“Hedda Is All of Us”:
Late-Victorian Women at the Matinee

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In December 1896, H. E. M. Stutfield attended a matinee performance of Ibsen’s *Little Eyolf* at the Avenue Theatre in London. Looking around the seats before the performance began, he noticed, somewhat uneasily, that most of the spectators were women. Later, in the pages of *Blackwood’s*, he describes the audience:

I arrived early, but found the house already full. There was a small sprinkling of males, but women had assembled in force to do honour to the Master who headed the revolt of her sex. The new culture and the newest chiffon were alike represented in the audience [...] Through a forest of colossal and befeathered hats I obtained occasional glimpses of the stage and the performers. (115)

Stutfield’s experience at the Ibsen matinee was not atypical, nor was his unease. Of the Ibsen plays premiered in London between 1880 and 1900, all but three were originally produced as matinees, and male reviewers often found themselves in an unaccustomed and uncomfortable minority.¹ Indeed, women in matinee audiences sometimes outnumbered men by as much as twelve to one (Burnand 422).

As originally conceived in the 1870s, the theatrical matinee had two purposes: the first was to extend the number of performances of a popular play, the second to encourage new dramatists and performers by giving them a venue for untried works.² Yet because both popular and independent matinees were dominated by women—as spectators, actresses, and dramatic protagonists—they served a further purpose, providing a space for the observation and critique of staged femininity. Thus the matinee encouraged the development not only of a new drama but also of a new feminist self-consciousness. Stutfield’s description of Ibsen’s matinee audience comes at the center of what is, after all, a discussion about the emergence of feminism. A hundred years later, we can appreciate his prescience. For it is clear that the Ibsen matinees of the 1890s contributed to the creation of turn-of-the-century
feminism, a feminism that would later realize itself in the theatricalized struggles of the Edwardian suffragette movement.

Ibsen’s dramas succeeded during the heyday of the theatrical matinee, when nearly sixty percent of all plays produced in London theaters were performed in the afternoon. Some of these matinees were simply extra performances of popular evening productions, but more than half were independent ventures, produced in rented theaters for afternoon performances only. The Ibsen matinees were independent productions, for although the translation and publication of his early work had given Ibsen a small but ardent following in London, West End theatrical managers were—with only one exception—unwilling to risk a full-scale evening production of his controversial “woman’s plays” (qtd. in Robins 16). Devoted Ibsenites thus had little choice but to take advantage of the space offered by the matinee. Accordingly, eight of the eleven Ibsen plays premiered in London in the 1880s and 1890s were produced as independent matinees, often by actresses who felt, as actress and producer Elizabeth Robins put it, that the plays offered them “not only [...] vivid pleasure [...] but—what I cannot find any other word for than—self respect” (15). At the matinee, Ibsen enjoyed an unanticipated success. Indeed, so popular were several of these productions that they were eventually moved to the evening bill. Still, male managers remained wary and with the single exception of An Enemy of the People (one of the few Ibsen plays that clearly was not a “woman’s play”), the longer evening runs of Ibsen were all determined by and subsequent to successful matinee runs.

As the matinee depended for its very existence on women spectators, so, too, did the development of experimental theater. Theater critics of the 1890s grudgingly acknowledged this dependence: as A. B. Walkley ruefully noted in a matinee review, “without womankind, the modern drama would cease to exist” (“Chocolate Drama” 68). The modern dramas of Ibsen and his English followers—the “sex problem plays” as they were then called—attracted large matinee audiences in part because they were, as many critics noted with alarm, all about women. While traditional Victorian melodramas had also often centered on the heroine’s story, they had not been perceived as being “all about women,” perhaps because the life of an average melodramatic heroine bore little resemblance to the life of an average female spectator. The melodramatic heroine, either the daughter of nobility or a destitute girl of the streets (and sometimes both), is subjected to an astonishing series
of spectacular disasters, from fire and flood to imprisonment and abduction. Passive, innocent, and all-suffering, she bravely endures these calamities and, in the end, dies a pitiful but noble death or is miraculously rescued by the strong, manly hero. By contrast, the contemporary, middle-class heroines of Ibsen and his followers seemed to live not in a fantasy realm, but in the spectators’ own world. Ibsen’s heroines do not face starvation, shipwreck, or attack by wild animals; instead, they struggle against the thralls of domesticity and the confines of traditional femininity. Their trials are the ordinary, familiar trials of pregnancy, childbirth, the double standard, sexual frustration, and, perhaps above all, boredom. When strong men appear, they tend to threaten the Ibsen heroine rather than offering her rescue and security.

That matinee spectators encountered these new heroines not merely in books but in public theaters crowded with other women like themselves is itself significant. Matinee theaters, along with recently developed department stores and recently opened lecture halls, were among the few acceptable places in which unaccompanied bourgeois women could escape the monotony and loneliness of a still rigidly domestic existence. But escape is the wrong word; for what the late-Victorian matinee offered, above all else, was a space in which female spectators could reflect on their own situation. In public, in the company of other women, matinee spectators were able to observe domestic, middle-class femininity as it was performed and critiqued. Although there were concomitant developments in literature and journalism, it was at the matinee that many middle-class English women first beheld women like themselves protesting against the constraints of Victorianism and gesturing toward the development of the New Woman. In the reports sounded by Hedda Gabler’s suicide and Nora slamming the door on domesticity, in rebellious Susan’s unsuccessful revolt against the double standard and notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith’s frustrated attempt to live outside the constraints of matrimony, the women in the matinee audience heard echoes of their own unspoken dissatisfactions. The theater thus offered a mirror which revealed female spectators to themselves and each other. And because this mirroring happened in a social space, the spectators’ sense of identification with these heroines was not only individually but collectively transformative.

The intensity of the relationship between Ibsen’s plays and female spectators was all too obvious to early reviewers, many of whom
vigorously protested Ibsen’s powerful influence on women; later critics, busily producing increasingly nuanced readings of Ibsen’s texts or Ibsen’s life, seem to have forgotten it. Thus, while scholars have often explored the relationship of feminist politics to Ibsen’s plays, they have tended to approach the question either biographically (was Ibsen a true feminist?), or thematically (what does Ibsen have to say about femininity?) (see, for example, Templeton and Finney). And the rare scholar who treats Ibsen historically, returning his plays to their contemporary contexts, still tends to work as a literary critic: that is, by treating the plays as texts rather than performances, with little consideration given to the complexities of production and reception (see Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria”). In failing to examine the plays as they were acted and perceived, scholars have been blinded to their transformative potential: What effect has a play with no spectators? It is precisely the play’s power to transform the audience that I recover as I trace the relationship between Ibsen’s early spectators and his heroines. In a discussion that focuses on the London premiere of Hedda Gabler (1891), the most successful of the Ibsen matinees, I demonstrate how the collective identification of female spectators with Ibsen’s heroines changed not only the meaning of the play, but also the identity of its matinee audience.

Before turning our attention to the problem called Hedda, we must, then, attend first to the audience, that “forest of colossal and befeathered hats” through which both male reviewer and female spectator “obtained occasional glimpses” of the Ibsen matinees (Stutfield 118). Contemporary accounts of matinee audiences come largely from male reviewers, who, grumbling at the extra burden of attending the matinee, and complaining about the ubiquitous matinee hats, often reported more on the drama in the seats than the drama on the stage. Their comments, though far from objective, tell us something about the women who attended matinees and a great deal about how they were perceived. In fact, the very distortions of the reviewers’ reports, their tendency to stereotype and exaggerate, their patronizing indulgence and their outright hostility, help us understand the significance of the matinee in a larger social context.

Almost by definition, matinee audiences at the turn of the century were leisureed audiences, made up of nonworking women, old people, and adolescents, mainly girls. For theater historian Dennis Kennedy “the female matinee audience seems a marvellous demonstration of Thorstein Veblen’s theory of vicarious leisure: wives and
daughters of hard-working men of commerce sent out in daylight in flagrantly impractical dress to proclaim freedom from drudgery for women bought by their master's successful toil" (137). Kennedy's description is apt, but it fails to account for the ways in which the display could recoil on the "master." Because the 1890s matinee provided its audience an opportunity to observe and analyze the very performance of femininity Kennedy describes, it became a space in which middle-class women not only confirmed but also threatened the hegemony of middle-class men. The perception of this threat is palpable in contemporary accounts.

In the reviewers' taxonomy of the matinee audience, "leisured ladies" and "matinee girls" predominate. "Leisured ladies," we are told, attended the matinee in order to display themselves and their finery, worship at the shrine of the latest matinee idol, and indulge themselves in chocolate, the latest theatrical refreshment. Walkley's descriptions of these ladies are particularly suggestive:

I am a frequenter of the playhouse, and live, therefore, in the odor of chocolate. I know that without chocolates our womankind could not endure our modern drama: and without womankind the drama would cease to exist. [...] But to see scores of women simultaneously eating chocolate at the theater is an uncanny thing. They do it in unison, and they do it with an air of furtive enjoyment, as though it were some secret vice and all the better for being sinful. ("Chocolate Drama" 68, 70)

Playfully ironic, Walkley is also somewhat discomfited by the sight of so many women together, all indulging in "furtive," "sinful," uncannily synchronized behavior. He thinks that they are somehow aligned together, perhaps against him, perhaps against men in general, and he finds his exclusion from this collective both troubling and exciting.

In another essay, "The Ideal Spectator," Walkley adopts a voyeur's tone and seems to relish his privileged position among the beautiful women at the matinee:

Nor must we forget that ladies in public have something else to do than merely to attend. They are on parade, they constitute a show in themselves—very often a more charming show that anything offered on the other side of the footlights. You must frequently have been seated behind a matinee hat which was better worth looking at than the play of which it allowed an occasional glimpse. (29-30)

There is a certain leering quality to this passage which suggests that, for Walkley, "hat" functioned as a synecdoche for the whole woman (much
as “skirt” once did); clearly, Walkley found some of the women in the audience “better worth looking at” than anything on the stage.

In a sense, his remark is consonant with the feelings of female spectators; they never complained about the hats because, like Walkley, they had come in part to see hats. “Spread in a vast radius around the head [...] piled high with ornamentation of birds, flowers or fruit,” these hats appear to have been worn not so much for men, but for other women (Macqueen-Pope 167). Indeed, while men repeatedly objected to matinee hats in public notices, newspaper articles, and even lawsuits, women remained adamant about their right to wear what they pleased, whether or not it inconvenienced a man.6 These huge hats were never worn to evening performances, but the matinee theater was a different realm—a woman’s world, a site of female pleasure. Here, unencumbered by male escorts, women spectators indulged in a variety of sensual delights of which their hats were only the most obvious example. Clad in beautiful clothes, ensconced in plushly upholstered seats, they ate chocolate bon-bons and gazed adoringly, perhaps not so much at the male matinee idols as at the “hats” of other spectators and the actresses onstage.

There were, of course, some spectators, especially younger ones, who could afford neither fancy hats nor the upholstered seats of the stalls—girls who came, singly or in groups, out of devotion to the theater and its stars.7 Contemporary reviewers dubbed this new species of spectator the “matinee girl,” and she caused much more of a stir than her older counterpart. If the leisured lady was a source of troubled fascination, the matinee girl provoked considerable alarm. Generally seen as an unfortunate result of increases in female education, economic self-sufficiency and leisure, the matinee girl indicated, by her very presence in the pit or gallery, a relaxation of the moral restraints that governed young women’s conduct. Some reviewers warned that matinee girls would frustrate any attempt at “intelligent” drama; others feared not that the girl would corrupt the theater, but that the theater would corrupt the girl. An American critic anxiously noted that young girls in the theater were consuming something far more dangerous than chocolate:

One will see at these matinees seats and boxes full of sweet young girls ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age. They are not there by the few, but literally by the hundreds. [...] It is enough to make a man burn with shame and indignation to see hundreds of girls sitting in the theater, and, with open mouths, literally drinking in remarks and conversations to which no young girl in her teens should listen. (Bok 16)
Clement Scott was similarly horrified to see, at a reading of *Ghosts* ("the most loathsome of all Ibsen’s plays"), young female spectators sitting "open-mouthed and without a blush" (Scott, "Rosmersholm," 180). The *Era*, objecting to the more sexually explicit passages of *Little Eyolf* (which it nevertheless reprinted in full), reported dolefully that "the audience, many of whom were women, sat in silence, eagerly drinking in every word" ("Ibsen and His Interpreters" 17).

While critics fussed and fumed, matinee girls themselves reveled in their newfound independence. In her memoirs, Molly Hughes recalls the thrill of attending the theater without a male escort:

>[A]t the age of twenty-four I had been to a play only some half-dozen times, and in each case I had been taken by a brother who had managed it all. Was it possible, I wondered, to arrange such an outing without being taken? I approached Miss Williamson. Did she think we might venture together [. . .]? She did most decidedly, and when we saw that we could go there and back by omnibus, and that the gallery was only one shilling, we hesitated no longer.

It was like tasting blood, or some exciting drug, for the pleasure was so delightful that we missed no play that Irving put on. (403)

Interestingly, Hughes adopts the same metaphor of consumption used by the outraged reviewers. They describe girls "drinking in" the drama; she declares the drink intoxicating and addictive.

In 1888 the feminist writer Ella Hepworth Dixon assessed the difference that this new sort of privilege could make in a young woman’s life:

If young and pleasing women are permitted by public opinion to go to college, to live alone, to travel, to have a profession, to belong to a club, to give parties, to read and discuss whatsoever seems good to them, and to go to theaters without masculine escort, they have most of the privileges—and others thrown in—for which the girl of twenty or thirty years ago was ready to barter herself for the first suitor who offered himself and the shelter of his name. (394)

By listing it last, Hepworth Dixon emphasizes the importance of going to the theater unescorted. Trivial as it may seem now, the privilege of going to a play without a man represented a significant new freedom for young women.

It was not merely the performances that fascinated these young women. Journeying to the theater, walking down the streets, feeling the crush of the crowd—all of these ancillary activities were filled with excitement. In the memoir of her London childhood, Elisabeth Fagan
recalls, "Saturday afternoon I was allowed to choose what matinee I should be taken to. [...] The exciting fight of getting into the pit through the covered in passage—it was long before the days of queues—was an additional attraction in my eyes" (75). The pleasure of the crowd, of being a part of something bigger than oneself, was one of the pleasures of matinee-going. This is made pointedly clear in the memoirs of Edwardian actress Eva Moore. Moore recalls as a “red-letter day” the first unescorted trip she and her sister made to the matinee: “Decima and I were thrilled to the depths of our small souls” (13). Previously, the two sisters had been to the theater only with their parents: “[T]hese delightful events had been somewhat marred by the fact that father insisted that we should ‘come out before the end, to avoid the crush’—as though anyone minded a crush after a theatre, when you went only twice a year and were only fourteen” (13). The matinee theater offered one of the few experiences of a crowd which bourgeois girls like Fagan and Moore were likely to encounter.

Clearly, then, one cannot separate the occasion of the matinee from its subject. When women attended an Ibsen matinee, their experience of the play was in some way shaped by the unwonted thrill of independence they enjoyed for the afternoon, and by their sense of community with the other hat-wearing, chocolate-eating, star-gazing members of the audience. Yet the matinee theater was not simply a world apart. Ibsen’s female spectators, having collectively and quite self-consciously escaped domesticity for the brief space of an afternoon, were thrust imaginatively back into the very domestic confines they had just quitted. As I have suggested, the shock of recognition was often quite powerful.

In *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928), Robins, who produced and starred in *Hedda Gabler*, recalls a spectator’s provocative remark: “One lady of our acquaintance, married and not noticeably unhappy, said laughing, ‘Hedda is all of us’” (18). Significantly, the spectator who laughingly identifies with Ibsen’s angry and desperate heroine is a representative of her class, an ordinary bourgeois wife (“One lady [...] married”), whose calm exterior (she is “not noticeably unhappy”) masks a deeper dissatisfaction. Her sense of identification with Hedda is itself transformative: she notices and implicitly acknowledges her own unhappiness, perhaps for the first time. Moreover, the spectator recognizes not only her own similarity to Hedda, but that of “all of us”—presumably that of all women similarly “married and not noticeably
unhappy.” It is this aspect of the spectator’s identification with Ibsen’s heroine, the sense that all the women in the theater were avatars for the dissatisfied Hedda, that transformed the female matinee audience from individuals into a collective.

*Hedda Gabler* was not the first Ibsen play produced in London, but it was the play whose unprecedented popular success marked the arrival of the Ibsen woman as a serious threat to both theatrical and social conventions.\(^8\) While most previous Ibsen productions had played for only one or two performances, *Hedda Gabler* eventually played for a record six weeks. According to reviewers, “[c]uriosity and craze combined to fill the house” and the play was soon “the talk of the hour” (“Momus” 558; “The Actor” 4). A critic for *The Times* called the Robins and Lea production of *Hedda Gabler* “one of the most notable events in the history of the modern stage, for, in spite of all prejudice and opposition, it mark[ed] an epoch and clinch[ed] an influence” (“Hedda Gabler” 229).

After two weeks of sold-out matinee performances, *Hedda Gabler* was moved to the evening bill, where it continued for another four weeks. In a review of the first evening performance, a critic for the *Sunday Sun* noted the difference between the appreciative afternoon spectators and the unresponsive evening spectators:

The audience […] did not become at all enthusiastic, nor did they openly hoot or scoff. They simply sat still, stolid and silent. […] [T]he chilling indifference of its reception, the lassitude of the audience, and the feeble applause which acknowledged even such admirable acting as that of Miss Robins and her companions, may be attributed to astonishment, or apathy, or disgust. […] Missing the stimulating applause which had been so liberally showered upon their efforts by matinee audiences mainly composed of the cult’s devotees, the performers on Monday night tried […] to raise the temperature of the house by resorting to over-emphasis. (“Theatres and Music” 6)

Obviously this report comes from a reviewer who sought to downplay Ibsen’s popular appeal; yet attendance records also confirm that *Hedda Gabler* was much more popular as a matinee (see Davis, “Ibsen’s Victorian Audiences”). Moreover, it was the matinee’s phenomenal success that determined the length and notoriety of the evening production. If more women eventually saw the play in the evening, that takes nothing away from the powerfully transformative experience other women had at the matinee.

Like *A Doll’s House*, but with more acerbity, *Hedda Gabler* offers
a pointed critique of marriage, the family, and conventionally defined femininity. The plot is simple and probably familiar. Having spurned at gun-point the advances of Eilert Lovborg, a disreputable but romantic intellectual, Hedda Gabler eventually marries one of her numerous suitors, Jorgen Tesman, a mediocre scholar who offers her security and modest wealth. The play opens with the return of Tesman and Hedda from a too-long honeymoon. Hedda, bored, dissatisfied, and pregnant, soon discovers that in her absence the dissipated Lovborg has been reformed by a woman whom Hedda has always despised: timid, yellow-haired Thea Elvsted. Moreover, Lovborg and Thea have written a manuscript that will far surpass Tesman’s efforts in the same field. In a matter of hours, the outraged Hedda destroys Thea and Lovborg’s trust in one another; dares Lovborg to return to the pleasures of wine, women, and debauchery; burns the manuscript; and engineers Lovborg’s suicide. But even these actions do nothing to alleviate Hedda’s misery and boredom. Still married to Tesman, still pregnant, still trapped in her house, she is now also under the power of another man; Judge Brack threatens to report what she has done unless she accedes to his desire for her. The play ends with Hedda’s suicide and the astonished reactions to it.

Chafing against the edicts of conventional femininity, Hedda pointedly rejects the girlish innocence so assiduously cultivated by melodramatic heroines (and by Thea Elvsted, who resembles the melodramatic heroine in both appearance and temperament). As a girl, Hedda had cajoled the worldly Lovborg into telling her of his sexual exploits; when Lovborg later suggests that she did this out of womanly sympathy (“Wasn’t it on your part a desire to absolve me [. . .] when I came to you and confessed?” [214]), Hedda is scornful: “Do you find it so hard to understand that a young girl [. . .] should want to find out about a world [. . .] that she isn’t supposed to know anything about?” (219). Hedda also refuses to accept conventional idealizations of marriage and the family. She marries, not for love (“Ugh, don’t use that glutinous word” [202]) but because there is nothing else for her to do: “I’d really danced myself tired,” she explains curtly, “I had had my day” (202). (In an earlier draft of this scene, Hedda is even less sentimental: “Getting married—it seemed to me like buying an annuity” (“Some Preliminary Notes” 121)). Marriage is an endless stretch of boredom for Hedda and monogamy makes her desperate: “And then the most unbearable thing of all [. . .] everlastingly having to be together with
the selfsame person (201). Similarly, bourgeois domesticity holds no charm for her. On a whim, Hedda insists that Tesman buy a house which he cannot afford; when they move in, the genteel pretensions of the house irritate her: it smells of death and lavender, it is too light, the piano is all wrong. Nor does motherhood seem to offer Hedda any hope of fulfillment: she shrinks with disgust whenever anyone even hints at her pregnancy.9

Yet for all her discontent, Hedda remains captivated by the image of conventional womanliness. She refuses Lovborg’s advances because she dares not besmirch her reputation with scandal; she marries because she can think of no acceptable alternative (as she tells Judge Brack, she has no vocation and she cannot imagine having one); she expresses dissatisfaction with her marriage only by wishing to be married to someone else; and she even explains her attempts to destroy Lovborg as the acts of a dutiful wife. As her suicide attests, Hedda is unable to imagine herself outside these conventions. Like Nora, the equally infamous heroine of A Doll’s House, and like many of Ibsen’s other heroines, Hedda says no to marriage, motherhood, selflessness, and separate spheres. Yet, again like Nora, Hedda has no idea what she does want. The New Woman, asserted Max Beerbohm, sprang fully armed from Ibsen’s brain (qtd. in Longaker 135). Actually, what sprang from Ibsen’s brain and was later given life on the London stage was not the New Woman as a positive entity, but an embodied refusal of the ideals and tenets of conventional Victorian womanliness. If the womanly woman was a relative being defined through marriage and motherhood, and the New Woman an autonomous being of independent means and desires, Ibsen’s heroines represented the rejection of the former without the achievement of the latter.

Neither old nor new, the Ibsen heroine was a transitional figure whose presence on London’s matinee stages had a tremendous effect on many of the women who saw her. In her passionate recollection of the first performance of A Doll’s House, writer Edith Lees remembers the powerful impact the play had on a group of her friends. In Lees’s view, the play’s performance heralded not a smooth transition for women but a violent death and rebirth.

How well I remember, after the first performance of Ibsen in London, […] when a few of us collected outside the theatre breathless with excitement. Olive Schreiner was there and Dolly Radford the poetess, […] We were restive and impetuous and almost savage in our arguments. This was either the end of the world or the begin-
ning of a new world for women. […] I remember that I was literally prostrate with excitement because of the new revelation. (256)

Lena Ashwell, an actress and later a suffragette, reacted similarly, maintaining that Ibsen’s plays provoked a revolutionary change in women’s consciousness: “More living creatures than the characters of Ibsen have never been on the stage. His women are at work now in the world, interpreting women to themselves, helping to make the women of the future. He has peopled a whole new world” (254).

The transformative power to which Lees and Ashwell testify seems to have depended on the spectator’s sense of personal involvement in the heroine’s story. Scott, writing in the Illustrated London News, noted that Hedda Gabler’s audience was interested not so much in Ibsen as his protagonists—his female protagonists: “Whether or not witnessing the play […] has had the effect of turning every pittite and stallite into an Ibsenite remains an open question, but certain it is that even against their better instincts the audiences have to a man—and woman—become Hedda Gablerites and Mrs. Elvstedites” (55). Scott’s parenthetical inclusion of women is reversed in other reports, where the involved, identifying behavior of women spectators is pointedly distinguished from the aloof, even critical behavior of men. In his description of the Little Eyolf matinee, Stuttfield dryly observed that “some of the female portion […] seemed at times much affected, and sobs and tears occasionally greeted such passages in the drama as were especially lugubrious. The males, I regret to say, were more disposed to chuckle irreverently” (113). Other critics made similar observations, noting the imitative behavior of Ibsen’s female spectators who laughed, moaned and cried, just as the heroines did, and the cooler, more analytical response of male viewers and male critics.

Female spectators themselves attested to an unprecedented sense of engagement with Ibsen’s work. Schreiner’s description of her reaction to an early reading of Ghosts is particularly vivid. “It is one of the most wonderful and great things that has long been written,” she wrote to Havelock Ellis afterwards. “[O]ne line […] made me almost mad. I cried out aloud. I couldn’t help it” (36). Schreiner’s involuntary cry suggests that her immersion in the drama caused at least a temporary loss of self-awareness. Other female spectators were even more strongly affected. At the first performance of The Master Builder, Lady Burne-Jones, transported into the vicarious world of the play,
completely forgot she was in a theater: “After the final curtain, I remember being disturbed by the applause. When I got up to go, I was bewildered to find the theatre empty; and I never knew how long I’d been sitting there alone” (qtd. in Robins 50). Another spectator, Lady Bell, was so immersed in Hedda’s drama that her companion felt obliged to break the spell of the performance. Robins recounts the story:

At the first performance of Hedda, she was thought by her companion to be in danger of lending herself too much to the glamour of the play; so this friend of Lady Bell’s youth warned her: “It’s all very exciting, but I wouldn’t trust her round the corner—that woman playing Hedda.” (20-21)

Fearing the effect of the drama’s “glamour,” Lady Bell’s companion destroyed the illusion by insisting that Hedda Gabler was only a play and the seductive Hedda merely a fictitious role played by a disreputable actress. The “danger” from which he or she (Robins does not specify, though one suspects that it was a man) was protecting Lady Bell, the specific object of fear, appears to have been not simply the illusionary world of Ibsen’s play, but the example of the vengeful Hedda. Lady Bell’s identification with the heroine depended on the elision of the performer; her companion intervened by reminding her of the actress.

Partly, it was the “fourth wall” realism of Ibsen’s plays that elicited such involvement. Gone were soliloquies, asides, and formal tableaux. In their place, Ibsen provided aggressively ordinary dialogue (his characters don’t make speeches, they utter terse, prosaic bits of conversation) and unusually frank discussions of personal—often sexual—matters. And while Ibsen’s dramatic structure owed much to the well-made play of French theater, he steadfastly refused to provide his audience with a satisfying sense of closure. Eleanor Marx, one of Ibsen’s early translators, praised his non-endings for their fidelity to “real life”:

How odd it is that people complain that his plays “have no end” but just leave you where you were, that he gives no solution to the problem he has set you! As if in life things “ended” off either comfortably or uncomfortably. We play our little dramas and comedies and tragedies and farces and then begin it all over again. (qtd. in Tsuzuki 165)

For Marx, as for other spectators and performers, the value of Ibsen’s plays lay precisely in their relative proximity to lived experience and their distance from the most obvious artifices of theatrical convention.
Significantly, the perceived realism of these performances was a product not only of Ibsen’s texts but also of the minimalist conditions under which the plays were first staged. Partly for reasons of economy, early Ibsen productions were markedly unlike typical West End productions. In the newly respectable West End, patrons were generally welcomed into luxuriously appointed theaters as if they were guests in someone’s home. Ushers dressed as parlor maids escorted spectators into the recently domesticated space of the theater where they were treated to a lavish display of elaborate scenery, fashionable costumes, and spectacular effects. Productions of the controversial Ibsen dramas, on the other hand, were often staged with borrowed scenery, makeshift properties, and everyday clothing. Moreover, while many West End performers still stepped out of the proscenium arch to address the spectator, Ibsen actors and actresses were directed to stay within the arch, to address their speeches to one another, and, above all, never to break the illusion of reality by acknowledging applause. Stripped of its social conviviality and devoid of glamorous spectacle, the public space of the theater became a strangely private place.

It was this intimacy, above all else, which struck playgoers as novel. When Robins first saw Janet Achurch’s production of A Doll’s House, she noted that, “[t]he unstagey effect of the whole play [. . .] made it, to eyes that first saw it in ‘89, less like a play than a personal meeting—with people and issues that seized us and held us, and wouldn’t let us go” (10-11). While the extravagant late-Victorian productions of melodramas, farces, comedies, and musicals had, through their emphasis on spectacle, created distance between the viewer and the performance, the intimate, realistic Ibsen dramas elicited a more involved, participatory response—particularly from women. And it was their identifying response to Ibsen’s realistic heroines that helped politicize the female matinee audience.

Today, many feminist critics of the stage and cinema assume that spectator identification can work only to confirm conventional ideas, not to coalesce a group reaction against them. Indeed, the idea that realism can be an instrument of change usually meets with derision, and identification is often consigned to the doghouse of reactionary, patriarchal practices. Arguing that theatrical realism masks as objective truth the ideological construct of the family, many critics insist that it can only serve to validate the normative values of the dominant culture. Sue-Ellen Case summarizes the argument:
Realism, in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as sexual “Other.” The portrayal of female characters within the family unit—with their confinement to the domestic setting, their dependence on the husband, their often defeatist, determinist view of opportunities for change—makes realism a “prisonhouse of art” for women. (124)

Other critics have similarly maintained that realism—theater as mirror—propagates and endorses the status quo. According to this view, realism encourages identification, and identification, because it depends on recognition, enforces gender norms which feminism ought to dismantle, not reify.

And yet one need not deny that realism has its dangers and limitations in order to argue that it can be used not only to uphold social norms but also to criticize them. As Claudia Schroeder has pointed out:

In the hands of its turn-of-the-century practitioners, realism was often intended to challenge the normalcy of the restrictive stage world it portrayed. [...] And in the hands of a feminist playwright, the strictures of stage realism can work to emphasize the entrapment of women in those very social and domestic settings realism was originally designed to portray. (29)

Ibsen’s status as a “feminist playwright” is debatable, but in the Robins and Lea production of Hedda Gabler, the unchanging set (all the action takes place in the same room), heavy curtains, and close air must have emphasized Hedda’s sense of claustrophobia and her desperate desire to escape marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, thus conveying to the late-Victorian audience precisely the sense of women’s entrapment Schroeder suggests. The actress Margaret Webster recalls her mother’s vivid experience of a Hedda Gabler matinee: “Even I, at second hand, can see the Hedda Gabler my mother used to describe; the dreadful sense of being trapped, the resentment, the banked-down passion, the incredulous desperation” (220). If audience members recognized this entrapment as a reflection of their own homes and their own lives, it could hardly have been a complacent recognition.

Indeed, the process of identification can itself be critical and transformative. Because identification is never static, but always in process, to identify with another is not simply to recognize oneself but to invent oneself. Even as Hedda Gabler’s Act IV costume, a sleeveless black evening gown and a black feather boa, became the rage of fashionable women throughout the city (Cima 153), the line between style
and substance blurred. For as the desired object is incorporated, the self is recreated. A columnist for *Vanity Fair* ironically suggested just this possibility, when he noted that the presence of the New Woman on stage might precipitate the appearance of New Women in the audience: “We do not believe in the New Woman’s existence. She is a caricature. We read of her in books, and we see her on the stage. But we have not met her.” However, “she may come into spurious existence presently, for there are silly women who will imitate anything” (“Of the New Woman” 265). An 1890 *Punch* cartoon mockingly represents this very type of imitation. Under the caption “Ibsen in Brixton,” the cartoonist depicts a large, middle-aged woman pausing on her way out the door to announce to her husband, “Yes, William, I’ve thought a great deal about it, and I find I’m nothing but your Doll and Dickey-Bird, and so I’m going!”; an open copy of “Nora by Ibsen” lies on the floor. During the run of *Hedda Gabler*, novelist and critic Grant Allen perceived this sort of identification on a larger scale, famously remarking that in his social rounds, he now took Hedda to dinner every evening (“Mr. Grant Allen at Dinner” 577–78). Because identification can lead to the recognition and articulation of an unacknowledged condition (“I’m nothing but your Doll and Dickey-Bird”), it can be the necessary first step in an effort to change that condition (“I’m going”) and therefore has at least a potential political force. Of course, the inherent instability of identification, its mutability and freedom from conscious control, does make it a somewhat precarious political tool.

That instability notwithstanding, the practice of identification remains integral to the creation of a collective. Most current theorists, even those who recognize the role that identification plays in the construction of the subject, tend to ignore its role in the construction of the group. Or, following Freud, they discuss it only in derogatory terms, as the basis for the “herd instinct” and the key to understanding the psychology of the unruly, unthinking mob. However, in considering the spectators of the Ibsen matinees, we must recuperate identification as an integral and necessary element in the formation of a more self-conscious collective. When Robin’s matinee spectator announced “Hedda is all of us,” she recognized a collective identity formed on the basis of mutual identification with Ibsen’s heroine. In her formulation, not only are individual spectators vertically identified with Hedda, but they are also horizontally identified with one another. At a historical moment when women—particularly middle-class women—tended to
be isolated from one another (one angel in each house), the construction of such a collective identity as the matinee "house" had great social and political significance.

Ironically, the spectators' recognition of their collective identity was encouraged by those who opposed Ibsen and feared his influence over women. It was hostile reviewers who noted the contrast between the identifying behavior of female spectators and the relative indifference of male spectators, who pointed to the gender divide in Ibsen's audience and made women recognize their own solidarity. While the staging of Ibsen's dramas contrived to isolate spectators, each one lost in the drama, unaware of others in the theater, these critics reminded spectators that they were not alone. Although there were reviewers who greeted the production of Ibsen's plays with sympathy and even excitement, the majority expressed a sense of outrage, and nothing seemed to unnerve them more than the rapt involvement of female spectators.13

Contemporary commentators acknowledged Ibsen's powerful attraction for women, but initially affected not to understand it. "The marvel of his notorious influence over feminine rather than masculine minds becomes all the greater," wrote one matinee reviewer in apparent bewilderment, "when it is considered that his characterizations of womankind deny her the highest attributes of her nature, whether as maiden, wife or mother" ("Goldsmith and Ibsen" 6). Of course, as female spectators later made clear, it was precisely their own dissatisfaction with the roles of maiden, wife, and mother which made the dissatisfaction of Ibsen's heroines so compelling. As if understanding this, critics soon began to describe Ibsen's female spectators in the same horrified terms as they used to describe his female protagonists. In a discussion of A Doll's House, the Saturday Review noted that Nora was "restless and hysterical, and let us say, exasperatingly unreal, and yet there are, so to speak, fragments of her personality which can be found in the character of almost every woman in the audience" ("A Doll's House" 135). Others went further, delineating the hysterical symptoms they saw infecting both heroines and spectators, conjuring up images of witchcraft and disease which served to confirm as well as to denounce the transformative power of Ibsen's plays. To read these early Ibsen reviews is often to witness the metamorphosis of the female spectator from an ordinary Victorian woman to an androgynous, diseased monster. As Mary Heath notes in her discussion of the early
reviews, "the lurid images of sickness, androgyny and infection [which] women members of the audience inspire[d]" were "merely paler reflections of Ibsen's modern Medusas" (22). After condemning the heroines as "repulsive," and "unwomanly" (Scott, "Hedda" 227), "diseased and infinitely perverse" (James 241), hostile reviewers similarly figured the female spectators as "unwomanly women," "unsexed females," (Scott, "Rosmersholm" 179) and, more colorfully, as "spectacled, green-complexioned, oddly-dressed females of unhealthy aspect, their bodies seemingly as diseased as their minds" ("Review of Ghosts" 202). Motifs of sickness, disease, and depravity were ubiquitous. A reporter at a performance of Rosmersholm noted that "never before at an entertainment for the mentally or physically afflicted [...] at an asylum concert or hospital treat, [had he seen] so many deformed faces; so many men and women pale, sad-looking" (qtd. in Johnson 48).

Obviously, these metaphors had strategic uses. The imputation of monstrous sexuality served as a means of marginalizing the Ibsen heroine and her identifying spectators. Defined as deviant, Ibsen's heroines and spectators would pose little threat to conventional womanliness; indeed, the notion of deviance could serve to enforce the norm. Moreover, the association of Ibsenism with images of disease and contagion gave the assault upon it an air of urgency and righteousness. If Ibsenism were perceived as a public health problem, a threat to the social body, its forcible eradication would be justified. However, the strident opposition of these reviewers also served to empower and embolden the Ibsen movement. The metaphor of contagion testified to the spreading popularity of Ibsen's ideas and marginalization worked to consolidate the Ibsenites as an identifiable entity. Hostile reviewers tried to minimize the influence of the Ibsen matinees by insisting that the audiences were made up of the already-converted, a small number of fanatical devotees who reappeared at each Ibsen production. There is little evidence to support such claims (see Davis, "Ibsen's Victorian Audiences"), and yet they shaped the experience of going to an Ibsen matinee: for a woman to attend was to be identified as, and to identify with, a marginalized (though increasingly large) group of "emancipated" women.

The bewildered hostility of many London reviewers thus created a dichotomy between insiders and outsiders, between those who understood and appreciated Ibsen and those who did not. This us/them split was constructed in many ways (socialist/anti-socialist,
modern/old-fashioned, normal/perverse), but most starkly, it was constructed as a split between men and women. In her discussion of Ibsen’s plays, Robins explained the split by pointing out that “the particular humiliations and enslavements that threaten women do not threaten men. Such enslavements may seem so unreal to decent men as to appear as melodrama” (30). Robins recognized that the meaning of the play was not intrinsic but dependent upon the viewer’s experience: although they might watch the same production of the same play, women tended to perceive Ibsen’s plays as realistic while men often viewed them as melodramatic. Theater historians locate the transition from melodrama to realism at the end of the nineteenth century, but it is clear that the difference between the two was partly in the eyes of the beholder.

In response to Scott’s unfavorable reviews of Hedda Gabler, Robins enlarged upon her observations about the gap between male and female reactions:

Mr. Clement Scott understand Hedda?—any man except that wizard Ibsen really understand her? Of course not. That was the tremendous part of it. How should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn’t understand her in the person of their wives, their daughters, their women friends? (18)

It was partly by making visible this difference in perception that the Ibsen matinees gained their feminist power. Consciousness of themselves as different from most of the male spectators transformed individual identification into group identification. The collective dimension in women’s response to Ibsen was thus prompted by male hostility, by the aggressively insistent, phobic sense of difference that these male critics articulated.

Because the early Ibsen performances elicited identification with heroines who protested, each in her own way, against the current situation of women, the performances politicized an audience of previously quiescent women. Theatrical identification ceased to be a passive, private experience and became the active matrix around which women built a collective identity. When Robins’s anonymous fan declared “Hedda is all of us,” she both recognized and called into being a group of bourgeois women no longer content with conventionally feminine roles. Her statement only confirmed the critics’ worst fears: the angry, dissatisfied Ibsen heroine was indeed an avatar for their own discontented wives, daughters, and women friends. The extreme negative
reactions of these critics created an embattled sense of unity among
these spectators and fostered the transformation of a female audience
into a feminist collective.

This creation of solidarity among a large group of bourgeois
women would have obvious political ramifications in the years that
followed. For in the women’s suffrage movement of the early-twentieth
century, a collective forged by the recognition of shared frustrations
and desires would find a political agenda. And in Hedda Gabler, who
was not a positive role model but an embodied protest against the
strictures and banality of conventional femininity, a figure for the
unspoken, unrealized anger of her female spectators, the Edwardian
suffragettes would find an appropriate figurehead for their largest
and most spectacular suffrage demonstration. In the Women’s Coronation
Procession of 1911, over forty thousand women marched through
London demanding the right to vote. The most popular contingent in
the procession, the Actresses’ Franchise League, was led by a woman on
horseback. She was dressed as Hedda Gabler.

NOTES

1While the most successful Ibsen productions (A Doll’s House [1879], Hedda
Gabler [1890], The Master Builder [1892], and Little Eyolf [1896]) eventually moved to the
evening bill, they all began as matinees. The exceptions were the Independent Theater
Society’s productions of Ghosts (1881), performed once on 13 March 1891; The Wild Duck
(1892), performed for two evenings and one afternoon on 4 and 5 May 1894; and Herbert
Beerbohm Tree’s production of The Enemy of the People (1882), performed for several
weeks in June 1893.

2The virtual absence of the matinee from more recent theater history suggests
that this prejudice lives on. Even today the precise origin of the matinee remains unclear;
theater historians have variously and vaguely credited E. T. Smith, Squire Bancroft,
Gilbert and Sullivan, and John Hollingshed with its initiation. Smith probably has the
earliest claim. In “The Nineteenth Century Matinee,” William Armstrong notes that
“Drury Lane playbills at the British Museum reveal that [the] first matinee took place on
Wednesday 19 January 1853” (56). Squire Bancroft, manager of the Prince of Wales
Theatre, notes in his memoir that “it was not until we produced Diplomacy in 1878 that
what are now called matinees—afternoon representations of the regular evening perfor-
manee—were really established” (71). Gilbert and Sullivan instituted a similar practice at
the Savoy Theatre in the 1880s, with Wednesday and Saturday afternoon performances of
their most popular operettas and their example was soon followed by many West End
theatres. John Hollingshed is generally credited with developing the experimental or
intellectual matinee, a specially mounted performance for afternoon audiences only (see
Rowell and Hollingshed). The experimental matinee, adopted by other West End theaters in the 1880s and 1890s, allowed an untried actor, actress, playwright, or manager to hire a theater for an afternoon performance. This in turn led to the development of independent theatrical societies and the promotion of a new, more intellectual drama.

In the early 1890s approximately twenty-five percent of all the plays produced in London (78 out of 328 in 1890; 103 out of 376 in 1891; 102 out of 366 in 1892) were performed in the afternoon as well as the evening. Another thirty percent (104 out of 328 in 1890; 111 out of 376 in 1891; 96 out of 366 in 1892) were offered as experimental matinees, performed—at least initially—only in the afternoon. The experimental matinee flourished in the 1880s and 1890s, but by the turn of the century it had largely been replaced by trial runs in the suburbs and provinces. Thus the matinee audience of the late-nineteenth century was uniquely powerful.

Wearing’s The London Stage 1890–1899: A Calendar of Plays and Players is the best resource for statistics on matinee performances, but it remains incomplete. As the editor himself warns, “Readers should be aware of the difficulties of determining [sic] the length of runs accurately because of such factors as (1) inaccurate advertising in newspapers and the like; (2) sudden withdrawals of productions which nevertheless remained advertised a day or two; (3) the dearth of programs on a day-by-day basis; (4) the existence of programs for productions which never, in fact, came to fruition” (vii). Because Wearing relies on advertisements and theater programs, I suspect that there were actually many more matinees than he records; experimental matinees with small budgets and short runs are the most likely to have been omitted. For an example of Wearing’s unreliability, we need look no further than the first London production of Hedda Gabler, the subject of this article. According to Wearing, Hedda Gabler was performed for just one matinee, on the afternoon of 4 April 1891.

Robins produced and starred in the English premieres of Hedda Gabler in 1891, and The Master Builder in 1893, both co-produced with Marion Lea, and Little Eyolf in 1896, and John Gabriel Borkman in 1897. For a detailed discussion of Robins’s production of Hedda Gabler, see Gates; for a broader discussion of Robins’s career as an Ibsen producer, see Cima. More recent biographies by the same authors place Robins in even more detailed context.

Tracy C. Davis’s fine essay, “Ibsen’s Victorian Audiences,” is the only critical work to address the subject of Ibsen’s spectators. Davis attempts to recreate the composition of the audience, particularly in terms of class; she does not attend to the particular reactions of Ibsen’s spectators. In the recent collection, The Edwardian Theatre, Joseph Donohue notes that of all the books on turn-of-the-century theater “that are badly needed,” he is most anxious for “the big book on the Victorian and Edwardian audience [that] has yet to be written” (27). Interestingly, in this same collection, Dennis Kennedy does address the question of audience. His essay, “The New Woman and the New Audience,” offers a provocative initial examination of audiences at the Court Theater between 1904 and 1907.

A lawsuit concerning a woman who refused to take off her matinee hat was reported at length in The Times (“The Police Courts” 6). Prince of Wales Theater manager Frank Curzon was charged with assault when he allegedly pushed a woman named Blanche Eardley. Apparently Mrs. Eardley had been unwilling to remove her hat despite vociferous protests from a male spectator. According to Mrs. Eardley, her refusal had
"something to do with the vindication of women's rights" (7). In the end, the magistrate ruled in favor of Mr. Curzon and dismissed the case amid applause from the gallery. The lawsuit received a great deal of attention. As the actress Eva Moore noted, "[E]veryone heard of the fight to the death between Frank Curzon and the matinee hat" (131).

For a discussion of the powerful influence of the late-Victorian actress on her young female fans, see my "Ellen Terry and the Revolt of the Daughters."

It was also, as Sheila Stowell and Joel Kaplan point out, the first Ibsen production to win "ready acceptance in fashionable circles. The Lady's Pictorial, which had twice dismissed Achurch's A Doll's House as 'not to the taste of English playgoers' announced that Robins's mise-en-scene had 'reconciled it to a text it had previously condemned in print'" (46-47). Indeed, Hedda's dresses and accessories were soon copied by London fashion designers.

There is some controversy over how Hedda's pregnancy was treated in the Robins-Lea production. Recent biographies of Robins claim that she excised all references to the pregnancy. However, a contemporary reviewer of the play noted that references to Hedda's pregnancy inspired giggles and whispering among the ladies in the audience (Carados 2).

See Freud, Interpretation of Dreams. In her powerful re-reading of Freud, Diana Fuss points out that "[t]he capability of identification to override the constraints of identity gives this psychological process enormous political efficacy" (18). Psychoanalyst Teresa Brema elaborates the point: "a contemporary social identification of the ego-ideal with another could offset the more traditional superego; which might explain how it was ever possible to think outside patriarchy" (qtd. in Diamond, Unmaking Mimetic 114). Although Diamond is suspicious of both dramatic realism and the universalizing possibilities in collective identification, she nonetheless suggests, with specific reference to Robins's production of Hedda Gabler, that we "might begin to imagine a politics of identification" ("The Violence of 'We'" 998).

According to Freud's theories, group identification (which he somewhat confusingly calls "partial identification") may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct. The more important the common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie" (Beyond The Pleasure Principle 108). In her critique of Freud's theories on identification, Fuss rejects the opposition between desire and identification (between "having" and "being" the image). See her Identification Papers and the earlier "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look." Certainly the evidence suggests that female matinee spectators both identified with and desired the late-nineteenth-century actresses who starred in the matinees.

Interestingly, though, it is the object that incorporates the subject's identity. The formulation is not "All of us are Hedda," but "Hedda is all of us."

For a discussion of the general English reception of the play, see Davis, Critical and Popular Reaction.

The imputation of unnatural sexuality was not leveled exclusively against women; if female spectators were unwomanly, male spectators were effeminate: "long-haired, soft-hatted, villainous or sickly looking" ("Review of Ghosts" 202).

Because Ibsen's plays elicited identification with the female protagonist, they provided a space for male empathy with the female point of view. We see evidence of the
success of this move in the fervent defenses of Ibsenism and Ibsen women by Shaw, Archer, McCarthy, and Grein. But identification with the heroine could also prove threatening for the male spectator; it put him into the position of Mary Ann Doane’s “transvestite” spectator (an unaccustomed position for the male spectator). The hostile reviewers’ imputation of androgyny to the Ibsen heroine and the Ibsenites may thus be read as a projection of their own hermaphroditic position as spectators. While there is certainly a long antifeminist tradition which insists that a strong woman must be part man, the depth of horror and repulsion expressed by these male reviewers suggests something beyond antifeminism. The luridly grotesque descriptions of the spectators belong to the world not of journalism but of gothic horror tales. The reviewers may have found the Ibsen women and spectators unattractive, and certainly many of them were appalled by Ibsen’s critique of marriage and the family, but perhaps they were also horrified to find themselves identifying—even for a moment—with Ibsen’s “unwomanly,” but decidedly sexual heroines.

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