

Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*

September 28, 2019

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) was a famous Norwegian playwright, often credited with being the worldwide father of modern drama. He was not Catholic, but he told a great truth, and St Augustine once said that all truth belongs to Catholics (because their God is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”). For this reason Catholics can even sometimes appreciate better than non-Catholics the truths that the non-Catholics are telling. The great truth of Ibsen is that even in strait-laced hypocritical Norway of the late 19th century, where life and joy are stifled beneath a weight of dying traditions, still the human spirit rises up in protest, and it prefers even death to an existence entrapped with no apparent freedom or meaning.

Let us illustrate this protest with a group of three later plays of Ibsen in which he has turned rather from the drama of modern society to that of individual persons. *Rosmersholm* (1886) ends with the hero and his beloved committing joint suicide. *The Master Builder* (1892) ends with the hero falling to his death from a high tower which it was suicidal for him to have attempted to climb in the first place. *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) ends with the hero dying from the cold of a virtually suicidal climb up a freezing mountain slope. But in each case the hero was striving for the freedom of the human spirit against a world stifling that spirit. Let us have a look at *Rosmersholm* in particular, an adaptation of which was staged in London recently with great success. Ibsen lives!

Every drama needs a dramatic clash, and the clash in *Rosmersholm* is between the old world of the Rosmer family and home on the one side, distinguished for the last 200 years by its soldiers and parsons who have set an example and given a lead to the whole region, and on the other side the rising new

world of emancipation and freedom from all those old values. The central figure in the play is the last scion of the noble family, John Rosmer, formerly a parson but who has lost his Christian faith and is now torn between the two worlds. On the one side is Dr Kroll, a cold-hearted conservative attempting to save Norway from the all-invading liberalism, but whose own wife and children are going liberal. On the other side is the editor of the local radical paper, Mortensgaard, who is at least as disreputable as Kroll in his attempts to pull Rosmer to his side. Rosmer himself has in theory been won over to the new world of joy and freedom by the charming young woman, Rebekka West, his platonic companion for several years.

The drama comes to a head when Rosmer tells Kroll of his loss of faith and his intention to fight in public for the liberals. Kroll moves into action, by fair means or foul, to stop Rosmer from lending his person and prestige to the rot. Under pressure from Kroll, Rebekka realises that in her struggle to liberate Rosmer from his noble but stifling background, it is in fact that background, Rosmersholm, which has overcome herself. In the end, the only way that John and Rebekka can achieve both the new freedom and the old nobility is to throw themselves together into the water-mill of Rosmersholm. In other words, says Ibsen, the old nobility is joyless, the new conservatism is heartless and the new emancipation is no better. There remains only death as a way out, seemingly the only possible affirmation for the trapped couple.

Is that all dark nonsense, unfit for today's Catholics? No, it is a realistic portrait of our world. When faith goes dead, as with Rosmer and with billions of souls today, then conservatism (Kroll) ultimately conserves nothing, left-wingery (Mortensgaard) is as good as throwing godless gasoline on a godless fire, emancipation (Rebekka) lacks stamina, and the liberal death-wish takes over. If one wishes to have life, and to have it more abundantly (Jn. X, 10), then Rosmer must

revive in himself the faith of his truly noble ancestors, which means he must go back beyond even the best of his Protestant ancestors to the Catholics who made Christian Norway. Let Rosmer become truly Catholic, and then Kroll, Mordensgaard and Rebekka will all be able to see the true solution, and the whole region can light up again with the light of Christ.

Kyrie eleison.