



# *Solguden* and Other Stories. Hamsun, Ibsen and Forgery

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## Abstract

The article analyzes a case of forgery, which included false documents by Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun, that was debated in court in 2012. The study is based on a number of documents and materials to which the author was given access by Norwegian authorities. Arguing that literary forgeries not only are legal evidence, but also can have historical and aesthetic value, the article discusses what kind of documents were forged, what they tell us about Ibsen's and Hamsun's position in today's literary canon, and how literary history would have changed if these documents had been proven authentic.

## Keywords

Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun, forgery, sociology of literature, canonization

## Introduction

In February 2006, two antiquarian bookshops in Oslo received an e-mail with a three-page attachment. If we, for a moment, imagine them opening that attachment, we can just suppose the surprise and amazement they felt when they understood what it was about. It contained the title page, the list of characters, and a synopsis of an unknown Ibsen play entitled *Solguden* (*The Sun God*), penned in Ibsen's iconic and instantly recognizable hand. The sender informed the booksellers that the original manuscript, a sketch of the unfinished play, was kept by a private person in Germany, and that it counted 14 pages in total (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 19). Those three scanned pages had the potential to change literary history.

Shortly after receiving the attachment, the booksellers contacted a major Norwegian public library, which expressed doubts on the authenticity of the manuscript. They engaged a handwriting expert, who concluded that the manuscript was probably not written by Ibsen, and that it, therefore, was to be considered a forgery (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 20). As a consequence, the booksellers and the library did not initiate any negotiations for a purchase of the manuscript, and the *affaire Solguden* ended there – at least for the time being. The sender of the manuscript, in fact, was not a new name to the people involved, as in more or

less the same period, from December 2005 to June 2006, the same person had sold or tried to sell a number of manuscripts by Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun to one of the same antiquarian bookshops and the library (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 2).

We do not know when the booksellers and the librarians started to become suspicious, but according to the ruling from the Oslo court, they reported the sender to the police in May 2008 (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 6). An investigation and a trial followed, resulting, in 2012, in a two-year sentence for having sold and/or tried to sell a number of false documents by Ibsen and Hamsun (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 30), a sentence that was reduced, in 2013, to 1 year and 9 months (with the 9 months suspended) (Borgarting Lagmannsrett 2013, 11).

Interestingly, the defendant was acquitted as far as *Solguden* was concerned. As there was no concrete proof that s/he had initiated a negotiation, and as just three scanned pages of the alleged 14 original were shown, the court found it irrelevant for the rest of the case (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 22). In addition, the hard copy of the manuscript was never found, and the only remaining traces of it are the three scanned pages sent to the booksellers. *Solguden*, in any case, was confirmed by the court to be a forgery after expert reports on handwriting and philology (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 20–21).

## Materials

This article offers an analysis of what State's attorney Hans Tore Høviskeland called “a unique case, both in Norway and in Europe” (Furuly 2011, 8).<sup>1</sup> My study is based on a number of documents and materials I was given access to by Økokrim, the Norwegian National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime. By request of Riksadvokaten (the Norwegian Prosecution Authority), all names of persons and institutions involved in the case will be anonymized, even if they have been disclosed elsewhere. Therefore, when I will mention the person who was convicted, I use either “the defendant” or the pronoun “s/he”, in order not to disclose his/her gender.

Before I proceed to sketching the scope of this article, I deem it important to say something about what I do *not* intend to do. This article is not a legal study of a court case, focused on the relevance and consequences for Norwegian jurisprudence on forgery. I gladly leave that job to law scholars. Nor is it a philological study, trying to discover whether the documents *really* were forged and/or if they were forged by the defendant. The expert reports commissioned by the Oslo court concluded that none of the documents, with a varying degree of certitude, were handwritten by either Ibsen or Hamsun (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 7, 13–15, 17, 20);<sup>2</sup> the court found the defendant guilty of having sold and/or tried to sell documents that were forged “by [him/her] or by others” (2012, 2–4),<sup>3</sup> although probably by the same person (2012, 6, 13). In some cases, the police analyzed the ink used in the documents, and the expert concluded, on the basis of its composition, that it was probably produced after 1989 (2012, 6–7, 13). In addition, the court did not believe the defendant's account of the provenance of the documents (see below), and, therefore, considered that s/he, beyond reasonable doubt, also forged them (2012, 10, 17–18, 21).

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1. “[E]n unik straffesak både i norsk og europeisk sammenheng”. All translations from Norwegian are my own, unless otherwise stated.
  2. The ruling of the Oslo court actually opened for the possibility that a few of the documents were authentic, but this was considered irrelevant for the sentence. The documents that are the object of my study were all considered forgeries (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 8, 17, 21).
  3. “[A]v [han/hun] selv eller andre”.

In any case, the question of *who* forged the documents is not particularly relevant to this article. My point of departure is a verdict: the documents were forged. And this spurs the following questions: What kind of documents were forged? What do *Solguden* and its related peritexts tell us about Ibsen's and Hamsun's position in today's literary canon? How would literary history have changed if these documents had been considered authentic? As the court writes at the beginning of the verdict, "this type of forgery can contribute to altering the image of important historical characters, events and works related to the cultural and literary history of Norway" (2012, 2. See also 2012, 26–26 and Borgarting Lagmannsrett 2013, 7).<sup>4</sup>

Forgeries, in other words, excite the collective literary imagination, and they do so by triggering our innate fascination for mystery and crime, something the *Solguden* case does in the best fashion possible. According to the defendant's account, a considerable share of the forged documents were deliberately planted in a stock of antiques s/he had received from a number of veterans of the Nasjonal Samling, the Norwegian Nazi party during World War II. According to this account, the defendant had approached the veterans in his/her professional capacity, but as their relationship degenerated, they wanted to avenge themselves by framing him/her. However, it never became clear why the veterans should have been in possession of these documents, and the court did not believe the defendant's account (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 7–12, 15–16, 20–21).

## Why Forge?

The *Solguden* story includes all the elements of a contemporary *true crime* thriller, including lost manuscripts by iconic writers, accusations of forgery, and even a Nazi plot. Far more important, however, is how this case epitomizes the lure of literary forgery and the capacity it has to infiltrate, question, disturb, provoke, criticize, and sometimes change literary history. A few examples from the history of forgery may help focus on these implications.

Forgeries have always been a part of the history of literature, with the first documented examples dating to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. It was, however, in the early Christian era and late Antiquity that textual forgeries as we know them began to appear (Grafton 1990, 8–35). Later, the tradition of plagiarism and imitation in the early Modern period gave a boost to spurious practices like forgery (Groom 2002, 38–44). Finally, in English law, the Statute of Anne (1710), which first recognized the author as a legal entity, and budding European romanticism invested forgeries with a specific impact on literary historiography (Ruthven 2001, 56).

In fact, the romantic cult of the author as a lone, genius-like creator inevitably caused forgers to tamper with the name of the author; forgeries thus acquired the power of altering the reputation and/or literary relevance of the author in question, or, conversely, forgers could capitalize on the name of the author for pursuing other goals, be it of financial nature (a manuscript of a famous author was supposed to generate money if sold) or of cultural nature. The latter is the case in what is probably the most famous example of forgery of all times, namely the works of Ossian, a series of alleged Gaelic epic poems. The Scottish poet and writer James MacPherson partly collected these from oral sources and partly invented, publishing them as fragments between 1761 and 1763. Macpherson's Ossian fabricated and celebrated a mythical Scottish past, which would undermine Ireland's primacy in Gaelic

4. "Denne typen uekte objekter kan medføre at det danner seg et uriktig bilde av viktige personer, hendelser og verk i norsk kultur/litteraturhistorie".

culture and corroborate the identity of post-Jacobite Scotland (Groom 2002, 111). Even more importantly, the forged Ossian poems played a key role in the development of European romanticism, with the proliferation of both English and foreign editions, inspiring a number of other revivalist movements (Groom 2012, 113). Even though Macpherson was unmasked in 1775, the wheels were already turning: Romanticism was born, and few seemed to care that the Ossian poems were forged. Their influence on literary history was already too strong.

The Ossian case remains a foundational episode for a modern understanding of forgery, especially because the mixture of genuine and invented material “results in a textual hybridity which destabilises the common-sense notion that a literary text is either genuine or bogus” (Ruthven 2001, 15). In addition, by directing the reader’s attention to an iconic, albeit mythical, author, MacPherson invested his texts with an aura emanating from the author-creator, which can be found in many later forgeries up to today. These aspects merged, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a growing recognition of forgery as a mode of creation, epitomized by the reception of the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century forger Thomas Chatterton, who fabricated a number of works of poetry and prose attributed to a fictional 15<sup>th</sup>-century monk, Thomas Rowley. Such a legacy culminated with Chatterton’s appreciation and critical study by Oscar Wilde, who had grasped that “at its finest, literary forgery could be the sign of supreme artistry, in ways that enabled him defiantly to link the imagination with the most inventive forms that might express, not empirical truths, but inspired lying” (Bristow and Mitchell 2015, 21). Chatterton/Rowley continued to be a literary reference for Wilde throughout his life.

In the Nordic countries, literary forgeries have not been the object of great scholarly interest, although a number of episodes show that it is still a relevant question. Just to mention a few recent examples, August Strindberg’s letters were the object of a case of forgery discovered in Sweden in 1995 (Meidal 1995), and the Hamsun association of Norway has lamented the occasional appearance of objects falsely attributed to Knut Hamsun (Lien 2012, 40). Ibsen forgeries seem to appear more rarely, although the curators of the Ibsen museums in Oslo and Skien recently discovered a top hat that was falsely claimed to have been Ibsen’s property (Haave 2018 and Edvardsen 2019).

## What is Forgery?

As K.K. Ruthven puts it in his influential monograph *Faking Literature*, forgeries have been historically difficult to define, partly because of the many synonyms that have been used to define literary spuriousity, such as “fake,” “forgery,” or “counterfeit,” just to mention a few recurring ones. Ruthven chooses the word “fake” and offers a broad definition as “any text whose actual provenance differs from what is made out to be” (Ruthven 2001, 39), an advantageous definition for its inclusiveness, but too vague to account for the differences among the items that are the object of my study. Therefore, I lean towards the more functional distinction, proposed by Nick Groom, between a “counterfeit,” which he defines as “an exact copy of a pre-existent work”; a “forgery,” which “has no actual original source; it conjures the illusion of a source”; and “plagiarism,” “which is like counterfeiting, but only insofar as it makes an exact and invisible copy” (Groom 2002, 16). According to these definitions, the vast majority of materials mentioned in this article would be considered forgeries.

Ruthven argues that forgeries are victims of a shared consensus on being “an aberration best ignored rather than a critique of the twin institutions of literature and literary studies” (Ruthven 2001, 195). Forgeries have the potential to unleash a “moral panic” (Ruthven

2001, 198) in the literary field, a reaction that the art historian Jonathon Keats also finds applicable to the art world, as “the mood of modern Western art is anxious” about forgeries (Keats 2013, 3). As he puts it, “[b]ecause art is a rare refuge from the mass-produced inauthenticity of the industrialized world, we are hypersensitive to any threat to the authenticity of art” (Keats 2013, 23). It is, therefore, in their nature as the opposite of “authentic” works of literature and art that forgeries show all their potential to “disturb the societies in which they are produced” (Ruthven 2001, 2), overturning the hierarchies of taste and authority of critics, scholars, and prizes. Forgers and forgeries gain their power by their potential to expose the very institutions that reject them as gullible and incompetent, showing a pleasure in pointing at and ridiculing the naked king (Ruthven 2001, 174, 183, 190).

In his book, Ruthven tries to rethink the binary opposition between “literarity” and “spuriousity,” or between “genuine” and “fake,” “in which literature is valorized as the authentic Self and literary forgery disparaged as its bogus other” (Ruthven 2001, 3). Instead, he claims that “‘literature’ and ‘literary forgery’ [are] categories of writing with much in common” and that we should start thinking more positively about forgeries, precisely because of their “carnavalesque irreverence towards the sanctity of various conventions designed to limit what is permitted in literary production” (Ruthven 2001, 3–4). Forgery, Ruthven seems to suggest, nourishes a potential to provoke that “genuine” literature and art have lost long ago; Keats goes as far as to suggest that “art forgeries achieve what legitimate art accomplishes when legitimate art is most effective, provoking us to ask agitating questions about ourselves and our world” (Keats 2013, 24); therefore, “[f]orgers are the foremost artists of our age” (Keats 2013, 4).

Furthermore, literary and artistic forgeries show how central the figure of the author still is in the cultural field, in spite of famous post-structuralist attempts at declaring his death (Ruthven 2001, 63–64, 70–73; Miller 2018, 45–48). In fact, forgeries turn the author into a fetish, an image which spellbinds both the sender and the receiver. The *Solguden* case is exemplary of this mechanism, as the forged manuscripts did not belong to some unknown author, but to two of the most iconic figures in Norwegian literature; even more strikingly, as we will see, they pretended to belong to periods and episodes in their lives (Ibsen’s unfinished last play and Hamsun’s appraisal of Nazism) that excite the public imagination.

Corroborated by its anarchistic irreverence and its obsession with the figure of the author, forgery presents itself as an extreme act of creation. If literature is representation, forgers fabricate something that is already fabricated, and make room for a fantasy within a fantasy (Groom 2002, 2–3). Through the narrative the forger activates by creating provenance and materials (ink, paper, etc.), “forgery becomes an imaginative production of the past that rests only ironically on material evidence, and which shows the forger as a storyteller *par excellence*” (Groom 2002, 64. Italics in the original). The forger is, first of all, a narrator, or, in other words, a creator; by telling a story, a forgery opens a window into our world, “reveal[ing] more about the times it is produced in than about the past it pretends to be a part of” (Ruthven 2001, 15).

This article proposes four different categories of forgeries, which address, in one way or another, the items involved in the *Solguden* case. Such categories are, of course, not waterproof, and a forgery can belong to several of them at the same time. 1) The **collectable**. Manuscript fragments of known works are rarely of great historical value, unless they differ from other documents already available in archives. Therefore, they are mainly an object for philologists and collectors, and gain legitimacy just by being allegedly handwritten by a famous author. 2) A similar category, but of slightly greater historical value, is the **icon**, i.e. an item that catalyzes the energies of an episode or period of great importance in the life or

career of the author. That could be a famous lost letter or a document that, in one way or another, concentrates the artistic aura of the author. 3) When, however, a document is not known from before and adds significant new information to the biography or the production of the author, we are dealing with a historical **game changer**, a type of forgery that gains its strength from the potential to tamper with and change the course of history. 4) Finally, any of these documents can become an *objet maudit*, or cursed object, if it in one way or another is linked to a dramatic and/or negative period or episode, and if its content or provenance history somehow reinforce its negative aura. This is the case, for instance, of objects owned or signed by dictators or criminals. In the next section, I will briefly comment on the documents that will be the object of my analysis and show how the categories above help to classify them.

## The Forged Documents

The 2012 court case included 26 documents attributed to Hamsun and Ibsen that were the object of different expert examinations. In this section, I will briefly comment upon the documents I deem most interesting for this analysis.<sup>5</sup> Among the collectables, autographed documents aimed at the collector market and of limited historical or literary interest, the folder includes around 60 pages of manuscript fragments of Hamsun's *Paa gjengrodde stier* (*On Overgrown Paths*, 1 b-19, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1047–1053) and Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* (1 b-4, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1005–1033). Being little more than handwritten reproductions of texts available elsewhere, these fragments do not have any particular historical value, although some of the experts reports mentioned that they, if proven to be authentic, would have shown a slightly different working routine by the two Norwegian authors (Økokrim 111/08-60, 120, 144 and 165). A similar item, which takes on the additional value of the *objet maudit*, is a handwritten draft of Hamsun's Hitler obituary, which does not show any significant differences from the version that was printed in *Aftenposten* on 7 May 1945. Therefore, this item is mostly aimed at collectors, although it also catalyzes the ominous legacy of Hamsun's Nazism (I a-2, Økokrim 111/08-60, 988). Because of their scant historical value, these materials will not be further analyzed.

As far as icons are concerned, the case included two first editions of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, with handwritten dedications to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Edvard Munch (1 b-5 and 1 b-6, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1034–1035). Although these dedications bear a minimum of historical value, their potential as forgeries lies in their iconicity, in the presence on paper of the handwritten dedication from one master to another; the object acquires almost relic status for having allegedly been in the hands of two iconic figures in the history of Norwegian culture. Of far greater iconic value is document 1 b-1 (Økokrim 111/08-60, 993–994), which is an enrolment register for Nasjonal Samling, filled in and signed by Hamsun. As I will show below, this document – the existence of which many have speculated about – would have been a sensation, even though it hardly would have changed the established view on Hamsun's relationship to Nazism. Such a document, by being an icon of Hamsun's liaison with Nazism, also qualifies well for the category of the *objet maudit*.

Lastly, there are the forgeries belonging to the third category, the historical game changers. The case included a diary from 1943 with a number of notes about Hamsun's visit to

5. I was given access to all documents by Økokrim, which delivered a folder marked "HAMSUN/IBSEN 111/08-60", with pages numbered sequentially. I will refer to these documents by the designation "Økokrim 111/08-60, page number". In addition, when it comes to the forged documents, I will indicate the catalogue number given by the prosecutors (for example, "I a-1", etc.).

Germany, including a draft of a letter to Hitler (1 b-2, Økokrim 111/08-60, 995–1003). The most sensational documents are, however, to be found in the Ibsen files. The folder contains a rather iconic letter from Ibsen to Hamsun concerning the former attending the latter's lecture on literature in 1891, with a note added by Hamsun in 1948 (1 b-7, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1036). The most important game changer, and the main subject of my study, is of course *Solguden* itself (II, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1054–1056). In the next two sections I will analyze these documents, starting with those related to Hamsun and continuing with the Ibsen documents.

## The Hamsun Files

The first item I would like to comment upon is the enrolment register in the Nasjonal Samling (hereafter NS). The document consists of an original register belonging to the so-called "NS-Hjelpeorganisasjon," a sub-branch of NS focused on humanitarian aid to the Norwegian population (Bratteli et al. n.d., 6). It is, technically, not exactly the same thing as *the party* NS, but the document would still have proven some sort of direct link between Hamsun and NS. The issue is highly relevant from a historical point of view, because the question of whether Hamsun was a member of the NS or not is still unanswered. While scholars seem to have come to a consensus regarding Hamsun's external support of NS and Nazi ideology (Dingstad 2003, Žagar 2009, Sjølyst-Jackson 2010), the question of his membership is a mystery still unsolved.

While this particular issue might appear to be a minor detail in the historical assessment of Hamsun's relationship to NS and Nazism, it has actually been of great importance in the public debate about Hamsun and his legacy (Langdal 1999), and even more so in juridical writings (Kierulf & Schiøtz 2004). The question originated in the court case the Norwegian State raised against Hamsun, which took place between 1945 and 1948. As Ståle Dingstad has pointed out, the accusation of High Treason was soon dropped by the State, out of consideration for Hamsun's age and health conditions (Dingstad 2003, 247–250). Hamsun was left with a civil case, as was common practice for former members of the NS, and it was imperative to prove that he had been an active party member, an aspect that turned out to be more difficult than expected (Kolloen 2004, 400–402). In fact, while the NS archive did contain a membership card registered in Hamsun's name and a questionnaire filled out by him, there was (and still is) no trace of the application form that would have proven Hamsun's *intentional action* of enrolment in the party (Kierulf and Schiøtz 2004, 60–61, 80–87).

The lack of such a document was in part a formality; the Court still condemned Hamsun on the basis of the available evidence (Dingstad 2003, 252–253), and the Norwegian public's judgment on him through the decades has been "based on his actions, not on formalities" (Borgarting Lagmannsrett 2013, 7).<sup>6</sup> The forged register, in any case, was quickly disclosed as false; according to one of the experts, he would never have filled the field "profession" with "writer" (Økokrim 111/08-60, 167),<sup>7</sup> as it is in the register. In addition, the date reported on the register (4 May 1943) makes little sense if compared with the other documents available: the membership card is dated 22 December 1940 and the questionnaire 15 January 1942 (Kierulf and Schiøtz 2004, 82, 84). Finally, the fact that the forged document was merely an enrolment register for the NS Hjelpeorganisasjon would make it difficult to claim that it was the link in the chain that had been missing for over five decades.

6. "[Etter] sine handlinger, ikke formaliteter".

7. Respectively "Stilling" and "Forfatter".

In spite of its flaws as a historical document, I would still argue for this forgery's importance as an icon and *objet maudit* – the token of a crucial and sinisterly fascinating moment in Norwegian cultural history. The very presence of Hamsun's signature in that register is the crux of the whole forgery, which would lose any significance and value if removed. In such forgeries, signatures are the catalyst of public attention, “graphemic traces which evoke metonymically the bodies of those who have produced them” (Ruthven 2001, 153), thus convoking the spirit of Hamsun the Nazi in the eyes of the beholder of the forgery.

Other Hamsun files play the role of the game changer. A case in point is a notebook dated 1943, with a number of notes and short texts written in Hamsun's hand. Apart from brief mentions of important events in Hamsun's life that year (such as “Visiting Goebbels!” on 15 May and “Nobel Prize medal given to Minister Goebbels” on 17 June, 1 b-2, Økokrim 111/08-60, 998, 1000),<sup>8</sup> the notebook includes a text that relates to an iconic event in Hamsun's life, namely his visit to Adolf Hitler that took place on 26 June 1943. Hamsun's forger wrote the following entry for 15 July:

Mr. Hitler. Excuse an old poet for finding new words for an old story. I am deeply sad about our meeting. My heart has always belonged to [unreadable] our brothers the German people, even more under your [unreadable]. Perhaps I went too far. A dotard's temperament and feelings should not have ruined such an important day. My sincere thankfulness for your goodwill and friendly attitude did not come to the surface, such can one feel [unreadable]! With deference and gratitude, I sign myself as your greatly devoted K.H. (1 b-2, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1002)<sup>9</sup>

This text, if proven authentic, would have been a game changer for several reasons. It is well known that the meeting between Hamsun and Hitler was far from a friendly conversation, and that the Führer abruptly ended it, furious about the Norwegian's criticism of Reichskommissar Terboven and his requests to ameliorate Norway's geopolitical status and the living conditions for Norwegians (Rem 2014, 269–286). What we know much less about, are Hamsun's thoughts and reflections *after* the meeting. According to different oral reports, Hamsun would have been worried about whether he had communicated his preoccupations to Hitler in an efficient way, but he did not show signs of repentance or formulate second thoughts about his behavior (Rem 2014, 289). Tore Rem, in his book about this meeting, even wonders whether Hamsun really understood how badly their conversation had gone (Rem 2014, 293). Years later, after the end of the war, Hamsun would recall the meeting with critical remarks about Hitler's ego, but certainly not with contrition (Rem 2014, 297).<sup>10</sup> In any case, Hamsun never formulated any written recollection of the meeting, although Rem mentioned that he made some notes that were later confiscated and lost (Rem 2014, 295).

In other words, this forgery would have been a game changer because it would have given us a quite different Hamsun than what we would expect of him after this meeting: a controlled, reflective, humble and repentant sinner showing (sincere or affected) regret for

8. “I Besøk hos Goebbels!” and “Nobelmedaljen gitt til Riksminister Goebbels”.

9. “Hr. Hitler. Tilgi at en gammel Dikter maa finde nye Ord paa en gammel Sak. Jeg er dypt ulykkelig over vort Møte. Mit Hjerte har altid tilhørt [...] vort germanske Broderfolk, endnu mer under Deres [...]. Jeg gik kanskje for langt. En Oldings Temperament og Følelser skulde ikke ha forkludret en saa viktig Dag. Min opriktige Tak for Deres Velvilje og venlige Holdning kom ikke til Overflaten, Slikt føler man sig [...] av! Med Ærbødighet og Taknemlighet tegner jeg mig som Deres særdeles forbundne K. H.”

10. The only available document that may point at Hamsun's regret is the unpublished draft of a letter to Otto Dietrich, Hitler's Press Chief. Hamsun was apparently unable to hear Hitler's answers, and therefore “forced him to give a long speech” (“umaket ham til at holde en lang Tale”). In 1946, Hamsun was not sure whether he had sent Dietrich the letter or not (Hamsun 2000, 407).



his behavior and almost begging the Führer for forgiveness. It is perhaps this very un-Hamsunian, pathetic tone that lead the expert to conclude that the text probably was a forgery (Økokrim 111/08-60, 168), but it is precisely this pathetic tone in relation to such an iconic event that would make this forgery a sensation and a game changer if it were proven authentic. Rem argues that the meeting between Hamsun and Hitler epitomized the meeting of two forms of authorities, the dictator and the intellectual – two powerful and interconnected, but in their nature separate, forms of discourse. This text gives us the other side of the coin after the meeting: a considerably less stubborn and milder Hamsun than previously presented through literary history.

The last game changer in the Hamsun files is a short letter of thanks from Ibsen to Hamsun. The text reads as follows: “Mr. Hamsun! / Many thanks for your invitation! / Yours / Henrik Ibsen.” In addition, the document features another handwritten text, this time in Hamsun’s hand, at the bottom of the page:

This answer from Dr. Ibsen came to me just a few hours before my lecture was to start. His brief answer upset me greatly. Would he come? He came!

*Nørholm, Nov. -48*  
(1 b-7, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1036)<sup>11</sup>

The Ibsen text is undated, but the context suggests that it would have been written in October 1891, when Hamsun held a series of lectures in Kristiania. In these lectures, he violently attacked the generation of writers before him, including Ibsen, and advocated for a renewal of Norwegian literature (Kolloen 2003, 162–165; De Figueiredo 2019, 566–569). It is known that Ibsen attended one of these lectures, and that Hamsun had sent him an invitation (Kolloen 2003, 163), but evidence of Ibsen’s response is non-existent. If this letter had been proven authentic, it would have changed considerably our knowledge and interpretation of the relationship between the two authors, not least for the later commentary, dated November 1948, which Hamsun ostensibly wrote at the bottom of the page. If this commentary were authentic, it would alter our understanding of Hamsun’s opinion on Ibsen, as it would mean that the old novelist, now confined to Nørholm after his sentence in the summer of that year, looked back to his youth in a somewhat nostalgic way and honored his old rival. But it would also have given us a literary figure “deprived of Hamsun’s wit”, as one of the experts involved in the court case wrote, concluding that the document most probably was false (Økokrim 111/08-60, 169).<sup>12</sup> Certainly, this document would not have given us the Hamsun that intended to “expose and scorn” Ibsen in his lecture, as an act of rebellion against the literary and cultural authorities that had preceded him (quoted in Rem 2014, 34).<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, in addition to being a potential game changer in literary history, this document has great iconic value; it embraces both of the main literary figures of Norwegian literature in a fascinating web, exciting the collective imagination about *the* great contact, however epistolary, between the two masters, a contact that, as we know, never took place. In other words, the story this document tells is too good to be true, and that is probably the reason why the same expert concluded that this document – together with the others that were objects of analysis – were not authentic:

11. “Herr Hamsun! / Hjertelig tak for Deres indbydelse / Deres / Henrik Ibsen.” “Dette Svar fra Dr. Ibsen kom til mig kun nogen Timer før mit Foredrag skulde holdes. Hans korte Svar gjorde mig meget oprørt. Vilde han komme? Han kom! Nørholm, Nov. -48”.

12. “[B]lottet for Hamsuns vidd”.

13. “[F]orklare ham og håne ham”.

From a historical point of view, many of the documents show an exaggerated focus on important figures such as Quisling and Hitler, Goebbels and Terboven, and of course Ibsen. The documents, in other words, would attract, or are thought to attract, public interest and therefore have great financial value. They capitalize on the author's habitus, an aspect that is strengthened by their relevance for Hamsun's connections to other leading historical personalities, be they politicians or artists. This would probably double the value of the documents, but it also makes the whole operation more suspicious. (Økokrim 111/08-60, 172)<sup>14</sup>

Such potential game changers tell a lot, as the quotation above hints at, about the mechanisms governing public opinion and its relationship with forgeries. Forgers do not forge just any document – they tend to forge that which is sensational and likely to have a market value and garner interest. As far as Hamsun is concerned, his private persona – as well as its relationship to his public persona epitomized by his support of Nazism – has become almost a collective obsession in the last few decades. When Hamsun's 1926 psychiatric patient journals, which are kept at the National Library of Norway in an extremely difficult encrypted code, were partly leaked in 2016–2017, a media campaign broke out in the cultural weekly *Morgenbladet* about the sensational elements that might be contained in them – an interest that even resulted in an art installation by Thomas Kvam entitled *Schizoleaks 1926–2017* (Lindholm 2017 and Flatø 2017). The core of the question was not the journals per se, but the way in which a psychiatric investigation could have offered the answer to the “Hamsun mystery” and, ultimately, to his Nazi sympathies. A similar pattern seems to concern the appearance of *Solguden*, who was sent to the Oslo booksellers in early 2006, i.e., at the beginning of the centennial year from Ibsen's death. Both the media and the public opinion would, therefore, be especially receptive for Ibsen in that period, as his works and legacy were the object of continuous mediatic attention. It was surely not a coincidence that such a forgery popped up at that exact point.

To sum up, forgeries of this kind speak volumes not only about the mechanisms governing the antique market, but, more broadly, about the need that the public has for the sensational, the surprise, the game changer that would make one reconsider established truths about literary history. It is the other face of the coin of the “anxiety” that Jonathon Keats recognizes as the basic mood of the art world, which is constantly preoccupied with the emergence of the forgery, the table turner that would change the rules (and the prices) of the market, but that also, secretly or unconsciously, craves the surprise and the thrill of seeing the tables turned. This is, I would argue, the most important aspect of forgeries such as these Hamsun examples or, as I will discuss in the following, *Solguden*.

## The Ibsen Documents

Icons are well-represented in the Ibsen files, in the form of two signed copies of *John Gabriel Borkman*, dedicated to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Edvard Munch respectively. The undated Bjørnson dedication reads “Dear Bjørnson! / A blessed / greeting from / Your / devoted / friend / Henrik Ibsen” (1 b-5, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1034).<sup>15</sup> The Munch dedication is dated

14. “Fra et historisk synspunkt gjelder det for flere av dokumentene at det er et overdrevent fokus på fremtredende personer som Quisling og Hitler, Goebbels og Terboven, samt Ibsen. Dokumentene er altså nært knyttet til det som påkaller eller som man må regne med vil påkalle offentlighetens interesse og som potensielt vil ha stor økonomisk verdi. Det spilles på forfatterens habitus, og denne forsterkes ved at mange av dokumentene er koblet opp mot Hamsuns forbindelser til andre ledende historiske personligheter, enten de er politikere eller kunstnere. Det fordobler angivelig verdien av dokumentene, men gjør også foretaket mer tvilsomt.”

15. “Kære Bjørnson! / En velsignet / hilsen fra / Din / hengivne / ven / Henrik Ibsen”.

“Kristiania, den 6.1.97” and reads “To Edvard Munch / with gratitude and / admiration! / Your devoted / Henrik Ibsen.” (1 b-6, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1035).<sup>16</sup>

The experts involved in the case were quick to express skepticism about these documents, both because of the overly friendly tone toward Bjørnson, to whom Ibsen apparently never wrote the word “ven” (“friend”), and because of the archaism “taksomhed” (“gratitude”) in the Munch dedication instead of the usual “taknemlighed” (Økokrim 111/08-60, 121). If authentic, the Munch dedication would have opened up interesting perspectives on the poorly documented relationship between Ibsen and Munch. For example, for what might Ibsen have been grateful to Munch? One of the experts mentions that Munch had drawn some playbills for a production of *Peer Gynt* in Paris shortly before the date of this dedication, but there is no other evidence that supports Ibsen’s sentiments (Økokrim 111/08-60, 123). Ibsen and Munch met sporadically during the 1890s, and in later writings Munch claimed that Ibsen had gained inspiration from his paintings when he wrote *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), but such claims have been the object of later criticism and their relationship seems to have been far from frequent and/or especially warm in character (Økokrim 111/08-60, 140 and De Figueiredo 2019, 668–669).

Therefore, the Munch dedication would cast some light upon an unknown story, but arguably not one that would revolutionize the way we look at either Munch or Ibsen. In this sense, we are not talking about a game changer, but rather of an icon, an object that catalyses the name of two masters on the same page and conjures their iconic power and the story of a missed friendship. The Bjørnson dedication arguably does something similar, yet in a less powerful and economically lucrative way on the antique market, given the greater fame that Munch enjoys worldwide.

Of considerably greater and more substantive consequence for our understanding of Ibsen’s career as an author is the last and main topic for this analysis, *Solguden* itself, a forgery that plays many of the previously mentioned roles: the collectable, the historical game changer, the icon. It consists of a title page, a list of characters and a partial synopsis, for a total of three pages. In the list of characters we find, among others, “Member of parliament Löving”, “Anna Löving, his wife”, “Nils Löving, their son” and “Wilhelm Halberg, painter” (II, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1055).<sup>17</sup> The synopsis tells us that “the plot unfolds in Kristiania” and that “Löving has been a member of parliament for many years”. His wife “shows signs of great loneliness” and “their love is cold, but friendly. They are well integrated in the art circles in Kristiania, which they visit regularly” (II, Økokrim 111/08-60, 1056).<sup>18</sup>

From the point of view of the content, there are several interesting clues in the last two pages. Starting with the characters, one notices that the forger has mixed some usual suspects from Ibsen’s oeuvre with a few less frequently used names. “Nils” is, for instance, Krogstad’s first name in *A Doll’s House*, and other characters are reminiscent of “Wilhelm” Foldal from *John Gabriel Borkman* (though spelled with a V) and the different “Anna” present in Ibsen’s early plays, for example *Love’s Comedy*. Somewhat stranger, perhaps, is the surname of the protagonist, Löving, which, as Erik Edvardsen has noted, seems like a crasis of Løvborg from *Hedda Gabler* and Alving from *Ghosts* (Lien 2012, 39).

Even more interesting are the perspectives *Solguden* opens up at the level of the plot. If *Solguden* were found to be authentic, it would have meant that Ibsen, for the first time in many

16. “Til Edvard Munch / i taksomhed og / beundring! / Deres hengivne / Henrik Ibsen”.

17. “Storthingsmand Löving”, “Anna Löving, hans hustru”, “Nils Löving, deres søn” and “Wilhelm Halberg, kunstmaler”.

18. “Handlingen foregår i Kristiania”, “Löving har været storthingsmand gennem mange år”, “bærer præg af megen ensomhed” and “deres kærlighed er kjölig, men venskabelig. De plejer i stor grad omgang med de kunstneriske kretse i Kristiania”.

years, would have given a politician the main role; politicians are extremely underrepresented in Ibsen's modern plays, with the possible exceptions of Stensgaard and Lundestad from *The League of Youth* (1869). Things become even more interesting if we take the synopsis into consideration. As one can see, apart from a typical Ibsenian story about an unhappy marriage, the play sketches a quite unusual relationship (at least in Ibsen's plays) between people from the high bourgeoisie, as we can presume members of parliament to be at that time, and the creative classes, represented by the painter Halberg and his "art circles". The painter Ballested in *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) is the only similar case that comes to mind.

One can only speculate regarding the class struggles that may have been represented in this play, but the forger must be given credit for his or her imagination and effort in inventing a plot and characters. We are therefore well into the forger's role as historical game changer; if it were proven to be authentic, this text would probably have added an explicit political bent to Ibsen's literary project, one which is quite unknown in his late plays.

In any case, the real game changer in this whole story is the title of the play. "Solguden", or "The Sun God", cannot have been chosen randomly by the forger. It appears only once in Ibsen's writings, and in a very special setting, namely a letter to his niece Anna Stousland, written on 11 August 1900. The letter reads as follows:

My dear little Anna,

Thank you for your kind and dear letter. It warmed my heart to read it, and I wished I had you here with me. You may certainly continue to call me your "Sun God". All the fire of my youth still burns in me.

I am almost completely well again and take long walks on the roads.

Your "Sun God". (Quoted from Meyer 1971, 794)<sup>19</sup>

This reference would have had sensational consequences if the manuscript were proven to be authentic. The letter, in fact, was written during a short period of good health that followed Ibsen's first stroke and preceded a worsening of his condition later that fall. Although it is not possible to rule out the possibility that Ibsen had used that word before, the title seems to point in one direction: *Solguden* had to be considered the last play by Ibsen, a play that it appears he had started to think about in 1900, but that he never finished because of his failing health (De Figueiredo 2019, 643).<sup>20</sup>

19. "Min kære, lille Anna! / Tak for dit gode, kærlige brev. Jeg blev varm om hjertet da jeg læste det og ønskede at jeg havde dig her hos mig. Du må gerne blive ved at kalde mig din 'Solgud'. Al min ungdoms ild brænder i mig endnu. – – / Jeg er omtrent ganske rask igen og går lange ture på vejene. / Din / 'Solgud'" (Ibsen 2010, 525).

20. Ibsen biographies do not report anything about the content of this work, but the Norwegian literary historian Francis Bull, in the second edition of his *Norsk litteraturhistorie*, makes the following comment: "Between 1900 and 1901 he said repeatedly that he was working on a new play: it was to have focused on the conflict between two human passions, love and power, he told Christian Michelsen. As an old sceptic, he then added: 'but then the conflict will be solved by the intervention of a third human passion: envy!'" ("I 1900 og 1901 snakket han flere ganger om at han forberedte et nytt arbeid; det skulle handle om konflikten mellom to av de menneskelige grunndrifter, elskovsdriften og maktdriften, sa han til Christian Michelsen, og så føyde han til, såre karakteristisk for den gamle skeptiker: 'men så skal konflikten løses ved et inngrep fra en tredje grunndrift hos menneskene: misunnelsen!'", Bull 1960, 463). This quotation is not supported by any other evidence, a practice that was not unknown to Bull. As Ellen Rees puts it: "Bull's father, Edvard, was Ibsen's personal physician at the end of the dramatist's life, and through this connection, the younger Bull later acquired an almost oracular position in Norwegian letters, having had direct access to the most important literary figures around the turn of the century. Francis Bull is, however, notorious for an almost total lack of documentation in his scholarship, and his second-hand account remains the only (unverifiable) evidence of innumerable anecdotes about Ibsen and his contemporaries" (Rees 2016, 80). Hypothetically, it is possible that the politician Christian Michelsen, who was in contact with Ibsen's son Sigurd (himself a politician) had received first-hand information from Ibsen, but at the moment there is no other evidence that supports this account. Moreover, the paragraph in question was, puzzling enough, not present in the first edition of Bull's literary history (1937, 451–452), and appears for the first time in a 1946 lecture on Kaj Munk (Grieg et al. 1946, 18).

In this way, *Solguden* not only reinforces its power as a historical game changer, but also acquires other very important qualities. On the one hand, it becomes an extremely rare and valued collectable; according to the Oslo court, the defendant had plans of selling it for 1 million kroner (Oslo Tingrett 2012, 21). On the other hand, it becomes an icon, a symbol of an everlasting question in Ibsen studies, one that has never been answered: what was Ibsen working on in those months in 1900, before his health worsened? To this question, *Solguden* adds the autobiographical undertone, which the letter to Stousland somehow activates. Was this last play supposed to be an autobiographical work?

What *Solguden* does, like any great forgery, is to tell a story that its audience is willing to believe in, and, in this way, it becomes a work of art. The story *Solguden* tells is double, both internal (the plot it tells, with the consequences sketched above) and external (its place in Ibsen's biography and its role as a game changer). It is therefore not a coincidence that the two experts who analyzed it concluded that it was, without a doubt, the most important of all documents in the case. They disagreed, however, about whether the play was forged or not, one concluding that it was not authentic, the other asking for more documentation about its provenance (Økokrim 111/08-60, 123, 133).

Such disagreement, in addition to the fact that no chemical analysis was possible (the document was only available as a scanned image), was perhaps the reason why a third expert was asked to verify the defendant's thesis about the provenance of the manuscript, namely that it had been in the possession of a family in Skien, which had ties to Ibsen. The expert concluded that the defendant's story had significant gaps, and that the document probably was false. However, s/he actually produced a hypothetical narrative *ad absurdum* about how, when, and why Ibsen could have had passed on the manuscript to this family, thus producing yet another story originating from *Solguden* (Økokrim 111/08-60, 177–183).

## Conclusion

What I have tried to argue here is that the forgeries mentioned in this article, and *Solguden* in particular, demonstrate that forgeries can be works of art, and that, more generally, art needs not to be authentic to be great art (Keats 2013, 66). Forgeries like *Solguden* are fantasies within the fantasy of literature, that open up “a realm of the fantastic, in which stories lie embedded within other stories, works unfold within works; in which fictions, dreams, and ghosts perpetually interfere with the order of things” (Groom 2002, 3). Rather than being condemned for the criminal offences they generate, forgeries like *Solguden* should perhaps be praised for the creative effort that underlies them, based both on refined technical skills and on a vivid literary imagination (Groom 2003, 142). In fact, the forger needs to imagine what the text would have looked like when it was written and what it should look like at the moment of its recovery, and such craft needs to go hand in hand with a historical understanding of the story the document is supposed to tell, the gaps it should fill, and the relationship with other stories and other documents (Grafton 1990, 50, 59, 62).

When a forgery is done well, it excites the audience's literary imagination and its need for novelty and table turning. As Ibsen biographer Ivo de Figueiredo put it regarding the *Solguden* case, forgers “exploit [...] our craving to fill in the gaps in history”, and they do so not by forging just any text, but by “always coming up with something new and exciting” (both quotations from Lien 2012, 40)<sup>21</sup>. Forgeries, as mentioned earlier, reveal more about the age

21. “[U]tnytter [...] dette suget i oss alle etter å få fylt hullene i historien” and “de kommer alltid med noe nytt og spennende”.

they appear in than the age they pretend to belong to, and they do so by grasping the opportunities that their own time and their public are ready to give them (Grafton 1990, 65, 67; Ruthven 2001, 15). As I have already pointed out, the fact that *Solguden* appeared in 2006 is not coincidental, as this year was the Ibsen centennial year, where great economic and cultural capital was invested in the celebration of the great Norwegian author – it was therefore the perfect moment for such a forgery to appear.

The anthology *Den biografiske Ibsen* (Sæther 2010), as well as the most recent biography *Henrik Ibsen: The Man & The Mask* by Ivo de Figueiredo (2019 [2006]), have attempted to show how Ibsen's life, following the narrative established by both himself and his later biographers, has partly acquired a mythical status, as the history of an inscrutable, Norwegian "Sphinx". As Jon Nygaard points out, "like most who have studied Ibsen, I have also thought that we now know all that is worth knowing about Ibsen's life and works, and so we can just add some fancy details and new perspectives" (2014, 72). The intention of Nygaard and other scholars (see Fulsås 2011) is to show that there *is* indeed a need for new historical perspectives on Ibsen's life and works, not least because of a number of assumptions and stereotypes that have taken root in Ibsen Studies. But this advocacy also shows another side of the story, that of the need that audiences – and perhaps scholars as well – have for the game changer that would overturn established truths about literary history, and consequently, write a new history. In such a way, *Solguden* and its peritexts do not say much about Ibsen's very last literary efforts or Hamsun's relationship to Nazism, but they reveal quite a lot about a society in which Hamsun and Ibsen have reached such a star status as to be "honored" by such forgeries. That is what forgeries do – they intersect with established truths, disturb and reveal the public's innermost desires. Herein lies the power they exercise on literary history.

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