

**THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
HENRIK IBSEN; VOLUME II.
THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND
THE PRETENDERS**

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The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen; Volume II. The Vikings at Helgeland the Pretenders by
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HENRIK IBSEN & WILLIAM ARCHER

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THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
HENRIK IBSEN

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VOLUME II

THE VIKINGS AT
HELGELAND
THE PRETENDERS

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
WILLIAM ARCHER



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THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND.

INTRODUCTION.

IBSEN himself has told us, in his preface to the second edition of *The Feast at Solhoug*, how the reading of the Icelandic family-sagas suggested to him, in germ, the theme of *The Vikings at Helgeland*. What he first saw, he says, was the contrasted figures of the two women who ultimately became Hiördis and Dagny, together with a great banquet-scene at which an interchange of taunts and gibes should lead to tragic consequences. So far as one can gather from this statement, the particular theme which he ultimately borrowed from the *Volsung-Saga* had not yet entered his mind. On the other hand, the conception of the two women's characters was certainly not new to him, seeing that a similar contrast presents itself in his very earliest work, *Catilina*, between the aptly-named Furia and the gentle Aurelia; while even in *Lady Inger of Ostrüt* it reappears, somewhat disguised, in the contrast between Inger Gyldenlöve and her daughter Eline. While the scheme of *The Vikings* was still entirely vague, however, fresh influences, both of a personal and of a literary nature, intervened, and, transposing the theme from the purely dramatic

into the lyrical key, he produced *The Feast at Solhoug*. The foster-sisters, Hiördis and Dagny became the sisters Margit and Signe, and the banquet, instead of being the culminating-point of the dramatic action, became its mere background.

The fact probably is that in 1855 the poet found himself still unripe for the intense effort of dramatic concentration involved in such a work as *The Vikings*. Probably, too, he knew that neither his actors nor his public at the Bergen Theatre were prepared to go back to the primitive austerity of the heroic age, as it was beginning to body itself forth in his mind. The good Bergensers were accustomed either to French intrigue (such as he had given them in *Lady Inger*), or to Danish lyrical romanticism; and he perhaps foresaw that the ruling taste of Bergen would be as hard to contend against as, in the sequel, the ruling taste of Copenhagen actually proved to be. At all events, from whatever mingling of motives, he put the heroic theme aside for two years, while he kept to the key of lyrical romanticism not only in the *Feast at Solhoug*, written in the summer of 1855, but also in the very feeble *Olaf Liliekrans*, conceived much earlier, but written in 1856. Not until he had left Bergen behind him and returned to Christiania in the summer of 1857, did the poet take up again, and rapidly work out, the theme of *The Vikings*. It is almost inconceivable that only a year should have intervened between it and *Olaf Liliekrans*.

Paul Botten-Hansen, perhaps Ibsen's closest friend of those days, has stated that *The Vikings* was begun in verse. If so, the metre chosen was probably the twelve-syllable measure of Oehlenschläger's *Balder's Death*, supposed to represent the iambic trimeter of the Greek dramatists. In an essay *On the Heroic*

Ballad, written in Bergen in the early months of 1857, Ibsen had condemned, as a medium for the treatment of Scandinavian themes, the iambic decasyllable (our blank verse) in which Oehlenschläger had written most of his plays, and which Ibsen himself had adopted in his early imitation of Oehlenschläger, *The Hero's Grave*. Blank verse Ibsen regarded as "entirely foreign" to Norwegian-Danish prosody, and, moreover, a product of Christian influences; whereas pagan antiquity, if treated in verse at all, ought to be treated in the pagan measure of the Greeks. At the same time we find him expressing a doubt whether Oehlenschläger's *Hakon Jarl* might not have been just as poetic in prose as in verse—a doubt which clearly shows in what direction his thoughts were turning. It must be regarded as a great mercy that he abandoned the iambic trimeter, which, in Oehlenschläger's hands, was nothing but an unrhymed Alexandrine with the caesura displaced.

This same essay *On the Heroic Ballad* throws a curious light on the difficulties which occasioned the long delay between the conception and the execution of *The Vikings*. He lays it down that "the heroic ballad is much better fitted than the saga for dramatic treatment. The saga is a great, cold, rounded and self-contained epos, essentially objective, and exclusive of all lyricism. . . . If, now, the poet is to extract a dramatic work from this epic material, he must necessarily bring into it a foreign, a lyrical, element; for the drama is well known to be a higher blending of the lyric and the epos." This "well-known" dogma he probably accepted from the German aestheticians with whom, about this time, he seems to have busied himself. A little further on, he adds that the accommodating prosody of the ballads gives room for

"many freedoms which are of great importance to dramatic dialogue," and consequently prophesies a great future for the drama drawn from this source. It was a luckless prophecy. He himself, though apparently he little guessed it, had done his last work in lyrical romance; and though it has survived, sporadically, in Danish and even in German literature, it can count but few masterpieces during the past half-century. Perhaps, however, Hauptmann's *Sunken Bell* might be taken as justifying Ibsen's forecast.¹

It must have been very soon after this essay was published (May 1857) that Ibsen discovered how to impose dramatic form upon the epic material of the sagas, without dragging in any foreign lyrical element. He suddenly saw his way, it would seem, to reproducing in dialogue the terse, unvarnished prose of the sagas themselves, eloquent in reticence rather than in rhetorical or lyrical abundance.

Had he, or had he not, in the meantime read Björnson's one-act play, *Between the Battles*? It was not produced until October 27, 1857, by which time *The Vikings* must have been almost, if not quite, finished. But Ibsen may have seen it in manuscript several months earlier, and it may have put him on the track of the form in which to cast his saga-material. The style of *The Vikings* is incomparably firmer, purer, more homogeneous and clear-cut than that of *Between the Battles*; but Björnson's mediæval comedietta (it is really little more) may quite well have given Ibsen a valuable impulse towards the adaptation of the saga-style to drama. The point, however, is of little moment. It is much more important to

¹ Though he himself wrote no more plays in the key of *The Feast at Solhoug*, the "accommodating prosody" of the ballads had doubtless its influence on the metres of *Peer Gynt*.

note that while Ibsen was writing *The Vikings* Björnson was writing his peasant-idyll *Synnöve Solbakken*; so that these two corner-stones of modern Norwegian literature were laid, to all intents and purposes, simultaneously.

In an autobiographic letter to Peter Hansen,¹ written in 1870, Ibsen mentions this play very briefly: "*The Vikings at Helgeland* I wrote whilst I was engaged to be married. For Hiördis I had the same model as I took afterwards for Svanhild in *Love's Comedy*." More noteworthy is his preface to a German translation of the play, published in 1876. It runs as follows:

"In issuing a German translation of one of my earlier dramatic works, it may not be superfluous to remark that I have taken the material of this play, not from the *Nibelungenlied*, but in part—and in part only—from a kindred Scandinavian source, the *Volsung-Saga*. More essentially, however, my poem may be said to be founded upon the various Icelandic family-sagas, in which it often seems that the titanic conditions and occurrences of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Volsung-Saga* have simply been reduced to human dimensions. Hence I think we may conclude that the situations and events depicted in these two documents were typically characteristic of our common Germanic life in the earliest historical times. If this view be justified, it disposes of the reproach that in the present drama our national mythic world is brought down to a lower plane than that to which it belongs. The idealised, and in some degree impersonal, myth-figures are exceedingly ill-adapted for representation on the stage of to-day; and, however this may be, it was not my aim to present our mythic world, but simply our life in primitive times."

¹ *Correspondence*, Letter 74.