. From my argument also follows, contrary to Moi’s claim, that there is no clear line leading from what Ibsen himself at the time called his “major work” (“hovedværk”) to the series of contemporary dramas he wrote from the end of the 1870s. I will argue that *Emperor and Galilean* left Ibsen in a far more ambiguous situation than is generally assumed.

The “meta-concern” with history distinguishes *Emperor and Galilean* from Ibsen’s earlier history plays. In his earlier plays he had used the past partly as a heroic example or yardstick for the present. Why, asked Georg Brandes, did Ibsen choose the “wild tragic and grand horror” of the *Vølsunga* saga for *The Vikings at Helgeland*? It was, he answered, to hold up a mirror to the present, to impress and disgrace it by showing the grandeur of the forefathers, their untamed passions, their pride and strength and their unsurpassed achievements (Brandes, 1898, 70–71). And indeed, when Ibsen wrote about contemporary politics in the 1850s, it was consistently in a comical, satirical mode.

Ibsen used history partly as a series of plots, fates, and characters in which he sought to read his own life and locate himself (Robinson, 1998, 63). *The Pretenders* is an example. *Emperor and Galilean*, however, seems to question whether history has any meaning at all. Before we hail that as a sign of its modernity, I think we should take Ibsen's own ideological positioning in the early 1870s into consideration. We should be careful, of course, about equating Ibsen's dramatic art with his "politics", or rather "anti-politics". But it would be equally mistaken to separate them completely. At least Ibsen himself insisted that *Emperor and Galilean* was closely connected to contemporary developments.

Contemporary critics often relate the time of the action of *Emperor and Galilean* (the middle of the fourth century) to Ibsen's own time. Both, it is claimed, were characterized by "crisis", "chaos", "confusion", "ambiguity", "uncertainty", "emptiness", "nothingness" and so on. Julian's experience is then equated to the experience of the essence of modernity (Østerud, 2011, 121, 132). In one of her subheadings, Toril Moi is more specific: "Europe after 1871: War, Doubt, and the Death of God" (Moi, 2006, 191). Reference is often made to Ibsen's letter to Georg Brandes at the end of 1870, where Ibsen refers to the destruction of France in the war with the German states that same autumn: "The old illusory France has been smashed to bits, and as soon the new, *de facto* Prussia is also smashed too, we shall enter the age of the future in one leap. How the old ideas will come tumbling about our ears!" (to G. Brandes 20 December 1870; Ibsen 1965, 106)

Before we convert these events and remarks into the emergence and experience of modernity, it would be wise to ask: chaotic and empty for whom? And compared with what? Ibsen lived in Germany in the 1870s and there was no sense of chaos or emptiness in Germany at the time: quite the contrary. There was a general enthusiasm for the successful war against France, for German unification, and for the great achievements of the German people. Ibsen's letter is wishful thinking, but the new, *de facto* Germany did not collapse at all.

I shall argue that Ibsen does not express a general "European" experience of modernity, whatever that might be, but rather the marginalized experiences of defeat, isolation, and estrangement. The major historical event, to Ibsen, was 1864 – the Danish defeat at the hands of Prussia and Austria. Not only did Denmark lose Schleswig in the war of that year; at the same time, the national-liberal Danish policy initiated processes that led to a consolidated German state under Prussian leadership. After what Ibsen conceived to be the Swedish-Norwegian betrayal of Denmark, he proclaimed that from now on the heroic past could no longer be evoked. 1864 was also the year when he first became interested in the Julian theme (letter to Bjørnson 16 September 1864; Ibsen 1965, 37–38).

During the years that followed, Ibsen hated Prussia and everything Prussian. When the Franco-German war broke out in the autumn of 1870 he hoped, like most Scandinavians, for a French victory. His son Sigurd was beaten in school in Dresden because he couldn't keep quiet about his French sympathies. In December Ibsen sent his "balloon-letter to a Swedish lady", comparing his own isolation in Dresden to the situation of the beleaguered population of Paris. In the spring of 1871 he was attacked for anti-German sentiments in German newspapers. In the so-called balloon-

letter he compared Prussia to what he conceived of as an un-individualized, lifeless, frozen, ancient Egypt.

He also lamented the fact that von Moltke's industrialized, rational warfare had "murdered warfare's poesy", as he put it (Ibsen/Northam, 1986, 110). In Italy in 1864 Ibsen had held up the heroism of the legendary Garibaldi and his men in contrast to the cowardice of his own fellow countrymen. But what did this heroism lead to? It only led to the expansion of what Ibsen detested: the domain of politics and state power. In the wake of the Franco-German war the papal state fell and Rome was incorporated into the new Italy. Ibsen complained to Brandes: "They have finally taken Rome away from us human beings and given it to the politicians. Where shall we take refuge now? Rome was the one sanctuary in Europe, the only place that enjoyed true freedom – freedom from the tyranny of political freedom" (to G. Brandes 20 December 1870: Ibsen, 1965, 106).

Ibsen took up the Julian theme again and again from 1864, but it was only after German unification in the spring of 1871 that he was able to devote himself to it fully, publishing the play two years later, in 1873. During these two years his attitude towards the new Germany changed and he came to appreciate German unification as a great historical achievement. In a polemical poem written in 1872, on the millennium of Harald Hårfagre's supposed unification of Norway, Ibsen sent new and quite different signals:

Observe time's law! It may not be denied.

Cavour and Bismarck wrote it as *our* guide (Ibsen/Northam, 1986, 134).

So, what are Ibsen's experiences of history? They are experiences of defeat, counter-finality, unpredictability, historical irony and asymmetry between means and results, causes and effects. These historical experiences seem to be an important background to *Emperor and Galilean* and they are, I think, reflected in the play in at least two fundamental ways.

The first is the distance established between action and history, between human intentions and historical events. Julian wants to create history, and moulds himself on great forerunners such as Alexander and Julius Caesar. But the more powerful he gets, and the higher his ambitions, the more ineffective he becomes. At the end, in something that seems to be the closest we get to a "moment of truth" in this play, Julian conceives of himself as an instrument for some external force to which he will never gain access. Basilios, his one-time friend and now a leader of the persecuted Christians, asks if he has anything to regret and Julian answers no:

JULIAN: [...] The power which circumstances placed in my hands, and which is an expression of the divine spirit, I used as best I knew. [...] and although some might feel that I have not achieved all I might have, they should remember that there is a mysterious power outside and above us which to an essential degree determines the outcome of human enterprises (Ibsen/Meyer, 1986, 297–298).

The second feature is the distance between plot and history. In an often-quoted letter to Edmund Gosse dating from January 1874, Ibsen wrote that he had not wanted to

write a traditional tragedy. At the same time he repeatedly claimed that he had been faithful to history. There was no bias to the play, he wrote to Brandes at an early stage; “jeg ser på karaktererne, på de krydsende planer, på *historien*”. In the English translation the distinction I am aiming at is lost since history and plot is conflated: “I explore the characters, their conflicting plans, the plot” (to G. Brandes 24 September 1871; Ibsen, 1965, 115).

The distance between action and history and between plot and history turns history, for Julian, into an empty, unsignifying space – a space where meaning is withdrawn, it is “[s]ign against sign”, until finally “[a]ll the omens are silent” (Ibsen/Meyer, 1986, 182, 281). As readers and interpreters we are left in the same situation as Julian: no definite meaning can be fixed, interpretation stands against interpretation. Is this a play about victorious Christianity, with Julian as an unwilling tool? That is the interpretation of the Christian characters of the play, but the play does not provide us with good enough reasons to privilege their interpretation. Did Ibsen, after all, believe in some kind of “third empire”? He said so once, but he also said that the subtitle “world historical play” should denote that it was about conflicts that were universal and would therefore repeat themselves at all times (to L.L. Daae 23 February 1873). Or is *Emperor and Galilean* a kind of tragedy after all? Many critics have found Julian, an emperor with increasingly totalitarian ambitions, wanting as a tragic hero.

This inability to fix a meaning may of course be taken as the foremost indication of the play’s modernity. And if we compare it with history writing at the same time, we might be tempted to concur with the admirers of *Emperor and Galilean*. The same year that Ibsen finished *Emperor and Galilean*, Ernst Sars, one of Ibsen’s old acquaintances from Kristiania, published the first volume of his monumental *Udsigt over den norske Historie* (Overview of the History of Norway). Norwegian history, Sars said, might seem to fall into three distinct parts without any necessary inner connection: the great medieval history, the descent into a long union with Denmark, and the new independence since 1814. His aim was to show that these periods constituted not just a chronological sequence, but a causal unity. In other words, Sars set out to emplot Norwegian history into one coherent story, starting in the Viking era and culminating in his own time. There was no doubt about the meaning of this story – it was all about the growth towards full independence, a task that it was left to the contemporary generation to fulfill.

With Ibsen and Sars respectively, then, we can observe movements going in opposite directions. Where the scholarly historian Sars emplotted history into an easily recognizable romantic national narrative, the dramatist Ibsen depicted a history where no clear plot was discernible. Where Sars closed the gap between action and history, and envisioned a future where the people would be the sovereign subjects of their own destiny, Ibsen offered the archetypal ironic vision that “heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world” (Frye, 1957/1971, 192).

Sars’ history is a perfect example of Hayden White’s argument that realist history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contained as much literary fiction in its structure as evidence-based facts in its details. Against the naive belief that historians simply find the narrative structure in the source material, White argues that historical plots are

always more of a construction than a reconstruction since any sequence of events can be plotted in a number of different ways. The choice of plot largely depends on aesthetic and ideological preferences (White, 1973). Historical emplotment therefore amounts to a kind of interpretative violence.

Following this argument we might acknowledge Ibsen as the more realist and modern of the two when he seems to abstain from imposing an easily recognizable plot on historical events. I have two reservations about such a conclusion, though. The first is that Sars' national history served as a narrative that motivated action, bestowed meaning, and eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy during the constitutional struggle and the struggle for independence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the Nietzschean "burden of history" perspective, which informs much of the discourse about these matters, this fact should unambiguously redound to Sars' credit. Besides, the success of the national movement that Sars belonged to, measured also against liberal and democratic standards, does not make it easy to decide who was the greater realist.

My second reservation is more important. Ibsen's alternative to providing history with a clear-cut narrative or dramatic meaning seems to be irrationalism. There are, in my opinion, interesting parallels between the implicit philosophy of history in *Emperor and Galilean* and the explicit philosophy of history in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, published a few years earlier (1863–69) (see White, 2007). In *War and Peace* Tolstoy mocks any attempt at rational historical explanation. He claims that we are bound to conclude that anything that happens is caused by an endless chain of events, which makes them predetermined from past eternity. History then becomes a force that makes things happen, even though we may feel perfectly free in our individual lives. The most reasonable attitude we can adopt seems to be the kind of passivity demonstrated by the completely un-heroic General Kutuzov. As head of the Russian army in the utmost crisis he does almost nothing, but saves Russia, destroys Napoleon and liberates Europe. In fact, Kutuzov may be perceived as the perfect counter-image of Julian.

Ibsen himself said, as is well known, that his work on Julian had in a way made him a fatalist. The context of the utterance is as follows: Georg Brandes had written to him while preparing his famous lectures in Copenhagen in the autumn of 1871. We do not know the contents of the letter from Brandes, but he obviously felt isolated and wanted Ibsen, as a leading poet, to give a signal to the younger generation. Ibsen answered (24 September 1871):

And so I should raise a banner, should I? My dear friend, I would be putting on the same kind of performance Louis Napoleon did when he landed at Boulogne with an eagle on his head. Later, when the hour of his destiny struck, he didn't need any eagle. In the course of my work on Julian, I have become a fatalist in a way (to G. Brandes 24 September 1871; Ibsen, 1965, 115).

Louis Bonaparte Napoleon attempted a coup d'état in 1840. He landed in Boulogne with 60 men, and as the legend goes an eagle had been trained to circle over his head. He was sentenced to life imprisonment but escaped easily in 1846. In 1848, the revolutionary year, he won the presidential election in December with an over-

whelming majority. Two years later he carried out a successful coup d'état and proclaimed himself emperor.

This example seems to suggest that when the time is ripe, appropriate action will take place, but for reasons that are beyond comprehension. And it is in vain to try to create the appropriate situation, to create history, or to create a reasonable prognosis of its course and act accordingly.

There is obviously a necessary distance between action and history: history is exactly what transcends our intentions and expectations. But that does not mean that we have to choose between perfectly transparent narrative intelligibility and complete inexplicability. The distance between action and history is the field of historical explanation. Karl Marx provided a perfectly rational explanation of these events in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). He did so by emphasizing the isolation of the Parisian working class, the interests of the peasantry and the lower middle class, the appeal of the Napoleonic legend, the self-destructive undermining of parliamentary institutions by royalists and liberals, and so on.

Ibsen, for his part, invites us to contemplate the “mystery of election”. The concluding lines of *Emperor and Galilean* go like this:

BASIL. O Christ, Christ, where were Thy people that they did not hearken unto Thy voice? Emperor Julian was a rod to scourge us. Not unto death, but unto resurrection.

MAKRINA. His ways are mysterious and terrible. How shall we understand them?

BASIL. Is it not written: ‘Some vessels are created for dishonor, and some for glory’?

MAKRINA. Oh, my brother, let us not seek to fathom that abyss. (*She bends over the corpse and covers its face*). Deluded soul – if you were forced into delusion, it shall surely be forgiven you on the latter day when the Mighty One shall descend upon a cloud to judge the living who are dead and the dead who are alive. (Ibsen/Meyer, 1986, 300).

This ending seems to support a Christian interpretation of the play. Against such an interpretation we can argue that there is disagreement between the characters as to what mission Julian served. Just before this exchange Maximus has made other, highly enigmatic claims. The play in any case leaves us with the ideas of necessity and election, and consequently some kind of Providence, in order to fill the abyss that has opened between human action and history.

Why was this solution acceptable to Ibsen? I believe it has something to do with the personal problematic that Ibsen also repeatedly referred to as a background to the play. Underlying much of what is written about *Emperor and Galilean* seems to be an assumption that Ibsen was interested in and valued freedom. But both his letters and his dramatic work in these years suggest that he was not. He was primarily interested in and valued the serving of a cause. He cared only about the struggle for liberty: “I care nothing for the possession of it” (to G. Brandes 20 December 1870; Ibsen, 1965, 106). Ibsen was, during the 1860s and well into the 1870s, totally consumed by the question of personal weakness and empowerment. He saw service as a means of gaining meaning and personal strength (very reminiscent

of the later Max Weber). And serving a cause had to have the force of an absolute, necessary calling.

This preoccupation has to do with all the uncertainties surrounding Ibsen's efforts to establish himself as an author during the 1860s. He had no independent financial means, a Norwegian literary field hardly existed, and he did not have the self-confidence of his contemporary and rival Bjørnson. The Nordic break-through with *Brand* in 1866 changed things a great deal. Ibsen wrote to the critic Clemens Petersen afterwards, saying that it was no longer a question "of 'want to be' but of 'must be'. You have helped me across that yawning gulf" (to C. Petersen 9 March 1867; Ibsen, 1965, 64). Later he tried to encourage Brandes by saying: "then you will do what you must do. A nature such as yours has no choice" (to G. Brandes 20 December 1870; Ibsen, 1965, 106).

By the time Ibsen wrote *Emperor and Galilean*, his own Sturm und Drang period was over. His authorial identity was consolidated and stabilized. And for that matter, selection could well be a mystery.

The ideological implications of *Emperor and Galilean* can also be judged according to Ibsen's explicit utterances on ideological and political matters in the early 1870s. I willingly admit that they are contradictory, confusing, and seemingly without any coherence at all. But one of the problems in the critical literature on Ibsen is that tensions are usually harmonized by privileging the writer's seemingly radical side and marginalizing the explicitly reactionary voices in his polemics.

We may take Ibsen's relation to Georg Brandes as indicative of this. Toril Moi claims that *Emperor and Galilean* is the first major work of literature written as a conscious response to Brandes's lectures (Moi, 2006, 283). Ibsen's well-known letter to Brandes from 4 April 1872 is the main evidence of this. It is the letter which contains the phrases "No more dangerous book could fall into the hands of a pregnant writer", "mortal combat between two epochs", "anything is better than the existing state of affairs" (to G. Brandes 4 April 1872; Ibsen, 1965, 123). In an earlier letter to Brandes, Ibsen had demanded "a revolution of the human spirit" as an alternative to purely political revolutions (to G. Brandes 20 December 1870; Ibsen, 1965, 106–107).

Is this an indication that Ibsen was even more "radical" than Brandes? I see it rather as a form of directionless abstract radicalism. To the extent that it had any direction, the main target consistently turned out to be those who fought for political reform, that is, liberals and democrats. So, alongside Ibsen the apparent anarchist, we find a staunch supporter of the forces of order. He declared himself firmly on the side of the government (to Demirgian 23 November 1870). He claimed that when French soldiers blamed the leaders for the French defeat at Sedan, this was "natural in men belonging to a revolutionary nation, which lacks proper discipline and control. We Norwegians ought to take a lesson from this; for it is in the direction of exactly such internal disintegration that fellows like Jaabæk, Johan Sverdrup, etc., are trying to draw our nation" (to J.H. Thoresen 21 November 1870). He called these liberal leaders "our demagogic political millennialists" (to Birkeland 10 October 1871; Ibsen, 1908, 222), and he only regretted that the guardians of order allowed people like Bjørnson and Jaabæk to operate freely: "People who permit Jaabaek and

Bjørnson to be at large deserve to be locked up themselves” (to Thoresen 27 September 1872; Ibsen, 1965, 129).

Paying tribute to the reigning powers is the position most consistent with historical fatalism. Following Pierre Bourdieu, we can also interpret this as a sign of a weak literary field. Given a high degree of literary autonomy, authors tend to be more indifferent to external power of any kind; before they have achieved such autonomy, sympathies will tend to gravitate towards the most powerful poles (Bourdieu, 2000, 105–10). Ibsen fits into such a pattern very well, while Bjørnson had a weight of his own.

To some extent, Ibsen adjusted his rhetoric to the addressee. But in personal meetings with Brandes he did not restrain himself at all. After meeting Ibsen in Dresden in 1872, Brandes reported that Ibsen considered all parliamentary politicians – explicitly not a man like Bismarck – to be liars, hypocrites and dilettantes for their outdated preoccupation with political questions. His discontent was accompanied by a belief in a strong monarchy that would uphold an aristocratic spirit and destroy the liberals; he was furious about Bjørnson’s republicanism (Brandes, 1994, vol. 1, 15–17). Following a further meeting in Dresden in 1874, Brandes was rather shocked by Ibsen’s gloomy prediction that one day the intelligent minority might be forced to use chemistry and medicine to avoid being politically swamped by a proletarian majority (Brandes & Brandes, 1939–42, vol. 1, 313–14). Dresden was at that time one of the strongholds of the German Social Democratic Party. In 1877 the leader of the Social Democrats, August Bebel, was elected in Dresden to the German Reichstag.

In 1877 came *The Pillars of Society*. It was rather positively received by Georg Brandes, but did not at all impress his brother Edvard. Bjørnson thought it was a pathetic effort from Ibsen to adjust to new tendencies without jeopardizing his position with the conservatives. The distance between the cultural positions of Ibsen and Brandes may be measured by two events taking place in the autumn of 1877. Whilst an honorary doctorate was being conferred on Ibsen in Uppsala in Sweden, Brandes left Denmark for Germany after the University of Copenhagen repeatedly had denied him the professorship in literature for which he obviously was the person best qualified. After moving to Germany, Brandes had no contact with Ibsen until 1882. As late as October 1879, less than two months before the publication of *A Doll’s House*, Brandes wrote that Ibsen “in den letzten Jahren den Stock-conservativen huldigt” / “in recent years has been courting the arch conservatives” (to P. Heyse; Brandes, 1952–66, vol. 3, 200). Brandes had set his hope for the future of Scandinavian literature on new authors Alexander Kielland and August Strindberg. *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts* came as much as a surprise to him as to anyone else.

It is, then, hard to accept that *Emperor and Galilean* should be Ibsen’s response to Brandes and his call for a modern literature. Brandes himself did not like *Emperor and Galilean* (Brandes 1994, vol. 1, 90–91) and the story of the Brandes-Ibsen relationship in the 1870s is the story of a growing divide. In literary terms *Emperor and Galilean* did not set Ibsen on a new course. The de-dramatization of history did not immediately prepare Ibsen for the prose of bourgeois life. Instead, Ibsen searched out a series of different routes and strategies the following years. It



has been generally accepted that *Emperor and Galilean* was Ibsen's definite departure from the historical drama, but that conclusion needs qualification. A recently discovered Ibsen-letter from 1875 (to D.C. Danielssen), held together with another one dating from the same time, suggests that as late as 1875, Ibsen was preparing a new play based on medieval Norwegian history. In 1876 he was engaged in preparing translations of two of his Norwegian history plays to German. And in 1877–78 he started working on an opera libretto based on his early *Olaf Liljekrans*. Edvard Grieg was to compose the music. This plan probably emerged from their success with *Peer Gynt*, and may also be related to all the interest surrounding the first Wagner festival at Bayreuth in 1876. Ibsen and Grieg seem first to have discussed the plan in Gossensass in 1876 upon Grieg's return from Bayreuth (Ystad ed., 2005–10, vol. 2k, 670–72).

One might wonder how Ibsen's literature would have developed if he had been absorbed by German culture in the 1870s. But he was not, and it was as part of an emerging literary field in Scandinavia that Ibsen reinvented himself in the 1870s. Bjørnson wrote the first contemporary "social plays" in 1875. Bjørnson was also deeply involved in the political conflicts of the 1870s which deeply affected the position and direction of literature and authors. In both Denmark and Norway the state became divided in an antagonistic struggle between liberal parliamentary majorities and conservative governments. This also polarized the fields of culture and literature. The center of gravity moved towards the left, contrary to the situation in Germany, and by the end of the 1870s alliances were formed between the political left and the "literary left", as it was called in Denmark and Norway. The Swedes had their "Young Sweden", with the same kind of alliance, at the same time.

Ibsen was not at the head of this movement, and joined rather hesitantly. But when he did so, he used it for his own literary purposes and gave the movement a momentum that it would not have had without him. By 1881, Ibsen had definitely regained the literary hegemony. He soon transcended any party affiliation and created a quite autonomous space for himself. And by the 1890s, with his breakthrough in Europe, Ibsen enjoyed a universal reputation in Scandinavia far beyond that of anyone else.

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### Biographical note

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### Summary

*Emperor and Galilean* has received renewed interest the last decade. It has been revalued and upgraded, it has been attributed a major role in the development of Ibsen's authorship, and it has been interpreted as an expression of the new uncertainties of modernity. The play definitely deviates from Ibsen's earlier historical dramas; it does not hold up an exemplary past or try to emulate a classical style. Rather, it seems to question history as a rational discourse and man's capacity to create history in a self-conscious way. It is argued that *Emperor and Galilean* reflects Ibsen's own experiences, more precisely: his experiences of defeat, estrangement and reorientation connected to the Danish defeat to Prussia-Austria in 1864 and the unification of Germany in the years that followed. Ibsen's historical experiences were primarily the experiences of counter-finality and historical irony. During the Franco-German war in 1870 he still hoped for a French victory, but a few

years later he came to appreciate German unification as a world historical event. The resulting attitude was a kind of fatalism reminiscent of the one we find in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, published a few years earlier, but of course unknown to Ibsen. This fatalism fit well with Ibsen's conservatism at the time. It left him in a rather ambiguous position, though, and there is no straight literary path leading from *Emperor and Galilean* to the contemporary plays of the 1880s and 1890s.

**Keywords**

*Emperor and Galilean*, history, politics, historical drama, modern drama, Georg Brandes