

THE MASTER BUILDER:

BIBLICAL ALLUSION AND THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION

When Ibsen published *Peer Gynt* to great acclaim in 1867, one critic was not so impressed, saying that the play was nothing but a bunch of quotes strung together. This charge, or this insight, remains true throughout Ibsen's *oeuvre*, and perhaps nowhere is it more true than in the final plays, whose protagonists, as Errol Durbach observes, so closely resemble Peer Gynt himself (123). However, while the quotations Peer used, or more typically botched, are taken from a wide variety of sources, in the late plays, and particularly in *The Master Builder*, the quotations are taken more and more often from one single source, namely the Bible.

Not only do the biblical allusions become more frequent in the later plays, but as my colleague Arnbjørn Jakobsen has astutely pointed out, the significance of the quotations becomes much greater: in plays such as *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Rosmersholm*,

Det bibelske språket kommer tydeligst til uttrykk hos bipersoner som ikke har leserens/tilskuerens sympati. . . . Den bibelske uttrykksmåten blir her et middel til grovkornet harselas. Det synes som om Ibsen ikke lenger finner noe av verdi innenfor en dristen virkelighetsfortolkning. (211-212)

The biblical language is most clearly expressed by secondary characters who do not have the sympathy of the reader/audience. . . . The biblical means of expression is here a means of coarse humor. It appears that Ibsen no longer finds anything of value within a Christian interpretation of reality.

In *The Master Builder* however, Jakobsen claims that
allusjonen [er]. . . knytta til forsøket på å constitutere ny mening. (215)

The allusion [is]. . . connected to the attempt to construct new meaning.

Ibsen raises considerable barriers to the characters' attempts to construct new meaning. The nature of these barriers, and the role of biblical allusion in illuminating our interpretation of the drama as a whole, will be the topics of this paper.

I will begin with the title of the play itself. Why is Master Builder Solness a Master Builder? It is well known that in the late dramas, Ibsen makes frequent use of a character's profession for symbolic purposes. For example, in *The Wild Duck*, Hjalmar Ekdal, that paragon of self-deception and unoriginality, is a photographer, a profession that consists of making copies of what is real. Solness provides his own answer to this question when Hilde asks him why he is not called an architect. He replies:

Har ikke lært grundig nok til det. Det jeg kan, det har jeg for det meste gått og funnet ut selv. (461)

My education wasn't thorough enough for that. What I know, I've mostly found out for myself. (Le Gallienne 633)

The facile nature of this response merely underscores the peculiarity of the locution. Many commentators have noted the biblical background for Solness' choice of profession. The image of the Tower of Babel is frequently invoked, and it is by no means inappropriate, given the enormity of Solness' ambition. As Kari Elliott suggests, also, Solness role as a builder recalls the wise and foolish builders in Matthew 7:24, one of whom builds on rock and the other on sand. (366). However, we must ask, would the suggestion of Babel and of the foolish builder have been in any way impaired if the drama were called "Architect Solness"? Of course not. This suggests that there is something about the term *Master Builder* that caused Ibsen to be uniquely intent on inserting it into this text. I maintain that a closer look at the biblical background explains this.

The term *Master Builder* occurs only twice the Norwegian Bible: first in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 3:10-15:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The second occurrence is in the Epistle to the Hebrews, chap. 11:9-10:

By faith [Abraham] sojourned to the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose [master] builder and maker is God.

In each of these citations the image of the *master builder* serves to highlight the issue of legitimate succession within the faith community. The master builder is associated with the founding and building of the community itself – with the patriarch Abraham in the passage from Hebrews and with Paul and ultimately Christ himself in the passage from I Corinthians.

Likewise in the drama, succession is a central issue. Unlike his biblical counterparts however, Solness is engaged not in laying down the conditions for the growth and progress of his community but in attempting to arrest it. He fears that he will be forgotten with the waning of his creative powers. To prevent this, he has crushed the career of Knut Brovik and held back the latter's son, Ragnar. Thus, Solness has systematically destroyed the possibilities of his protégés. Even his sexuality, as evidenced in the power he wields over Kaja Fosli, is ironically employed in denying, not promoting, the natural progress of the generations.

A second striking aspect of the passage from I Corinthians is its concern with fire. The image of the flame serves to reinforce and deepen the theme of succession: the work of the legitimate builder will survive, while that of the illegitimate builder will perish. Flame, of course, plays a critical function in the drama, and again the image is related to

succession -- Solness relates to Hilde how his twin sons, his own natural heirs, were taken from him due to the fire that gutted their house.

References to biblical events occur throughout the text of the play. In Act II, Solness explains to Hilde how the fire that destroyed their home and killed his sons nevertheless was the source of his success. The old house was on a large estate and when it burned he was able to divvy the estate up into lots. In Norwegian, the word Ibsen uses for estate is *have* or garden (461). The use of *have* in this context suggests the Garden of Eden, an association which is strengthened by the flame imagery, for Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden by an angel with a fiery sword (Genesis 3:24). Another example is Hilde's reaction when Solness climbs the scaffolding. She speaks Christ's own words:

for nu, nu er det fullbragt (482)¹

for now it is finished. (Le Gallienne 667).

What is the purpose of these references, both overt and subtle? Commentators such as the "mythopoeic critics," to use Errol Durbach's term, contend that their purpose is to serve to identify Solness with the deity. Orley Holtan remarks that "Solness' death, over which Hilda [sic] presides, takes on, through her, the nature of a sacrament" (102-03). Hilde's benediction suggests "an affinity with Christ. . . (111). Kari Elliot remarks that the three nurseries in the Solness home are symbolic of his appropriation of the Christian trinity (371). She goes on to remark that Hilda, too has a superhuman role: "Being placed in the central one of the three nurseries, Hilda might be conceived as a link between Solness and the divine principle."

In all cases, this mythological and psychological approach advances the view that Solness is essentially a heroic figure. Holtan identifies him with the myth of the dying king: "The relationship between Solness and these people [Knut and Ragnar Brovik and Kaja Fosli] is more than that between employer and employee; it is that of . . . king to subjects" (104). Writing from a Jungian perspective, Kari Elliot portrays Solness as the symbol of the challenges facing the maturing self in the modern age. The consequence of this view is to portray Solness's death, like that of the old king in the Ur-myth as delineated by Joseph Campbell (Holtan 102) is tragic in that it is necessary and inevitable in order to benefit humanity. As Holtan writes, "Solness is not only a sacrificial king, he is also a Promethean rebel, defying God for the well-being of man" (109). Elliott advances a similar view, although focusing on Solness' role as symbolic of the healthy individual: "symbolically Solness' fall from the tower means equally the death of his ethical contradiction and the birth of his whole psyche. His death, then, is like a phoenix linking destruction and creation (371).

The problem with this view, and with any interpretation of the play that lionizes Solness and portrays his death as tragic, is that it overlooks or misreads the significance and purpose of the internal infrastructure of biblical reference. The biblical infrastructure provides a context for the central scene of the play, namely Solness' narrative of his rebellion atop the steeple at Lysanger, that is quite different from Solness' own understanding of his actions and from the mythopoeic interpretation that these

¹ See Santon-Ife, p. 65.

commentators overlay upon the text. We hear in the play that as Solness stood atop the steeple, he declared:

Herefterdags vil jeg være fri byggmester, jeg også. På mitt område. Liksom du på ditt. (479)

From now on I will be a free Master Builder, free in my sphere, just as You are in yours (Le Gallienne 663)

This pronouncement is significant because with it Solness establishes his own *sphere*, his own world, and makes himself the ruler of it. Close attention to the biblical references points out the self-contradictions and abject failure that are at the heart of Solness's newly created world.

Atop the steeple, Solness conceives a new ambition, namely to build:
Hyggelige, lune, lyse hjem, hvor far og mor og hele barneflokkene kunne leve i trygg og glad fornemmelse av at det er en svært lykkelig ting, det å være til i verden. Og mest det å høre hverandre til. (462)

Comfortable, warm, cheerful homes where a mother and a father and a whole troop of children could enjoy life in peace and happiness – sharing the big things and the little things – and, best of all, *belonging* to each other (Le Gallienne 634)

However, as much as he claims to want to create the conditions for happiness for others, he is unable to create those conditions for himself or those closest to him. He tells Hilde,

det nye huset. . . aldri blir hjem for meg. (470)

the new house. . . will never be a home for me. (Le Gallienne 648)

Furthermore, his decision has had the effect of making those around him utterly miserable. His wife is tormented with jealousy and regret, he destroys the career of old Brovik, squelches Ragnar's ambitions, and keeps Kaja Fosli down in a sort of sexual slavery. His actions denote anything but the desire to help people feel glad that they exist and grateful that they have someone to belong to.

With these factors in mind, we may see that the role of the biblical citations is not to *identify* Solness as a divine or semi-divine figure, but rather to *contrast* Solness with the biblical counterparts almost to the point of parody. This contrast is suggested already in the first act. In conversation with Kaja Fosli, Solness justifies his efforts to keep Ragnar down with the exclamation,

Jeg er nu engang slik som jeg er! Og jeg kan ikke skape meg om heller!" (440)²

I'm made that way – I can't change my nature. (Le Gallienne 598)

[Literally: "I am simply as I am! And I can't re-create myself either.]

He portrays himself as his own creator, in contrast to God's creative activity. The impression is reinforced when Solness explains to Dr. Herdal the nature of his relationship with Kaja Fosli in an episode that prefigures his encounter with Hilde

² See Santon-Ife: "Solness' choice of words is significant here. Instead of saying 'I can't change', he employs the language of creation, the power for which he attributes to himself, in what amounts to a denial of the dialectic structure of the self" (52-53).

Wangel. Solness describes for Herdal how when he first met Kaja he had the desire that she should come and work for him because he foresaw that if she did, Ragnar would also stay. Solness says that although this was his wish, he didn't utter a word of it to Kaja, but that he

Sto bare og så på henne – og ønsket så riktig iherdig at jeg hadde henne her.
(444)

I just stood looking at her, and wished with all my might that I could persuade her to work here. (Le Gallienne 605).

And, he says, the next day she simply showed up and began working.

When Solness describes these bizarre circumstances to Dr. Herdal, the latter's response exemplifies Ibsen's mastery in using the idioms of ordinary speech to communicate a profound truth. Herdal replies,

Dette her forstår jeg ikke det guds skapte ord av. (445)

I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Solness (Le Gallienne 606)

[Literally: "I don't understand God's created word about this."]

This response underscores the difference between Solness in his sphere and the God of Genesis. God creates with the word, while Solness creates without the word but by the sheer force of his unspoken will.

The power and nature of this will completely suffuses Solness' world. It represents a complete contrast to the antecedents – Paul, Abraham, and of course Jesus himself – suggested by the biblical references. Those figures embody the renunciation of personal will. Solness embodies self-will to a morbid degree.

The word that Solness uses in the conversation with Dr. Herdal: *ønske*, occurs again and again in the text. When Hilde describes for him her recollection of the day he climbed the steeple at Lysanger, he denies having kissed her, yet says

Jeg må ha tenk på alt dette her. Jeg må ha villet det. Ha ønsket det. Hatt lyst til det. (451)

I must have thought about it. I must have willed it, wished it, longed to do it. (Le Gallienne 616)

These synonyms of personal desire are Solness' true watch words. Interestingly, they are also the watchwords of Peer Gynt, Solness' literary and spiritual antecedent. In Act IV of that drama, when Peer is in Africa, meeting with the international businessmen, he explains his personal philosophy with these words:

Det Gyntske selv, det er den hær
av lyster, ønsker, og begjær

...

kort, alt som nettopp *mitt* bryst hever,
og gjør at jeg, som sådan, lever.

The Gyntian self – it's an army corps
of wishes, appetites, desires.

...

In short, whatever moves my soul
and makes me live in my own will
(Fjelde 132)

The association with *Peer Gynt* is important because it underscores the nature of Solness as a protagonist. Like Peer, Solness is at the core a comic figure, based as he is on the diametrical opposition between his pretensions and his real nature.

The arrival of Hilde Wangel only serves to intensify the strength of Solness' will. Hilde lives similarly in a world of pure will. When Aline says that she has prepared the bedroom for her out her duty as a hostess, Hilde reacts critically. Solness asks her what else Aline should be motivated by, and Hilde replies,

Hun kunne jo sagt at hun ville gjøre det fordi hun likte meg så forferdelig godt.
(459)

She could have said she'd *love* to do it, because she'd taken such a tremendous fancy to me. (Le Gallienne 629)

In other words, Hilde is ruled solely by personal preference, and expects others to be so ruled also.

The essence of Solness' and Hilde's personalities is rendered clearly by Solness' remark that the troll in him calls out to the troll in her (466, Le Gallienne 640). As we know from reading *Peer Gynt*, and from the Asbjørnsen and Moe fairy tales that Ibsen drew from, the thing that trolls do best is to eat people. As such, they represent pure appetite, pure desire. The mark of humanity is the ability to suppress this pure, selfish desire. The fact that this impulse is so dominant in Solness and Hilde demonstrates that they are both themselves consumed with self-will.

The contrast between the characters' use of the biblical citations and the antecedents of those citations is most clear in the leitmotif of "the impossible," whose achievement is the ambition of both Solness and Hilde. This phrase is associated with their determination to build the "castles in the air," and suggests the biblical use of "impossible" as found in Matthew 19:26. In this famous passage, Jesus tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person to reach salvation. However, Jesus says, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."³ The critical association here is that of *the impossible* with salvation, with spiritual attainment. Critics have suggested that Hilde's trance-like states, her experience of hearing music at Lysanger when Solness mounts the steeple, have been the result of a sexual fixation with Solness. Yet as Durbach (131) notes, their relationship is about as asexual as you could find, even for Ibsen. Rather, Hilde's actions are symptoms of an acute religious mania, with Solness as its focus. Hilde looks upon him as the key to her personal salvation. This is what she is demanding when she says:

³ Santon-Ife identifies the use of "det umulige" with Mark 14:36 (65). However, I believe this passage is more fitting.

Rykk ut med mitt kongerike, byggmester! Kongeriket på bordet! (452)

Out with my kingdom, Master Builder. My kingdom on the table (Le Gallienne 618)

While the kingdom is described in the play in terms of a fairy tale, the stakes are in fact much higher. What she requires of Solness is the Kingdom of Heaven, albeit without God.

This interpretation is underscored by the frequently discussed theme of the various houses in the drama. Kari Elliott, for example, notes that “Solness’ past inner states. . . are portrayed in the various buildings which he has constructed” (366). Her Jungian view does not go nearly far enough, however. Solness is not merely a representation of the self, he is the representative of his age. In his article, “The Unconscious Evil of Idealism and the Liberal Dilemma,” Helge Rønning suggests that Ibsen, along with many other intellectuals, became disaffected with the fruits of bourgeois liberalism toward the end of the 19th century. He quotes the British historian E.J. Hobsbawn on this topic (185-86):

“The intellectual history of the decades after 1875 is full of the sense of expectations not only disappointed. . . but somehow turning into their opposite. . . . Nietzsche, the eloquent and menacing prophet of an impending catastrophe whose exact nature he did not quite define, expressed the crisis of expectations better than anyone else.”

With these factors in mind, let us examine the significance of each of the houses Solness builds or inhabits.

The first house, Aline’s childhood home, is described as:
en stor, stygg, mørk trekasse å se til utvendig. Men nokså lunt og hyggelig inne allikevel. (460)

a large, ugly, wooden box from the outside; but inside it was comfortable enough. (Le Gallienne 632)

This house corresponds to the traditional Christian viewpoint, a viewpoint which is exemplified by Aline’s devotion to duty. The sense of comfort it offered was due to its providing humanity with a clear role. The time for this period is past, however, and is unrecoverable; we see this in Hilde’s reaction to her conversation with Aline at the beginning of Act III. After Aline goes off with Dr. Herdal, Hilde says:

Jeg kom nu nettopp opp fra en gravkjeller. (473)

I’ve just come up out of a tomb (Le Gallienne 652)

What succeeds the period of Christianity and duty in Ibsen’s historical delineation is *Det moderne gjennombrudd* (the Modern Breakthrough), the period of modern humanism. This is the period that is suggested by Solness’ determination to create “homes for human beings.” However, as we have seen, there is something critical missing from Solness’ project and by extension from the humanist enterprise. As well

designed as they might be, no one can actually feel at home in these houses or in the period they represent. Human beings have lost their sense of place in the universe. As Solness says,

For å komme til å bygge hjem for andre, måtte jeg. . . for alle tider gi avkall på å få et hjem selv. (462)

In order to build these homes for others, I had to give up – give up forever – a real home of my own (Le Gallienne 634)

What is therefore required is some kind of synthesis that will square the circle of humanism and spirituality. Solness recognizes this, and this attempt at synthesis is represented by the third house, the one that is nearly complete as Hilde enters the scene. This house combines his notions of what a “homes for human beings” should encompass with a steeple like those which he built on churches early in his career. But the attempt is a failure. He recognizes that neither Aline nor he will be able to live comfortably in that house.

Hilde’s arrival prompts him to redouble his efforts. He realizes that simply adding the trappings of spirituality to an essentially humanist project is too tame. In order to truly create a world in which human happiness is possible, the spiritual dimension must be paramount. As he says in conversation with Hilde:

Solness: Det eneste som jeg tror der kan rommes menneskelykke i, -- det vil jeg bygge nu.

. . . .

Hilde: Vårt luftslott!

Solness: Med grunnmur under! (480)

Solness: I believe there’s just one possible dwelling place for human happiness – that’s what I’m going to build now.

. . .

Hilde: *Our* castle-in-the-air!

Solness: On a firm foundation. (Le Gallienne 664)

Solness’ insistence on building “on a firm foundation” recalls the citation from Hebrews: “For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose [master] builder and maker is God.” It represents Solness’ attempt to break out of the humanistic dilemma by assuming God-like powers. But the effort to build the “castle-in-the-air” is likewise doomed. Humanism cannot create a spirituality from within its own resources because it is so completely infected with self-will. Hilde’s exclamation that “it is finished” is as cruelly ironic as any in Ibsen, for it’s hard to imagine a character less Christ-like than Solness. Christ died for the world, while Solness dies in pursuit solely of his own ambition and self-will. Far from indicating the attempt to create new meaning, as Jakobsen and the mythopoeic scholars suggest, the allusion lays bare the futility of Solness’ mission.

The biblical allusions in *The Master Builder* serve to point up what is lacking in this humanist enterprise. Ibsen realized that the achievement of his generation was spiritually hollow, like Solness himself. The only principle that humanism follows is the principle of will. As Hobsbawn suggests, Nietzsche was a central figure in articulating this assertion of will as the only legitimate basis for human relationships. Many commentators note the role of Nietzsche's thinking in the late Ibsen plays, and the influence seems undeniable. But *The Master Builder* seems to be more a critique of Nietzsche than evidence of Ibsen's concurrence with the German thinker. Solness and all of the other late protagonists are no supermen. Their pettiness, venality, and mean-spiritedness demonstrate St. Paul's insight into the poison at the heart of the human will.

The use of biblical allusions in *The Master Builder* and the other late plays is indeed quite different than their use in the middle plays. In all cases, the references are used ironically, but what changes is the object of Ibsen's irony. With character like Manders, the object seems to be organized Christianity. In the late plays, however, Ibsen switches from skewering religion to skewering the humanism that had come to replace it. Solness – egotistical, self deluding, cruel and ultimately fatally flawed – is Ibsen's stand-in for the romantic humanism that he came to see was terribly limited and whose ascendancy portended in his eyes unprecedented catastrophe. By placing the words of scripture in the mouth of such a character Ibsen emphasizes the complete disproportion between the claims of humanism and its actual ability to create the conditions for human happiness. The use of biblical allusions, and in particular the image of master builder, expresses not simply Ibsen's fear of his own looming mortality and fading creative powers, but his far more profound anxiety that his own generation had not been builders at all, but destroyers, and that the legacy he is leaving is one of utter desolation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Durbach, Errol. *“Ibsen the Romantic”: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays.* Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1982.
- Elliott, Kari. “‘The Master Builder’: Houses Built on Rock or Sand.” *Edda* 6 (1979): 365-373.
- Holtan, Orley I. *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen’s Last Plays.* Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1970.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *Eight Plays.* Trans. Eva Le Gallienne. New York: The Modern Library, 1982.
- . *Nutidsdramaene 1877-99.* Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1973.
- . *Peer Gynt.* Trans. Rolf Fjelde. New York and Toronto: Signet Classics, 1964.
- Jakobsen, Arnbjørn. Biblical Intertextuality in *When We Dead Awaken.* *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IX* (1997): 69-82.
- . “‘Hvad skal jeg ha at leve for da? Bagefter?’: Om Ibsens bruk av bibel allusjoner i samtidsskuespillene.” *Edda* 94 (1994): 209-223.
- . “Immortality as Life Strategy: An Analysis of *Lille Eyolf* with Emphasis on Biblical Allusion. In *Ibsen at the Centre for Advanced Study.* Ed. Vigdis Ystad. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997.
- Rønning, Helge. “The Unconscious Evil of Idealism and the Liberal Dilemma: An Analysis of Thematic Structures in *Emperor and Galilean* and *The Wild Duck.* In *Ibsen at the Centre for Advanced Study.* Ed. Vigdis Ystad. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997.
- Santon-Ife, Anne-Marie V. “‘Lykke’ as Compensatory Fiction in Bygmester Solness.” *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen IX* (1997): 51-68.