

# Ibsen and Sallust

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When Øivind Andersen, as the first director of the Norwegian Institute at Athens, arranged a pioneering conference on ‘Antiquity in Norwegian Literature’ in November 1992 with his Bergen colleague Asbjørn Aarseth, the result was a thorough and useful survey.<sup>1</sup> However, the most conspicuous example of influence I am aware of was only superficially touched upon.<sup>2</sup> I will try below to fill that lacuna now, basing my article on my study *Catilina og Ibsen*.<sup>3</sup>

On the face of it, one might think that Henrik Ibsen would interest a classicist primarily because his modern dramas quite often convey a spirit akin to Greek drama and to Euripides in particular.<sup>4</sup> But this influence is hard to pin down in detail. As was his wont, Ibsen reveals very little about his influences. He probably never saw a Greek play performed on stage and none was ever staged in Norway before Ibsen’s death, as far as I know.<sup>5</sup> As for ancient literature, then, Ibsen’s use of the historians, Sallust and Ammianus Marcellinus, in his so-called ‘Roman dramas’ is much more evident than the possible general influence from Greek tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Ammianus is important to every student of *Kejser og Galilæer*,<sup>7</sup> Sallust has hardly received the attention he deserves in Ibsen’s biography.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, had it not been for Sallust or, to put it bluntly, had it not been for that notorious villain Lucius Sergius Catilina, I am not sure that Ibsen would have become a dramatist or, at least, he would not have made his debut early enough to attract the attention of the violinist Ole Bull, who recruited him for his newly established Norwegian Theatre in Bergen in 1851, thus giving Ibsen the mandate to write dramas to be produced each year.<sup>9</sup>

At the age of 15, Ibsen had been sent by his bankrupt father from the town of his birth, Skien, to the tiny town of Grimstad further down the coast in order to become an apprentice at the local pharmacy. Hopefully, he would in due time be able to enter university and become a medical practitioner.

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1 Andersen and Aarseth 1993.

2 Haugan 1993, 151.

3 Kraggerud 2005.

4 Kraggerud 2013.

5 See Kraggerud 2013, 1101, n. 3.

6 The designation stems from Rudolf Sokolowsky’s 1902 article in the German periodical *Euphorion*.

7 See in particular HIS 6K.

8 e.g. Figueiredo 2006, 70.

9 See Kroepelien 2006, 123–49.

While he was going about his duties in the pharmacy, literary interests took up much of his spare time. In the third year, 1846, Ibsen received the shock (and humiliation) of his life: at 18 years old he became a father. The mother of the child was a maid in the pharmacist's house who was 10 years older than him. Ibsen was sentenced to pay maintenance for his son for 14 years. This new obligation in his life, which was disclosed in detail only some years ago,<sup>10</sup> is reflected more or less dimly several times in his plays.

At the age of 20 he began to prepare for entrance to university. Latin, which he already had a basic knowledge of from his time in Skien, was a crucial subject for an external candidate. He hired a private tutor to assist him with the most demanding parts of the curriculum. But in the winter of 1848/49 the preparations came more or less to a halt; the cause of this educational derailment was his urge to write a play about Catiline, in verse as convention then required. Catiline was prominent in his Latin reading;<sup>11</sup> 25 years later, Ibsen found the play essential enough to his production to revise it for a second edition. It is in this edition that he offers us a rare glimpse into his past and discloses why he had been so fascinated by Catiline. The preface gives us a highly interesting, but somewhat one-sided, account of the background to his first play. Ibsen tells us about the agitated times back in the late 1840s, about the February revolution which led to a call for emancipation among oppressed people across Europe, and about Denmark's war with mighty Prussia in Schleswig. He was himself ablaze on behalf of liberty and was at odds with his own little community, where he felt much constrained by his circumstances. 'Then I read Cicero and Sallust on Catiline and I devoured these writings. As can be seen, I did not share their opinion about Catiline's character and behaviour.' Ibsen vents his contempt for the demagogue Cicero 'who did not dare to attack Catiline unless he could do so safely'. By 1875 Ibsen had far more knowledge about Roman history than in 1848/49. In the sixties he had read that great masterpiece, Theodor Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte*.<sup>12</sup> Ibsen would probably have subscribed to Mommsen's low opinion of Cicero's personality. But when Ibsen gives us the impression that he himself by and large disapproves of Sallust, this is at best insufficient. Being a historian, Sallust had a basic advantage over Cicero, since history had a stronger appeal to Ibsen than rhetoric. Sallust had, moreover, chosen to deal with Catiline as his first main character of Roman history because he wanted to direct attention to a particularly ugly excrescence on Roman society. Sallust had seen his own society in a very critical light. The historian's philosophical

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10 Dahl 2000.

11 On *Catilina* see Eitrem 1940, 103–26 and 147–51, and Larson 1999, 85–106.

12 *HIS* 12, 323.

bent makes his account of Catiline a valid diagnosis of the Roman society of his youth, whereas Cicero's scornful attacks contain no such analytical dimension. Ibsen, however, had no intention of writing a correct account of the crisis that occurred between early November 63 BC and early January 62 BC, the time which was covered by his play. He felt free to reshuffle some events and even alter others deliberately. For instance, Lentulus, Catiline's second in command, appears just before the last battle and tries to assassinate Catiline because Ibsen wanted to dramatize a tension between them, a tension which is hinted at by Cicero (*In Catilinam* 3. 9). In his play, the envoys from the Allobrogian Gauls meet Catiline himself in Rome, i.e. before Catiline's hasty departure from the city and contrary to the historical record.

It is easy to distinguish Ibsen's primary concern: his play is very much about Catiline's tormented soul. Ibsen's attention is focused upon a deeply divided character who is unable to control the conflicting forces in himself. His protagonist cherishes an idealism that cannot be reconciled with his gross ambition. His admiration of noble love alternates with hedonistic lust and egoism. These conflicts enable us to observe the hallmark of Ibsen's genius – a penetrating analysis of character combined with a critical scrutiny of his own self. A couple of Ibsen quotes are particularly relevant here: in an untranslatable epigram he says: 'To live is war with trolls | in the vault of the heart and brain. | To write – that is to experience personally the Day of Judgement.'<sup>13</sup> In a letter he writes: 'All I have written has in the closest way to do with what I have lived through'.<sup>14</sup> Ibsen bears witness to this self-diagnosis in the first act where we meet Catiline the seducer, a scene blowing up Sallust's short piece of information about Catiline's affair with a noble lady and with a Vestal virgin (*Sall. Cat.* 15. 1). In Ibsen's play the Vestal Virgin is pivotal. The clandestine encounter between Catiline and the priestess is disclosed. She, called Furia by Ibsen, is seized and condemned to death, whereas Catiline escapes. She is later saved from her dungeon and becomes the sort of demon for Catiline which her name had foreboded. Ibsen has doubled the motif of seduction by giving the priestess a sister who was driven to suicide by Catiline. Without knowing who the culprit was, Catiline is induced by Furia to swear a solemn oath to take vengeance on her sister's seducer, whereupon it is revealed that he himself is the guilty man. Thus, Catiline condemns himself to death. This self-inflicted curse comes true at the end of the play when Catiline survives the battle; as for the curse, it is implemented in an intricate arrangement involving the demonic Furia. Catiline murders his loving wife Aurelia, Furia kills him while

<sup>13</sup> *HIS* 11, 613, see also 11, 452 and 14, 47.

<sup>14</sup> *HIS* 14, 47, 14–16.

Aurelia's forgiving love saves his soul, and he can die on her dying breast while the vanquished Furia retreats from the scene.

In this way Ibsen enhanced one passage in Sallust, making ruthless and sacrilegious lust a core element in Catiline's tragedy. With open eyes he also incorporated into his drama other destructive traits of the reckless man portrayed by both Sallust and Cicero. But as Aristotle taught us in the *Poetics*, a bad character is no fit subject for tragedy, so the Catiline of the sources was no tragic hero. Ibsen's Catiline is a mixed character. His Don Juan nature and roguish side are at war with a genuine social conscience which is unable to accept the injustice caused by greed and exploitation. But his political idealism is not allowed to outshine his darker sides. On the contrary, the better part of his nature does not stand a chance of prevailing in the course of the drama.

Sallust was in fact able to provide the young playwright with all he needed for his character, mostly because of Sallust's technique as a historian. Sallust uses speeches to demonstrate the motives of his protagonists in the Thucydidean manner, by inserting the speeches, and even letters, with the effect of activating the forensic principle *audiatur et altera pars* and thereby introducing a true dialectic element in his history. This element contributes to shed light on the rebellion, however criminal its leaders were in the eyes of the historian. The revolutionary feelings beneath it all are interpreted rather well by Sallust in chapter 20, where Catiline expresses strong indignation over people's living conditions. The only possible escape from their slave-like existence is to seize liberty. The ruling class exploits the whole world and sprawls in its own riches. The virtues and merits of the common people count for nothing. Catiline's followers are called proletarians (*miseri*), but that may have been only partly true since some may well have lost their livelihood due to their own incompetence and extravagant lifestyle. But Sallust must have acknowledged that the call for the abolition of debt was widespread and justified. A serious revolt cannot be explained only as a result of low morals and bad character. Ibsen had a sharp eye for both sides of the case. His main point was, however, that true, unselfish idealism and a just cause may well be represented by a more-than-dubious character; and Ibsen has no need to step outside of Sallust's treatise to create such a self-contradictory protagonist. In chapter 28, Sallust mentions the subversive political activity of Gaius Manlius in Etruria. Manlius had much success because of people's poverty and resentment. Equality and justice served as a muster call. This resentment is elaborated in Manlius' letter to Q. Marcus Rex, who was sent by Rome to quench the rebellion (chapter 33). Manlius explains to the general that the aim of the revolt is to restore what people have lost due to their economic ruin, namely their *liberum corpus*. A prerequisite for being a Roman citizen is that

you have that basic liberty, a fundamental human right. Neither power nor wealth is the insurgents' aim according to Manlius. His appeal is followed by a harsh attack on the corrupt practices of the praetors. Similarly, in his letter to Catulus in chapter 35, Catiline emphasizes his efforts on behalf of impoverished people.

In this indirect way, Sallust concedes that the arguments of Catiline and Manlius are significant factors in explaining the strength of the revolt. Likewise, the episode of the Allobrogian envoys in chapter 40 reveals the same indignant dissatisfaction with being oppressed by debt and taxes. Ibsen avails himself of these passages: he uses the same notions and apparently feels no need to add anything to the arguments used by Catiline and Manlius in Sallust. Ibsen's analysis of Roman society is simply what can be distilled in clear terms from Sallust. In fact, Ibsen's version helps us disclose the ambivalence in Sallust's account. Nobody at that time was more aware than Sallust of the faults and vices flourishing in Roman society. But, for the ancient historian, Catiline is only a hideous symptom of the society's moral decline, and he refrains from calling for a policy to mend gross social injustice. Thanks to the dialectic technique, however, Sallust is at least an indirect mouthpiece for justified social dissatisfaction. Sallust inspired the young pharmacist's assistant to think for himself and call for a radical improvement of society and an end to oppression and inequality. The deplorable thing is that only Catiline was the champion of that vision.

Ibsen does not gloss over an essential point contained in Sallust's analysis: that Catiline had been corrupted by the times in which he lived. As a politician he is a victim of immense ambition, and to gain power through election he uses bribery (which is made possible by the misuse of his wife's money). Such behaviour he tries to excuse because it is the only way to realize a radical programme in a corrupt society. At the same time, Ibsen illustrates Catiline's altruistic generosity when he portrays him giving away the last of his money to an old, needy soldier. But whereas Sallust is close to splitting up his main character into irreconcilable figures and making the criminal rebel respond – hypocritically, of course – to the plight of the masses, young Ibsen deliberately gives his protagonist a highly complex, not to say self-contradictory personality in which positive and negative sides are constantly at war with each other. Ibsen's protagonist is no chance result of elements that the author has culled from his sources. Rather Ibsen has recognized in the Roman rogue a genuinely human character whom Ibsen felt to be akin to himself in his own situation. As a consequence, his Catiline has become a *mixtum compositum* of rather incompatible *personae*, a peculiar feat that in some ways characterizes many of his main scenic characters. Ibsen would have received no approval for this

from Aristotle, and hardly any from Sallust. On the other hand, his protagonist is nonetheless truer to life than the characters envisaged by Aristotelian theory.

This aspect of the protagonist's personality is emphasized in a mature way in Catiline's opening monologue. In only five lines (*HIS* 1, 137, lines 9–18), Ibsen introduces the three *personae* of Catiline: the Catiline with idealistic dreams in politics; the brutal and egoistic libertine, an emblem of Roman decadence who ousted his early idealistic ambitions; and finally the escapist who is on the point of withdrawing from society:

I must! I must! Deep down within my soul  
a voice commands. And I will do its bidding;  
I feel I have the courage and the strength  
to lead a better, nobler life than this,  
one endless round of dissipated pleasures!  
No, they can never still my inner urge!  
Mad ravings! All I crave is to forget.  
It is too late! I have no aim in life!  
Ah, what became of all my youthful dreams?

Ibsen's Catiline is a tragic hero whose idealism ends in total defeat, although his soul is finally redeemed by his loving wife.

Ibsen's Catiline is a leader who is spurred on to his seditious role by his friends, but since his friends are led by all sorts of low motives that pervert the purity of Catiline's ambitions, he is a tragic figure in that respect as well. The informed spectator would undoubtedly have thought beforehand that Catiline was no great leader, no Gracchus, and so a beneficial result could never have come out of it all. That is probably what young Ibsen thought too.

We have yet to discuss the deeper, and perhaps the most important, inspiration which Ibsen took from Sallust. This inspiration is found in the first four chapters of *Bellum Catilinae*, which deal with Sallust's own political career before he became a writer. These chapters contain not only a highly interesting account of Sallust's change of career but also a succinct philosophy which is applied to Roman history. Sallust presents himself as an unsuccessful politician. As a young man he was unable to adapt himself to the often corrupt, ruthless and greedy ways that prevailed in politics. Indeed, he confesses that he himself, being an inexperienced young man, was infected by the low morals of the times. This kind of greedy and corrupt life was far from what a human being should aspire to, according to this honest self-examination. Admittedly it is laid down in our nature to have ambition, he says, and we should not allow ourselves to pass our life in obscurity, but we should seek true *gloria* through *animi virtus* ('excellence of mind'), which, being the divine part of

the soul, must be our guiding principle. History itself bears witness to the truth of this. The strength of nations is due to men's intellectual abilities and moral strength, both in times of peace and in war. When vices are on the increase in society it loses its strength and is doomed unless the vices are halted. The same law of life holds good on an individual level as well. In all activities of life the *animi virtus* is a decisive factor. If a man succumbs to the body and gives in to pleasures and lust, he will forfeit *gloria*. Instead he must try to achieve something great. Our possibilities are, in principle, as many as there are noble professions. Which one to pursue depends on the individual talent. Sallust goes on to compare two of these professions: the political career is traditionally regarded as the best way to serve one's country; but against this he holds up the writer's profession which means one can serve one's country equally well, since words are not to be rated below actions. To finish the argument Sallust refers to himself as an example: to achieve the right form of *gloria* in accordance with his own talent, he luckily came to his senses, left politics, and turned to writing history instead.

Proceeding from this philosophical preface to the following account of Catiline's life, one might view the politician Catiline as the negative counterpart to Sallust: the historian, in time, applied his talent to a noble profession, whereas his protagonist misused his indubitable talents to pervert politics. Catiline is indeed a warning example. Ibsen was, above all, fascinated by Sallust's preface. As he later said, he was already writing verses at the time, trying to encourage the Swedish king to join the Danes in defending Denmark. He must have sympathized from the bottom of his heart with Sallust's elevation of the writer's role. One of Ibsen's slogans was that one must venture to entertain great thoughts. An angry young man could channel his radicalism into an ambitious literary genre. The choice must have been obvious: no genre could depict and structure life with its human agents and their choices like drama. At the same time this genre could also give Ibsen's own life meaning and direction. Under the influence of Sallust, Ibsen points to a political programme he sympathized with, that is, in its ideal form; but the politician who had activated the programme, Catiline, came to a tragic end for obvious reasons. More importantly, Catiline is a man whose character Ibsen recognizes in himself, but like Sallust, Ibsen chooses a literary vocation.

It now remains for me to say something about what came out of Ibsen's *Catilina*. A couple of devoted friends were privy to this undertaking, and one of them made a fair copy and went to Christiania to have the play printed under a pseudonym, but this was unsuccessful in so far as the friend had to pay for the printing from his own purse. Nor would the theatre put on the play. Although the men of the board offered praise, they did not believe that it could



be a box-office success. Ibsen was nevertheless persuaded by his friend to leave Grimstad and pursue his career in the capital. While earning his living by writing for magazines and composing occasional poems, which came easily to him, Ibsen failed the entrance exam at the university. The next year tipped the scales in his favour, however. He wrote in haste another play which was better suited to the tastes of the bourgeoisie. In early autumn 1851 he met the violinist Ole Bull, whose earnings abroad had allowed him to realize his dream of establishing a Norwegian, not Danish-speaking, theatre in Bergen. Ibsen's *Catilina* had already come to Bull's attention. He deeply sympathized with the young, versatile playwright and was convinced of his potential. They met, and Bull hired him on the spot for his theatre, both to take part in the productions and to stage plays of his own. Ibsen even got the opportunity to go abroad to study theatre in Denmark and Germany. The six years spent in Bergen gave him first-hand knowledge of the repertoire and all the practical experience he needed. And last, but not least, he met his Suzannah there, and she became his greatest ally in his future career.

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