

**BETWEEN OCCULTISM AND DRAMA  
HENRIK IBSEN AND ALEISTER CROWLEY**

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THE DEATH OF THE DRUNKARD

I.

TERROR, and darkness, and horrid despair!  
Agony painted upon the once fair  
Brow of the man who refused to give up  
The love of the wine-filled, the o'erflowing cup.  
"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging."  
No wine in death is his torment assuaging.

II.

Just what the parson had told me when young:  
Just what the people in chapel have sung:  
"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging."

"Desunt cetera."

1. This, the earliest poem ever written by me, has perished save the above fragment. Its date is 1886. -- A.C. (Crowley, 1906, 1)

This poem is not mentioned here for any hidden literary value that I intend to unveil for you, but for a peculiar paratextual feature. The future writer and occultist Aleister Crowley apparently wrote "The Death of the Drunkard" as an eleven-year-old schoolboy. Twenty years later, in 1906, the poem was first printed in *The Collected Works of Aleister Crowley*, with the following gloss by its editor Ivor Back: "It should be noted that this fragment is of a wildly revolutionary tendency. It made him the Ibsen of a school where a parson and a chapel were considered with the rest of the non-Plymouth-Brethren world as so many devils let loose from hell" (Ibid.).

In this article I will propose an interpretation of this connection between Ibsen and Crowley and place it in the larger context of the multi-faceted and frequent references to Ibsen that Aleister Crowley made at the beginning of his career as a writer and occultist. I will claim that his reading of Ibsen can give new insights into the mechanisms of the reception of Ibsen, and that it allows for a reading of some of his plays within an occult discourse. Also, it provides an opportunity to treat Crowley with a different attitude than the irony and disdain to which he is often exposed.

Aleister Crowley is arguably one of the most influential figures in modern occultism.<sup>1</sup> His magical practices and esoteric writings, which he cultivated alongside a rich literary production and a fairly good career as mountain climber, painter and chess player, “have heavily influenced contemporary new religious movements of a magical and neo-pagan bent” (Pasi, 2006, 281). As a consequence of his bad reputation, due to the alleged depravity of his rituals, drug abuse and moral subjugation of his adepts, Crowley has been idealized as a pop culture icon as often as he has been dismissed as a charlatan. Nevertheless, he has been the object of no fewer than ten different biographies, which testify that he still fascinates the international reader community. One of the curious things about Crowley is his recurrent presence in many different and heterogeneous literary contexts, such as Decadence, the Celtic Revival, the French avant-garde and the English vorticists, just to mention a few examples. He was a prolific and multi-faceted literary figure, and – although the quality of his writings is very uneven – his literary production and position in the European avant-garde still awaits proper recognition.

Let us go back to the poem. Whether it was really written in 1886 is an open question, especially if one takes into account that Crowley does not seem to have given signs of rebellion or unease towards society until a year later. Crowley had been raised in a very religious family based in Warwickshire and tied to the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian sect that focused on a literal interpretation of the Bible and on strict moral conduct. This environment does not seem to have annoyed him until the death of his father, for whom he had a great admiration, in 1887, when he was left to the care of his bigoted mother and his uncle (Pasi, 1998, 44-48). From this point on, a revolt against the Christian religion started to mount inside the young Crowley, first as an act of rebellion towards his family, and later as a complex and long-lasting refusal of the Christian revelation. The representation of the dying drunkard and the upcoming nemesis balances a fascination for decadence and a sense of impending doom that Crowley inherited from the Plymouth Brethren and never really abandoned (Bogdan, 2012). This may actually suggest that the poem was written later than what Crowley states in the *Collected Works*, and possibly after his turbulent years at Trinity College in Cambridge (1895-1898), where he engaged in the abuse of alcohol and sex and started writing poetry in the vein of British Decadence (Kaczynski, 2010, 32-50). Furthermore, the “Ibsen” label applied to “The Death of the Drunkard”, officially given by the editor of the *Collected Works*, in practice voices Crowley’s opinion, as he was actually the publisher of the collection; this is particularly interesting, because it does not represent Crowley’s view of Ibsen in 1886, when he was 11 years old and the Norwegian playwright was still very little known in England, but of an adult who looks back at his work in 1906. So, what lies behind this link with Ibsen, and what had happened in the intervening years that might have led Crowley to give himself such a label?

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<sup>1</sup> Occultism is here intended as “the [...] manifestations of fin-de-siècle esotericism” (Hanegraaff, 2006, 888). Drawing on Antoine Faivre’s statutory definition (1993, 4-8), esotericism is intended as a “form of thought” which originated in the Western world during the Renaissance, concerned with a body of ancient works essentially focused on three “traditional sciences”, i.e. alchemy, astrology and magic.

Ibsen's English reception reached its peak in the early 1890s and was polarized on a struggle between conservatism and radicalism. The "Ibsen controversy" of the early nineties mainly focused on Ibsen's immoral and decadent, if not directly feminist, atheist and socialist views – most of which were little more than labels the "Ibsenites" and the "Ibsenophobics" had put on him (Rem 2006). In 1895, when this process of reception had reached its apogee and was starting to decline, Crowley entered Trinity College at Cambridge. Already dissatisfied by his strict moral upbringing, Crowley was exposed to agnosticism and cultural materialism, which were dominant currents at university in that period, and this made his relationship with religion increasingly difficult. He started cultivating thoughts of rebellion, on both a religious and political level, and found his arch-enemies in Christianity and Victorianism (Pasi, 1998, 48-51). Up to a certain point, the polarized Ibsen reception had been symptomatic of the same struggle against the Victorian system of values that was mounting in Crowley at Cambridge. The British Ibsen was made an icon of this movement and his critique of the European bourgeoisie was turned into a critique of Victorianism. This is clearly mirrored in Crowley's writings: just to mention one example, his autobiography *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* is littered with references to Ibsen as an ally in his battle against Victorianism (1971, *ad indicem*). We may look at this reading of Ibsen as a "rebel" against society as an outdated interpretive key, yet Crowley's use of Ibsen as a tutelary deity is solid proof of how established this reception was. Crowley was so obsessed with this aspect of Ibsen that he often referred to him totally out of context, only in order to emphasize his own refusal of any imposition or rule of society. For example, in the 1922 novel *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, when the protagonist has just been picked up by a fishing smack after a dive *in his evening suit*, his first comment is: "Like Hedda Gabler – 'one doesn't do these things'" (Crowley, 2008, 41).

Such "social" reading of Ibsen took a more marked political turn towards the end of Crowley's student life, in 1898-1899. In Cambridge, he had studied literature intensely, with the Greek classics and the British Romantics as favourite readings. He started writing poems inspired by British Romanticism and Decadence, and developed an interest in the Celtic Revival, a fascination for Celtic culture and heritage that flourished in the British Isles in the 1890s. Crowley was so deeply into Celtic culture that he started supporting political views close to Jacobitism, claiming that the House of Hanover had usurped the throne of England and that the Stuarts should reclaim the monarchy. Crowley even claimed to have Celtic ancestors and changed his first name Alexander to its Celtic version, Aleister (Pasi, 1999, 60-71). Crowley's link to the Celtic Revival is important for his reception of Ibsen, because it introduced him to another exponent of this trend, the poet William Butler Yeats. Crowley first met Yeats in 1898, when, having left university and having started to be seriously interested in the occult, he was admitted in the London-based Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an order of Masonic and Rosicrucian inspiration where Yeats had been a member since 1890. Yeats' judgment on Ibsen has traditionally been considered to be negative, based mainly on the Norwegian's alleged lack of poetic qualities and for his interest in realism (Rem, 2007, 188-194). However, as Irina Rupp Malone has successfully shown (2010, 25-31), Yeats' opinions of Ibsen's plays were far more diversified than what has been transmitted by later

scholarship, and this is especially true in the period in which he and Crowley met at the Golden Dawn. Between 1898 and 1899, in fact, Yeats wrote articles and held speeches in which he praised Ibsen as a founder of a national drama and literature rooted in its characters and traditions. Such praise was both embedded in the Celtic Revival and instrumental to Yeats' dramatic ambition of the period, which was to found an Irish national theatre inspired by the Norwegian one. There is no concrete proof that Crowley exchanged views on Ibsen with Yeats in their intense literary discussions in 1899. They also had a difficult relationship, due to internal tensions in the Golden Dawn. Yet, there is a series of elements that, I argue, would encourage reading Crowley's interest in Ibsen in the light of their mutual cultural impulses. Not coincidentally, Crowley's legitimism, which had been thus far focused on Scotland, took a turn to Ireland towards 1900, shortly after his meeting with Yeats. In his writings of the period, Crowley hailed Ireland as the land of freedom and as a repository of that Celtic heritage which would oust the usurping domination of the House of Hanover. This usurpation – and this is the important link to Ibsen – was the direct origin of his arch-enemy, Victorianism. So if Ibsen, in this particular time span of 1898-1899, was seen as a model for the cause of the Irish theatre, which in turn signified Irish identity, this fitted perfectly in Crowley's Jacobitism and anti-Victorianism of the period. Ibsen was the right man at the right place, both in the service of the cause of Irish nationalism and anti-Victorianism. It is not coincidental, as we will see below, that he wrote the Ibsen-inspired play *The Mother's Tragedy* at the height of this period.

Although the focal point of Crowley's reception of Ibsen so far has been socio-political, this does not mean that this was Crowley's only interpretive key to the works of the Norwegian playwright. There is a small but rather noteworthy reference to Ibsen in the *Liber Al Vel Legis*, or *Book of the Law* (1904), the text which Crowley claimed to have received from a preternatural entity, Aiwass, and which became the "Bible" of his esoteric thought, Thelema. In the commentary to verse 21, Crowley states:

When an Artist – whether in Astronomy, like Copernicus, Anthropology, like Ibsen, or Anatomy, like Darwin – selects a set of facts too large, too recondite, or too "regrettable" to receive instant assent from everybody; when he presents conclusions which conflict with popular credence or prejudice; when he employs a language which is not generally intelligible to all; in such cases he must be content to appeal to the few. He must wait for the world to awake to the value of his work (2002, 109).

In his overview of these controversial personalities or "Artists", Crowley surely points at the "Ibsen controversy" of the early 1890s. However, Ibsen is given a new label as "Anthropologist", in other words a person who studies *the human being*. This is a considerable distinction from Crowley's earlier labelling of Ibsen as a "rebel", and even more interesting in the context in which it appears. Verse 21, of which the Ibsen reference is a commentary, reads as follows:

We have nothing with the outcast and the unfit: let them die in their misery. For they feel not. Compassion is the vice of kings: stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law and the joy of the world [...] (Ibid., 102).

This excerpt bears a clear Nietzschean and anti-Christian undertone (if not a vague reminiscence of *An Enemy of the People?*), which Crowley readily acknowledges; this is, however, not the main key for understanding the Ibsen reference. Crowley's command to "stamp down the wretched & the weak" (the Christian dogma, in other words) is an essential step in the spiritual process which is at the core of Thelema, i.e., the full realization of the individual, who must find his own "Will", or spiritual scope in life.<sup>2</sup> In this process, the "Artist" plays a key role:

He knows that he is a God, of the Sons of God; he has no fear or shame in showing himself of the seed of his Father. [...] Thus then must every Artist work. First, he must find himself. Next, he must find the form that is fitted to express himself. Next, he must love that form, as a form, adoring it, understanding it, and mastering it, with most minute attention, until it (as it seems) adapts itself to him with eager elasticity, and answers accurately and aptly, with the unconscious automatism of an organ perfected by evolution, to his most subtlest suggestion, to his most giant gesture. (Ibid., 107-108).

The Artist's task is therefore to find himself (or his Will, the ultimate goal of Thelema), elaborate a form that allows him to express himself consequently, and inspire others towards the discovery of their Will. In doing so, the Artist has to be ready to face criticism and controversy, first appealing to "a few" and then waiting "for the world to awake to the value of his work" (Ibid., 109). In the context of *The Book of the Law*, Ibsen acquires a high position as an Artist by being an "Anthropologist" and therefore the repository of supreme knowledge about the human being. This is a key point, because man is at the very centre of Thelema. As verse 3 of *The Book of the Law* recites, "Every man and every woman is a star", which implies that "each human being is an Element of the Cosmos, self-determined and supreme, co-equal with all other Gods" (Ibid., 25). The Artist is thus that human being who has already realized "that he is a God", and who can show it to others through the artistic "form" he has found. According to Crowley, Ibsen – and Crowley himself – are just two of these figures: as he put it in the foreword to the 1900 play *Tannhäuser*, Ibsen "had realised the changed and infinitely more complex conditions of life; our self-appointed spiritual guides notwithstanding, or, rather, withstanding in vain" (1993, 5). Although the commentaries to *The Book of the Law* date from a later

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<sup>2</sup> It must be said that an individualistic, "spiritual", and, to some extent, "esoteric" interpretation of Ibsen's works had already been attempted in the process of their reception in England. Henrietta Frances Lord, who translated *A Doll's House* into English in 1882, wrote an introduction to the translation, where she stated that "the idea behind *Nora* is: the goal of marriage is to free the personality of each human being" (quoted from Rem, 2006, 63, my translation). A year later, Lord would join the Theosophical Society, and she also cultivated an interest in psychical research, which culminated in the publication of the essay *Christian Science Healing*, first issued in 1888 and still reprinted today (Crawford, 2001, 357-358 and Lord 2012)

period than its “reception” in 1904, the identification between Ibsen-the-Artist-Crowley is evident in the label Crowley would give himself in 1906 with “The Death of the Drunkard”: like Ibsen, Crowley considered himself a “prophet” who would lead mankind to the discovery of their Will.

Crowley's first literary realization of the socio-political as well as spiritual impulses he found in Ibsen, came in a play he wrote in 1899, entitled *The Mother's Tragedy*. As Crowley puts it in *The Confessions*, it “seems to have been influenced by Ibsen, with a touch of Bulwer Lytton” (1971, 183). *The Mother's Tragedy* (Crowley, 1974) is one of Crowley's first attempts at writing drama, a genre which he cultivated throughout his life and which he successfully blended with his practices of ceremonial magic, culminating in the hybrid experiment of theatre magic *The Rites of Eleusis* in 1910. *The Mother's Tragedy* is a short and rather unpretentious one-act play, set in an unknown age and focused on a triangle between Cora, her illegitimate son Ulric, who is not aware of his parentage, and the young girl Madeline, who is in love with Ulric. Apart from the influence of Ibsen, to which I will return later, Crowley's reading of Greek tragedy shines bright throughout the play; the action is followed and commented upon by an entity called “The Spirit of Tragedy”, which acts as a coryphaeus. The plot is simple: shortly after Madeline has told Cora of her love of Ulric, the latter also declares his love to his mother, who is terrified at the thought of his son being in love with her. By degrees, Cora brings Ulric to the truth; the young man rages at his mother, who is guilty of having concealed the truth from him, but nevertheless claims the validity and purity of his love, opposing social conventions. Out of his mind, Ulric despises Cora as a mother and praises her as a mistress; in an outburst of rage, he kills Madeline but is finally overcome by his mother, who pushes him to die the same self-inflicted death in the name of morality. The doom of social conventions comes to be identified as Fate by The Spirit of Tragedy, thus establishing a clear link with Greek tragedy. Also, the theme of incest is evidently borrowed from *Oedipus Rex*. At the same time, Crowley's reading of Ibsen – and, I would argue, of *Ghosts* especially – is evident in the thematization of the role of the mother, who has clear parallels with Mrs. Alving, in the retrospective technique with which secrets are unveiled, and in the idea that “the sins of the fathers fall on their sons”. On the one hand, Cora incarnates the typical bourgeois double morality, for she has a bastard son but has concealed this from both him and the rest of the world. On the other hand, Ulric represents a revolt against these values: while Cora submits to moral authority and is obsessed by the idea of sin, Ulric tries to liberate himself from it; he does not renounce his marriage proposal even when his mother, in a desperate attempt to convince him to change his mind and at the same time conceal the truth, calls herself a prostitute and reminds him that she has already been married. Ulric despises her only when she appeals to motherly love: he declares incest and lust are noble sentiments, and challenges bourgeois morality and religion by tearing a Bible into pieces and tossing it into the fire. In an overturning of Oswald's request to be killed, it is Cora who commands Ulric, almost a Romantic hero, to take his own life, but he exits the scene as the moral winner. *The Mother's Tragedy* mirrors both the socio-political and the individualistic reception of Ibsen, with a marked spiritual, and especially anti-Christian tone: if Oswald questions Christian family morality in *Ghosts*, Crowley

makes “his” Oswald, Ulric, tear the Bible into pieces, causing his character to rise above the Christian revelation.

Although *The Mother's Tragedy* contains a few allusions to the practice of divination and to the Jewish Kabbalah, which Crowley had started studying at the Golden Dawn, the reference to Ibsen does not contain any specific esoteric element. Crowley gradually came to an esoterically informed reading of Ibsen, first with the above-mentioned quotation from *The Book of the Law*, and later in the treatise *The General Principles of Astrology*, which he started writing around 1914, partly published in 1927 and which was finally reconstructed from scattered fragments in 2002.<sup>3</sup> During these years, Crowley had made great magical progress, first leaving the Golden Dawn, then “receiving” the *Book of the Law*, later putting much effort into a “scientific” approach to occultism with the publication of the journal *The Equinox*. Throughout these years Crowley referred continually to Ibsen in his works and diaries, always with a marked radical undertone, be it socio-political or moral-spiritual.<sup>4</sup>

This brief overview of the interpretations and uses of Ibsen that Crowley expressed during his early years as writer and occultist is meant to suggest that further investigations of Ibsen's international reception, focused on less canonical discourses than a history of performances, criticism and book editions, may bring new insights to Ibsen studies and especially to the understanding of the status of the Norwegian playwright in the European public space of his age. Occultism is one of these discourses, and is still fairly virgin ground.<sup>5</sup> Although, in the twentieth century, it has been greatly marginalized in the hierarchy of the human sciences, occultism (and esotericism in general) was deeply embedded in the literary, cultural and historical environment of Ibsen's age, and should be taken into account when assessing the impact and the significance of his literary work. If Crowley, as one of the most prominent figures of modern occultism, believed that Ibsen “had realised the changed and infinitely more complex conditions of life” (1993, 5), it is highly probable that he is just the tip of the iceberg, and further entanglements in the realm of Ibsen and the occult are still waiting to be discovered.

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<sup>3</sup> In this treatise (Crowley and Adams 2002, 119; 401), Crowley briefly refers to the psychology of Hedda Gabler and to the concept of “the troll in us” from *The Master Builder* in order to explain the characteristics of, respectively, the Scorpio type and the planet Neptune.

<sup>4</sup> William Breeze, the editor of Crowley's diaries (which are largely yet unpublished) provided me with a list of references stretching from 1920 to 1943 (e-mail dated 7 June 2013).

<sup>5</sup> There are a limited number of studies, of very varying quality, that have touched upon questions related to Ibsen and esotericism, with a special focus on freemasonry (Vidalin, 1986 and Ghaderi, 2005), the symbology of the tarot (Lampl, 1973), astrology (Vik, 2001 and Gullfoss, 2010) and mysticism (Doerr, 2011).

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**Summary**

The article investigates the references to the works of Henrik Ibsen that the writer and occultist Aleister Crowley scattered in his writings around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the early phase of his career as a writer and occultist. Crowley's reading of Ibsen has a marked a socio-political bent, especially in his interpretation of the work of the Norwegian playwright as an act of rebellion against the bourgeois (and for Crowley, Victorian) system of values. Also, such view is enriched by a spiritual and individualistic interpretation of Ibsen as an "Artist", i.e., in the light of Crowley's occult doctrine, *Thelema*, of an individual who has found his own "Will" and can inspire others to do so. Such social and spiritual interpretations of Ibsen on Crowley's part found their literary realization in his one-act play *The Mother's Tragedy* (1899). The article claims that Crowley's reading of Ibsen can give some new insight in the mechanisms of reception of the Norwegian playwright, by opening up for a reading of some of his plays within an occult discourse. Also, it is an occasion to treat Crowley – a figure that was constantly present in the European cultural and literary life of the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of the first five decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> – with a different attitude than the irony and disdain to which he is often exposed.

**Biographical note**

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