

EROS AND POLITICS

A comparative Analysis of Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (1886) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* (1898)

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The Public and the Private

One of the more striking characteristics of the development of modernity is the breaking down of the divisions between those aspects of life and existence that belong in the private realm and those, which are part of the public realm of society. This has been analysed as among others, the encroaching of how details of intimate life have become part of the media's public discourse, which is a central aspect of the analysis of the structural change of the public sphere, as developed by Jürgen Habermas and others (Habermas: (1962) 1990, 1989; Calhoun: 1992). There is not anything any longer that can be kept from the gaze of the public. This is a defining characteristic of all forms of modern journalism – from the coverage of celebrities to politicians. From another perspective Richard Sennett has called the process “the fall of public man” (Sennett: 1977). This development is closely linked to the development of modern politics and the modern press, which has turned the private life of politicians into a matter of public interest. These traits of modernity serve as a backdrop for two dramas that thematise the relationship between the political and the intimate spheres in late nineteenth century.

In 1898 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832 – 1910) published the drama *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* (Bjørnson: 1911). It has its background in events from 1888 in which Bjørnson had played a central role, which will be explained later in this article (Hoem: 2010 and 2011). The play has four central themes – politics, love, friendship and betrayal. It deals with power games in public and private spheres. Twelve years earlier Henrik Ibsen had published his drama *Rosmersholm* (Ibsen: 2009), which has its background not in the same concrete events that Bjørnson's drama referred to, but in the general atmosphere of animosity that marked Norwegian politics in the 1880s, and which resulted in the introduction of parliamentarianism and the rise of the modern party system. There are also other strikingly similar elements in the dramas that call for a comparative analysis of power and politics within the sphere of intimacy.

Two Characters in Search of a Solution

First some words about Bjørnson's play and the two characters that have given the play its title. Paul Lange is a prominent politician¹ deeply involved in the political game between the left and the right of the liberal party that is in power and where he is

¹ He is portrayed as the Norwegian prime minister in Stockholm. This was an arrangement in the political set up in the union of the two countries and it lasted from 1873 – 1905. The prime minister in Stockholm was a minister in The Norwegian Government and ranked below the Norwegian prime minister in Kristiania. More than anything he served as the representative of the Norwegian government at the court of the Swedish King.

regarded as a potential leader of the left faction. However, he decides to honour the old prime minister who has been regarded as selling out to conservative forces and being too close to the King. There are speculations about how Paul Lange will act in relation to a vote of no confidence, and he decides to give a speech extolling the old man's important role. The left faction interprets this as opportunism, and its members chastise and criticise Paul Lange for not standing up for his principles. Furthermore, there is speculation that he gave the speech in order to be appointed to the post of ambassador to London. As a character, Paul Lange is portrayed as an ambitious politician. He strives for honesty, fairness and libertarian values. Publicly, he acts with strength, but behind his public role there is weakness, self-doubt and a high degree of vulnerability. He is also portrayed as being a bit of a laughing stock because he has proposed to several women throughout his life, without success. At the time of the drama, he is a widower. His wife died after a long illness.

Tora Parsberg is portrayed as a young, beautiful and strong woman hailing from a very wealthy and prominent family – being an orphan she gained her wealth by being adopted by her maternal grandfather. The first encounter between the two protagonists presents Tora Parsberg as a strong woman who has decided to accept Paul Lange's proposal. She sees as her task to urge him on in his public as well as private struggle to conquer his doubts. She is convinced of his strength and fascinated by his many-faceted personality, which combines compassion and insight into the weakness of human emotion. She sees his ability to act publicly in a manner based on thoughtfulness and consideration for others.

Around the two main characters there are others who set the relationship and positions of the two in a relief. There are scheming politicians who pursue their own interests and thrive on scandal and the failure of others. But the most interesting other character in the play is Paul Lange's old friend Arne Kraft, who is a radical without compromise, and who denounces and betrays their friendship when he feels that Paul Lange has let down the radical cause.

Structurally the play has three acts. The first and the last take place in Paul Lange's quarters. There are few characters, and except for a walk on part by a servant, there are only two persons present on the stage at a time. The second act shows the public life that surrounds the two main characters at an evening party at Tora Parsberg's grand residence. Here the intrigues, power games and conspiracy against Paul Lange play themselves out, with many references to the public debate in the press. At the end of the play Paul Lange is unable to come to terms with the dilemmas and predicaments he is faced with, and he shoots himself. The structure of the play, shifting from taking place in his private quarters to the public party and ending in his quarters with his lonely death, thus illustrates the interaction between public and private themes and conflicts. The conflict and conflation of the public and private spheres are, on the one hand, related to Paul Lange's – for a politician – strange ambivalence to public conflicts. While Tora Parsberg believes in her personal strength and that she, through her love, can transcend the divide between the private and the public sphere. This, however, turns out not to be possible.

Politics, Psychology and the Press

The historical background to the play is closely related to Bjørnson's own life. In 1888 Bjørnson's old friend, the then Norwegian prime minister in Stockholm Ole Richter (1829 – 1888), shot himself after he apparently had revealed confidential information about negotiations between the Norwegian and Swedish governments over Norway's role in foreign policy issues. In these revelations Bjørnson had played a very central role. There was speculation by many, that what was seen as Bjørnson's betrayal of his friend had contributed to his suicide. Another aspect of the play that points to Bjørnson's political role is the portrait of the character Arne Kraft. There are indications that Bjørnson modelled this character on his own role in the real drama. (Bull: 1937; Hoem: 2010 and 2011) The old politician, whom Paul Lange speaks highly of, is clearly a reference to Johan Sverdrup (1816 – 1892) who was the leader of the left until 1884 and the introduction of parliamentarianism in Norway, but not in Sweden. Later as prime minister he was seen as too compromising by, among others Bjørnson, who attacked him vehemently.

In Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, it is the struggle between the left and the right over the introduction of parliamentarianism in 1884 and the modern political party system that forms the immediate historical background to the play. This was a bitter struggle that split families and broke friendships as in Ibsen's play. It signalled the introduction of a new political era in Norway, and it was tantamount to the coming of political modernity in the country. Thus both Ibsen and Bjørnson depicted political events, but gave these psychological dimensions and also interpreted them by showing the interrelationship between public and private life.

In Ibsen's as well as in Bjørnson's drama, there is a close affinity between politics and psychology (Engelstad: 1992).² The political struggle is portrayed as a public pressure that forces the two weak protagonists to reevaluate their background and personal existence. The plays ask whether it is possible to maintain a position of honesty and be of two minds in the face of political demands for clarity and clear conflict lines. This is particularly painful to both Rosmer and Paul Lange when they are faced with the demands of their old friends and characters with parallel functions in the two plays – Rector Kroll and Arne Kraft. They cannot accept Lange's and Rosmer's personal doubts and dilemmas. They do not accept compromise or understand that it is necessary to distinguish between the interests of private life on the one hand and public strife on the other.

In both plays the press has an interesting function as a norm setter and not least constructor of interpretive frames. In *Rosmersholm* this is directly depicted in the struggle over Rosmer in relation to whether he shall join Rector Kroll's conservative newspaper or Mortensgård's radical paper. With this in mind one aspect of the play is

² I have analysed the interplay between the political and the psychological with particular reference to the political elements of *Rosmersholm* in my book *Den umulige friheten. Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten*. (2006/2008)

the interrelationship between the public and the intimate sphere and the impossibility of navigating between the two. The press plays a catalytic role in this formation. It all starts in the first act when Kroll comes to Rosmersholm and asks Rosmer to be editor of the paper the conservatives have bought to serve as a counterforce to the radical paper *Blinkfyret*. Rosmer refuses partly because he has changed his opinions, and partly because he is not one for public struggles. But Kroll is, at least initially, more interested in his name rather than in his opinions.

In the second act, Mortensgård enters, and with characteristic political and journalistic hypocrisy will not write that Rosmer has relinquished Christianity and become a free thinker, because the radical movement already has many of that kind. There is more need for a Christian than yet another atheist. Thus Kroll's and Mortensgård's attitude to Rosmer are in many ways similar. They are not so much interested in what he really believes and stands for, but in what public role he can play in their game. At the beginning of the third act the political struggle enters Rosmersholm through Kroll's newspaper attacks on Rosmer. These attacks also reveal elements of Rosmer's private life, something that Kroll threatens to expose further in the final meeting between the two old.

In all this we see different modes and spheres of communication that do not interact properly. Both Kroll and Mortensgård wrongly interpret Rosmer's idealistic views, which are in no way part of day-to-day politics. On the one hand, the world of press and politics is not a place for ideals, but on the other hand, ideals that have no links with reality are abstract, and cannot even partly be realised. *Rosmersholm* is a play about the impossibility of ideal reciprocity and respectful communication. What the play portrays is that the tragic split between the ideal and the real is not to be interpreted in either the media or in politics. This is also the case for interpersonal communication, where the intimate relationship between Rebekka West and Rosmer is also marked by a form of communication where the struggles of the public arena enters their secluded life, and where they misunderstand and misinterpret the signals they send to each other. The representatives of the press in the play force the 'news' story of Rosmer into an interpretive frame that does not correspond to his many-faceted idealistic interpretation of existence.

In *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* there are many references to the interaction between politics and public opinion. In the second act of the play, the characters discuss Paul Lange's speech in a manner that shows how it is impossible to communicate on many levels at the same time if you want to act politically. The speech does not figure in the diegesis of the play. It is only talked about and interpreted by those who may have heard it or have heard rumours about it. Thus we do not know what Paul Lange said. By presenting the crucial event in such a manner, Bjørnson also suggests that communication in politics is all about taking sides not about what really is being expressed and felt. The way Paul Lange's speech is interpreted by the political actors in the play hints that he must have tried to frame his position in such a manner that he both attacked and supported the prime minister. That this is not understood constitutes part of the pressure that drives Paul Lange to suicide. Through numerous references to what the

papers have reported on his speech, the politicians change their positions, and at the end when Arne Kraft speaks directly and confrontationally to him, Paul Lange's political defeat is obvious. He tried to deliver a message that had more than one intention, and that proved to be impossible. His way of acting politically turns out to lead to failure. Paul Lange, like Johannes Rosmer, tried to communicate on more than one level. That is impossible in the public political strife. And thus those who attempt to do so die. Their form of communication seems to be possible only beyond life.

Weak Men – Strong Women

Part of Bjørnson's portrayal of Paul Lange is that he also falls because he lacks strength, and this is emphasised by lines spoken by the politicians in the second act about how he has suffered from mental illness and weakness, and has had to withdraw from politics earlier. Paul Lange stands out as a sympathetic, but also vain man. But more than anything, the play questions what happens when politics changes from being an arena for attempting to change and improve social conditions, to one where the only thing that counts is power itself. At the end of the second act when Tora Parsberg intervenes to save her lover, she expresses another view of politics, which may be interpreted as that of idealists who fail to come to grips with reality. She says, among other things, that politics was created to provide the greatest form of humanness, but it has been turned into the opposite of what is human. It was intended to create a good society, but it has on the way poisoned many minds. Furthermore, as she asks the ostracised Paul Lange to lead her to the table she says that she welcomes those who have been persecuted and wounded, and who have not been found good enough by the righteous ones of the parties who rule by the laws of stone tablets. At her feast, the first ones shall be the martyrs of humanity, who suffered because they were not cunning, but had courage and love. In her words, only those of free and noble emotions can celebrate.

There is a difference between Johannes Rosmer and Paul Lange. Rosmer is never really part of the politics and public struggle. Rebekka urges him into the public sphere by subterfuge in that she lets Mortensgård know that Johannes has relinquished his Christian beliefs. Paul Lange, on the other hand, is part and parcel of public and political life. That is his existence. It is when he loses his position there and his public honour that he gives up life and love. There are many parallels between the women to whom the two men relate. Both are depicted as being strong, independent and idealistic and willing to sacrifice for the men they love, and also to urge them forward and provide them with strength. Both Rebekka and Tora Parsberg may be said to represent images of the new and emancipated woman of the late nineteenth century. Both women have chosen a life of being autonomous and of attempting to provide a weak man with strength to live an independent life.

Johannes Rosmer and Paul Lange are depicted as being timid and hesitant and unable to make up their minds. For instance, it's striking that Paul Lange promises both to support and not to support the prime minister. His actions are marked by ambiguity. In this perspective it is also significant that Paul Lange does not let Tora Parsberg announce their engagement at the party, because he is not certain how it is going to be

interpreted publicly. Unlike her, he seems to be unable to come to terms with his love, so he hesitates.

Both Rebekka and Tora are images of the autonomous, conquering woman who wish to shape their men according to their perceptions, and thus define themselves, as well as the men, as partners in an equal relationship. They also are similar in not having any family. Thus it is an irony from Bjørnson's side that Paul Lange is so preoccupied with getting the ambassadorship in order to acquire equal social standing with Tora Parsberg. Her reaction to the possibility of him getting the post is totally different from his. She wants him to take it so that they can disappear in the London fog, and the two of them can be alone together in their happiness in the world's centre.

Rosmer and Paul Lange are both widowers and the memories of their dead wives linger in the plays. This is stronger in Ibsen's than in Bjørnson's play, but both men's first marriages and past histories play a part in giving them the image of weakness and hesitancy. In addition, Bjørnson's protagonist is also talked about as always having been on the lookout for a good match. Tora Parsberg does not care. She knows that she wants him.

Power, Guilt and Honour

In *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* there is no triangular power struggle as there is in *Rosmersholm*. Rosmer is a weak man who is at the centre of the contest between a dead and mad woman and a living, emancipated and calculating woman. Rebekka's project is to liberate Rosmer from the power of his dead wife and turn him into a strong and free individual. But it is Rosmer's powerlessness and inability to let himself be liberated that conquers Rebekka, and her project ends by him convincing her to die with him. Both Rosmer and Rebekka fall victim to a deep feeling of guilt that renders them powerless.

Tora Parsberg's rival in Bjørnson's play is not so much Paul Lange's first wife as it is the public image that he strives to maintain and is so afraid of losing, and which is summed up in what is his central concept of life, namely honour. Throughout the play he struggles to maintain his public honour, and it is when he feels that he has lost it that he commits suicide. Regardless of that, he has gained Tora's love.

In both plays the contrast between companionship and an erotic relationship is striking. Both Rebekka and Tora are clearly depicted as women who have sexual desires and for whom love is more than just a platonic relationship between two equally minded individuals of opposite sex. In *Rosmersholm*, Rebekka's background and the way she is talked about and expresses herself makes it clear that she wants to be part of an erotic relationship. Her project has political, erotic and philosophical elements that come together in the yearning for freedom, particularly freedom from the past. Ironically, it is the past that kills her and Rosmer. And it is fear of the erotic that undermines her ability to act in a powerful manner.

At the end of the first act of *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* there is a long scene between the two protagonists centring on the letter of proposal that he has sent her. The scene has elements of talking at cross-purposes. He interprets everything she says as if she will refuse him, while she leads him on. The dialogue also reveals different

perceptions of what a love relationship is to include. It becomes clear, as it does in other parts of the play, that Paul Lange is preoccupied with his social standing and that he would not dare to propose to her if it had not been for his status as prime minister and an Excellency. To this she answers that if that had been the important element; she would have been married a long time ago. But more significant is that he is also in the process of giving up his position and thus he seems to want her to join him in a new project of freedom, something that she is the one to put clear words to.

The metaphors used for their project also have erotic connotations, such as inviting him to open up her closed rooms. The scene ends with her accepting him and they embrace and kiss. It is expected that their engagement and love will be publicly announced at her grand party. This does not take place, however, because of Paul Lange's reluctance and fear of public ridicule. In the last act, he expresses the same form of reluctance when she suggests that they shall leave together first to Copenhagen and then onwards to an existence away from Norway's narrowness. It is typical of Paul Lange that he says that they cannot travel because they are not married.

In this act, Paul Lange, like Rosmer, turns on himself and what began as a struggle over political standpoints becomes a deep inner conflict about guilt and conscience. In Ibsen's play Rosmer projects his guilt on to Rebekka and drags her into his suicidal drive. In Bjørnson's play it seems for a short while as if Tora's encouragement and attempts to protect Paul Lange from self-renunciation and despondency will succeed. But then he receives a message about his public image and destiny, and the destructive political impulse overwhelms his will to live and love.

Both Paul Lange and Johannes Rosmer are depicted as men, who are trying to live up to ideals of free individuality and compassion, which are not practical in a world of bitter political struggle. Of the two, Johannes Rosmer is more of a utopian idealist than Paul Lange, who, after all, has been part of the political game for a long time. But in both cases, they are forced to take a stand that demands that they publicly give up on their ideals, turning away from public life and giving up on their own ego and ability to live. They are both overwhelmed by doubts in their own projects of liberation and dreams of a full life. They are unable to reconcile their public failure with a free existence in an erotic relationship with a woman they love. The destinies of Johannes Rosmer and Paul Lange illustrate that it is impossible to be both an idealist and a practical politician.

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Summary

There are many parallels between Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (1886) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* (1898). Both dramas have as their protagonist a weak and noble man, who is offered love and an erotic relationship by a strong woman, and who is not able to reciprocate.

At the same time they are plays about how politics demand the ability to act and take a stand in a world where men are supposed to engage politically at the same time as women are supposed to stand in the background. In both dramas the political and the erotic are interwoven in a manner that drives the men into despair because they can neither satisfy the demands of love in the intimate arena nor the demands for power in the public arena of politics.

There are also other parallels between the plays, in relation to the role of the figures, that demand of the protagonists that they take a stand, and drop them and betray them when they do not. Both dramas also end in a final suicide. Though here the two plays differ in that in Ibsen's play the drama ends in the double suicide of the man and the woman, while in Bjørnson's it is only the man who sacrifices himself. This implies

that the question of strength, power and the erotic are more consistently played out in Ibsen's drama.

Keywords

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Henrik Ibsen. The relationship between the public and the private spheres. Politics, power, idealism. Love and reality – women and men.