

A DEFENCE OF TESMAN: HISTORIOGRAPHY IN *HEDDA GABLER*

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Hedda's tête-à-tête with Judge Brack seems to confirm the popular view of Hedda Gabler as a tragedy of a woman stifled by her union with a non-entity. Judge Brack tells Hedda that she should be happy: "you have got exactly the home you had set your heart on" (Ibsen, 1909, 77). "Do you too believe in that legend?" Hedda asks and of course proceeds to correct him saying that she merely pretended to covet the house out of pity for Tesman, who was "writhing in agony of having to find conversation" (77); and so the so called legend of Hedda's ideal house was born.

The wife of a historian Hedda dismantles the legend with new evidence, revising her own history for its reader, Brack. In the key 19th century historian Leopold von Ranke's words, Hedda offers Brack "a strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive though they may be" (Cited after Hughes-Warrington, 2008, 58). Hedda explains that his belief in what she calls a "legend" (which is a workable equivalent of the Norwegian *ønskehistoriet* [wish history]) was wrong; this means that the causal links he made between past and present events of her history are also incorrect. By implication, his rose-tinted view of the present needs to be reassessed.

The subject of history in *Hedda Gabler* has been explored by Brian Johnston, Elinor Fuchs, and more recently Matthew Wikander. Their work sheds light on the play's engagement with the ideas of Hegel and Nietzsche, the conflict between paganism and Christianity and Ibsen's own attitude to the future. My concern is principally with historiography: the methods and ideologies of history writing. The importance of the subject for the play will be seen through a defence of that frequently ridiculed but poorly understood historian of the Medieval Netherlands, Jørgen Tesman.¹

The subject of Tesman's long gestating work is "The Domestic Industries of Brabant during the Middle Ages". The phrase appears twice. In Act I, Aunt Julie responds to the painfully long title of Tesman's work: "Fancy—to be able to write on such a subject as that!" (18). The second mention of the title is in Act II, in the conversation between Hedda and Brack, when Hedda complains:

To hear nothing but the history of civilisation, morning, noon, and night ---

Brack: Everlastingly

Hedda: Yes, yes, yes! And then all this about the domestic industry of the middle ages ---! That's the most disgusting part of it! (58)

In both cases, Tesman's special subject is ridiculed: it is boring, it is irrelevant, and it is labour consuming. The comedic nature of both situations makes readers see Tesman as Hedda sees him. As a result, critics do not like the historian. Tesman is said to be "not capable of his own work" (Zucker, 1999, 204). In this figure, Ibsen is said to have

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for invaluable advice on the subject.

“indicted the historical profession”. (Kern, 2003, 54). He is often seen as the polar opposite of Hedda’s past lover Løvborg. Elinor Fuchs, for instance, explains:

There could be only one outcome in a true intellectual duel between the plodding Tesman ... and the visionary Lovberg, author of an original new work on the “civilisation of the future (64).

The tragedy is that this conflict is aborted, she argues, and Løvborg loses to Tesman through Hedda’s burning of the manuscript.

From that moment the world of the play, the torch of civilisation has passed from the future to the past, from the visionary, that is, to the philologist whose thorough but unimaginative scholarship will become civilisation’s only means of access to an unrecoverable work of genius (64).

Not all critics share Fuchs’ admiration of Løvborg’s project. His shifting unstable personality invites this critical ambivalence. By contrast, the negative view of Tesman is prevalent. As a consequence, it is easy to miss the point that Tesman’s approach to the study of history and his particular field were still new in the 1890s, when the play was being composed, and would have been innovative in the 1860s when the play is likely to be set.²

Tesman delights in archival work. He talks of the documents that he copied on their honeymoon trip: “You wouldn’t believe how much I have picked up from all the archives I have been examining—curious old details that no one has had any idea of”(9). The focus on the archives and the attention given to small details are measures of a historian’s professionalism. At least this is so since Leopold von Ranke’s breakthrough work in the early 19th century . “No documents, no history” is the frequently quoted motto of his followers (Langlois and Seignobos, 1898; Cited after Thompson, 2000, 51). The professionalization of history is usually dated to 1848, by which time all German-speaking universities had adopted Ranke’s methods for the rigorous training of historians in the science of critical examination of documents (Iggers, 1997, 25). In Scandinavia, the advent of professionalization had to wait until the 1880s (Torstendahl, 2012, 274). The view of the rivalry between Tesman and Løvborg as a conflict between an old fashioned drudge and an innovator is turned on its head if one considers them in the light of the Ranke words about his own work:

History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the account for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices the present work

² The idea that the play is set in Christiania that ‘Ibsen himself had known in the ‘sixties’ belongs to William Archer (See his introduction to Hedda Gabler in Ibsen, *The Collected Works*).

does not presume; it seeks only to show what actually happened (Ranke, 1915, vii; Cited after Hughes-Warrington, 2000, 294).

Tesman's professionalism is not something that Løvborg aspire to. Rather, Løvborg wishes to instruct the present and judge the past, as he writes his history of everything under the guidance of a talented housewife of questionable education in a remote area without access to a large library or archives.

Further, Tesman's field is cultural history, an established though still a relatively new field. His particular subject is unusual, however. Cultural History blossomed in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. "You ought to go to Munich, and work hard there for a whole year ... attending lectures' Ibsen wrote to John Paulsen in 1879; 'You ought to make a thorough study of the history of civilisation, of literature, and of art; and there are particularly good professors in Munich in these branches' (Spinchorn, 1964, 180). The first chair in Cultural History was established in Munich 1859; Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl was in the past regarded as the leading representative of the genre, along with Gustav Freitag (Gooch, 1913, 574), even though recent scholarship emphasises the lasting impact of the work of Jacob Burckhardt.

Yet Tesman differs from these historians. Without being a nationalist interested in recovering the soul of the people, like Riehl and Freitag, Tesman seems to be approaching history from the bottom up. He is more interested in the domestic crafts of medieval Brabant than the deeds of their kings. In this Tesman goes beyond Ranke and his followers, for whom the state was the central objective of historical inquiry. Nor would one imagine Tesman producing work like Burckhardt, who while he expanded the range of the historian's enquiry retained a belief in the importance of the study of politics (Hinde, 2000, 193). It is hard to imagine that Tesman's research into domestic industries would include a consideration of political history. Indeed Brack's dismissal of Hedda's idea of a political career for her husband may give us a clue as to Tesman's interests as a historian.

Tesman's work on the domestic industries of Brabant would offer his readers a glimpse into the daily life of the middle ages to the degree that it can be reconstructed from the material objects and the records. One thinks of a book from a much later period of historical writing, such as Eileen Edna Power's 1924 *Medieval People*, in which an array of sources is marshalled to recreate a day in the life of people such as the peasant Bodo setting off "whistling ... in the cold with his oxen and his little boy" (Power, 2007, 17), his wife Ermentrude, mentioned in a medieval census, and the servile "women spinning and dyeing cloth and sewing garments" (Power, 2007, 18). It takes a very particular skill to turn objects and dry facts into histories. Tesman's mind is conditioned to perform just such a task. Hence his comment on the embroidered slippers: (The ones that Hedda really "do[esn't] care about): "Only think—ill as she was, Aunt Rina embroidered these for me. Oh you can't think how many associations cling to them" (21). One imagines that Tesman's book (had he been allowed to finish it) would be a similar reconstruction of associations, a recovery of the master behind the handiwork. Hedda, with whom we sympathise, does not care for it, and we tend to laugh off this

aspect of Tesman's work. Thus we side with Løvborg the historian over Tesman, forgetting that Hedda's interest in Løvborg does not extend to his historical endeavours. She prefers burning books to reading them.

Though writing over thirty years after Ibsen (and his imaginary professor), Power did feel the need defend her approach to history and situate in the context of the counterclaims of the proponents of political history: "Up to the middle of the last century the chief interest of the historian and of the public alike lay in political and constitutional history, in political events, wars, dynasties and in political institutions and their development. Let us now praise famous men," was the historian's motto. He forgot to add "and our fathers that begat us". He did not care to probe the obscure lives and activities of the great mass of humanity.... To speak of ordinary people would have been beneath the dignity of history" (Power, 2007, 13).

To speak of the ordinary lives of ordinary men, to abandon the epic and the political in favour of the everyday, these directions in historiography may be said to have been foreshadowed by the developments in literature and drama. In other words, Tesman, writing on the domestic industries of Brabant, seems to be a closer ally of the author of the play than Løvborg, interested primarily in the march of civilisations.

Ibsen's development as a playwright was conditioned by his interest and study of history. During the period from *Catilina* to *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen experimented with different approaches to history and legend. He attempted to enter the mind-frame of the waning ages of paganism in *The Vikings of Helgeland*; he revived the world of political intrigue in *The Pretenders* and *Lady Inger of Ostrat*; and he challenged his own views on world history with the writing of *Emperor and Galilean*. Ibsen's eventual fame is based on what one can described as democratisation of dramatic writing. A similar shift of focus and emphasis became fully established in the historical writing with the advent of the Annales School, a group called so after its journal, and comprising such historians as Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) and Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and (slightly later) Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) as well as later generations of scholars. In the 1890s, while Hedda was being composed, the fight was not yet won.

Though it does not seem to be mentioned in the correspondence, Ibsen might have come across the controversy over the August Strindberg's *History of the Swedish People* (1981-82) Strindberg provoked the wrath of the Swedish historical establishment by criticising the revered historian Erik Gustaf Gejer for supplying an account of the deeds of royal families and public official instead of history. Strindberg promoted his own work as a truer picture. *History of the Swedish People* aimed to show ordinary people: 'how they lived, ate and drank; how they dressed, entertained themselves, married, were baptized, were buried' (Cited in Bergström and Bergström, 1990, 433). Strindberg's detractors included both historians and journalists, who were gradually won over by arguments in the historical journals. The focus on the non-political history was regarded as an expression of political radicalism.

A comment by Hans Forsell regarding the work of the Danish historian Troels Frederik Troels-Lund indicates that objections to cultural history were not unrelated to the controversies that greeted other forms of democratically focused writing.

The more the draftsman finally lowers himself to especially occupy himself with the most common and lowest forms, the more it becomes apparent that "naturalism" in these areas, as in others, punishes itself by losing everything of interest (Nordisk tidskrift 4, Cited in Bergström and Bergström, 1990, 441).

In 1891, Troels Frederik Troels-Lund, a pioneer of Danish cultural history and the author of the *Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede I-XIV*, 1879-1901³, was provoked by the German historian, Dietrich Schäfer, into writing a spirited defence of cultural history which he then published as a foreword to the subsequent editions of his work. Troels-Lund opposed the idea of the primal importance of the state for historical research by claiming that the history of the state's development and progress is the history of cruelty. What is the nature of the State's relation to Christ, he asked, only in that it killed him? (Troels-Lund, 1914-5, xx) He countered the claim that the history of the state is a moral history. In its relationship with the state, he admitted, the individual's best qualities may come to light, but "this is the individual's morality, not the State's. If someone for instance claims that man's best qualities unfold during a war, plague or [other] catastrophe—it is man who proves moral, not war or plague" (Troels-Lund, 1914-5, 12).⁴ Reminiscent of Ibsen's words to Brandes that the state is "the curse of the individual" (Brandes, 1899, 59), Troels-Lund's defence of his own Tesmanism indicates just how much was at stake in the historiographical wars of the late 19th century.

Leaving aside, for a moment, the question of the significance of historiographical politics for *Hedda Gabler*, I would like to consider Tesman's actual subject. In Act 2, Tesman carries in a pile of books. Brack ventures a sly comment: "Yes, books on his special subject, Mrs Tesman" (73). The question is what books these might be that Tesman is anxious to "keep up with". I will not attempt to answer this question literally; however, some facts are worth noting.

There were in the 1860s, very few if any books on the domestic industries of Brabant. The majority of works having "husflid" or domestic industry as part of their title belong to the period after 1870s. An earlier work, however, William Torrens MacCullagh's *The Industrial History of Free Nations*, was published in 1846. MacCullagh's book contains several engaging chapters on what was the main industry of the Netherlands—cloth-making. By the 13th century Flanders and Holland both were chief exporters of woollen cloths in Europe; wool was sourced elsewhere (and especially England), was passed on to craftsmen (to the fullers and the weavers) and the fabrics were then shipped to England. This arrangement depended on the cooperation of several

³ The first edition of the book appeared under title *Danmark og Norges Historie i Slutningen af det 16de Aarhundrede* — History of Denmark and Norway to the End of the Sixteenth Century.

⁴ "At Individet i dette Forhold baade har lagt og fremdeles vil lægge for Dagen mange af sine bedste Egenskaber, derom er der ingen Tvivl. Men denne Moral er Individets, ikke Statens. Hvis nogen f. Eks. paastaar, at i Krig, under Pest, i store Folkeulykker udfolder Mennesket sine bedste Egenskaber, saa er det Mennesket, der her viser sig sædeligt, ikke Krigen, Pesten, Ulykkerne."

different groups of different social rank and allowed many opportunities for enrichment for the middlemen. Trade soon became politics, and violent politics at that. A short private war, for instance, occurred after the prohibition on exports in 1271 in which Zealand privateers sailed to London to amend matters by force. According to MacCullagh, the prosperity of the Netherlands was the result of that trade: “And year by year the good work prospered, feudalism continuing to barter its powers of misrule for solid contributions, which industry could always find means to raise for the purchase of peace and liberty” (MacCullagh, 1846, 59-60). In the 14th century, the passing of the manufacturing laws and the subsequent restrictions by the guilds drove the trade from towns into villages; at the same time the wars between France and Flanders “drove the villages into Brabant” (65). The reaction of the Brabant municipality was to impose heavy taxes resulting in “tumults and uproars among the manufacturing population” (MacCullagh, 1846, 65). Disturbances broke out in Ghent, in Burges and in Brabant. In the town of Leuven:

in a violent outbreak of the weavers and others, many of the magistrates were slain in the Hotel de Ville. Some of the manufacturers on that occasion emigrated to England, where they introduced the knowledge of their art, but many more, both Flemings and Brabanters settled in the parts beyond the Meuse, at Haarlem, Amsterdam and Leyden (MacCullagh, 1846, 67).

The subject of domestic industries of Brabant, in other words, might lead one to the study of popular uprisings. Of course, Tesman might not have pursued this particular line of research. He might even lack the skill needed to connect the riots of the manufacturers and the bloodshed in medieval Brabant to what happens in his own home: when Hedda is told the household is to survive on pittance, she declares that at least there is one thing available for her entertainment: her pistols.

It might be idle to speculate which turn the unfinished research of the imaginary historian would have taken place, or what documents he might have collected during his travels across Europe (tax records perhaps, registers, trade agreements). It is idle because the book remains unfinished. Tesman puts it aside for the sake of the collaborative resurrection of Løvborg’s book with Thea. And Tesman’s book, which might have dealt with the daily life of the middle ages, or embroiderers such as Aunt Rina’s medieval counterparts, or indeed the tax-ridden craftsmen-turned-terrorists of Brabant is one more important casualty of what Brian Johnston calls Hedda’s “miniscule Gotterdammerung” (Johnston, 1992, 149): Aunt Rina, Løvborg, Løvborg’s book, Hedda and her unborn child.

Brabant in the Middle Ages is a potentiality, something that hides behind the veneers of this play. It is a potentiality that complicates the meanings of this neo-allegorical drama about an attempt to write history within a changing stream of events and circumstances.

It is tempting to turn on its head Fuchs’s above cited argument about the clash of the historians, and to see the defeat of Tesman’s research by that of Løvborg in terms of

the war of between cultural and political history. Yet this approach would not be right. Løvborg and Tesman are not polar opposites, though this is how Hedda attempts to cast them; outside of Hedda's vision, they are colleagues. As Hayden White has observed, one aspect of the burning of the manuscript is "a symbolic repudiation of that 'civilization' of which both Tesman and Løvborg, each in his own way, are thoughtless devotees" (White, 1996, 117). True, Tesman is jealous of the more successful historian, but their relationship is marked by mutual respect (why else would Løvborg read passages of his work to Tesman), and neither does Tesman denounce Løvborg's methods. Indeed, the desire to launch cultural history as a way to provide a comprehensive account of humanity was prevalent, as is evidenced in the work of Franz Kugler and August Boeckh. Nor does my defence of Tesman extend to his farcical nature. However advanced his research, Tesman is still the man whom Ibsen describes as "nearsighted. He used to wear glasses. Oh what a nice rose! So he stuck his nose in a cactus" (*Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*, NBO Ms 8 1219). The possibility that this naïve, near-sighted man has had a better shot at historical innovation is one more of the play's ironies.

Johnston has noted that the argument of *Hedda Gabler* is that of *The Emperor and Galilean* (Johnston, 1992, 145), linking the two plays to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and the everlasting battle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian forces. Approaching the topic from a different angle, I would like to add that *Hedda Gabler*, like *The Emperor and Galilean*, is indeed a world-historical drama. It is not only an examination of the historical forces at work on the spirit of the world but also a dramatic inquiry into the nature of historical writing.

Hedda's conversation with Brack and her remark to Tesman are but two examples of the play's multitude of casual remarks that easily translate into and can be read as historiographical comments. The desire to reconstruct, understand and reinterpret past events permeates the play. It is behind the seemingly trivial moments in the play such as the incident with Aunt Julie's hat (when Hedda pretends that the artefact left on the chair is due to a servant's misdemeanour rather than the aunt's poor knowledge of etiquette and lack of fashion-sense), Hedda and Thea's memories of their school days (Thea remembers that Hedda used to burn her hair, while Hedda insists that they used to be friends), or Hedda's confusion about the landmarks on the honeymoon photographs. The drive to reconstruct the past is also behind more important plot points such as Løvborg's recollection of Hedda's threatening him with the pistol and her interpretation of the event (she claims that this was not her worst act of cowardice). The play is thus preoccupied with the various methods of historical investigation and their combined failure to account for cataclysmic and catastrophic events, such as Hedda's past confrontational relationship with Løvborg, his death by accident or design, or her own death.

The play allegorises the historiographical process through its characters. However real they and their world are, Tesman, Hedda, Thea and the other characters also play parts in this dramatic inquiry into the nature of the historian's relation with his elusive subject. Michel de Certeau has observed that historiography is "an odd procedure that

posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as form of knowledge. A labour of death and a labour against death” (de Certeau, 1988). This paradoxical process is allegorised in the final scene which sees Tesman and Thea working on the drafts of the lost manuscript of the recently diseased Løvborg. The two historians are absorbed in the attempt to resurrect the recently lost past and the recently lost vision of the future, but the present outstrips them. Hedda’s suicide is unpredictable, immediate and an act which forces the present into the past, life into death, current events into history. It demonstrates how futile Løvborg’s, Thea’s and Tesman’s ambitions are when it comes to writing the future or understanding and reconstructing historical events. It is also an incomprehensible act in the sense that it cannot be analysed and explained by reference to current customs. Hence Brack’s exclamation: “people don’t do such things” (185), which is thus not merely an expression of his psychological philistinism.

This catastrophe which stops the play is engineered by Hedda, a woman in whom perhaps the force of history itself is personified. It is a force ignorant of geography and politics, scornful of historical labour and its methods. It is that which sets the business of life in motion as it destroys manuscripts and the people who produce them.

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Summary

The article investigates the subject of history and historiography in *Hedda Gabler* through a revision of the prevalent view that intended *Tesman* to be a caricature on the historical profession. *Tesman*'s research area is innovative; it foreshadows later developments in historical thinking and is therefore linked to Ibsen's modernism.

Keywords

Hedda Gabler, History, Historiography, Brabant, Frederik Troels-Lund