

**ASTRID SÆTHER:
Suzannah. Fru Ibsen**

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This is the first full-length biography of Henrik Ibsen's wife Suzannah Thoresen, an intensely private woman of whom it is generally agreed that very little is known. The accepted picture of her is of a wife in the background, always loyal and supportive, but somewhat cold and withdrawn, and partly responsible for her husband's tendency in later life to seek the company of younger and happier women. With this investigation Astrid Sæther, who has been one of the leaders of the Ibsen Centre in Oslo for many years, attempts to bring Suzannah centre stage and change our perception of her, to demonstrate that she was a strong and independent woman who not only sheltered but also inspired her husband. She was intelligent and well read, and helped Ibsen through discussions of his writing to realise his talents to the full.

This is an ambitious undertaking, and it is considerably hampered by the lack of material about its subject. Much of the correspondence between husband and wife – who did spend considerable periods apart – has been destroyed, so a reconstruction of their relationship is difficult. Sæther has made the most of what material there is, especially in previously unpublished family letters, and follows their public and private lives in great detail. On the way she presents a fascinating picture of Suzannah's early life with her family, including her far more glamorous step-mother, the author Magdalene Thoresen, and her much loved older sister Marie. There is also much of interest here about Henrik and Suzannah's relationship with their only son Sigurd, a source of pride and worry whose early promising career as a diplomat did not bring the rewards he had anticipated. As regards the two central characters, however, much is speculation, and the narrative is accordingly speculative. There is a somewhat irritating tendency to ask a string of rhetorical questions about how we might interpret the material, which are left hanging in the air, even at times when the questions seem faintly absurd. To ask about Suzannah's return to Copenhagen from Christiania in 1863, for example, "reiste hun fra sin mann for godt?" (was she leaving her husband for good? (p.101)), seems rather bizarre when one of the few things we are sure about is that she stayed to the bitter end. Some discussion of how one might go about interpreting a life so little recorded might have been illuminating, but such theoretical considerations are entirely absent here.

It is always tempting, when dealing with a minor character in a historical context, to exaggerate their importance in the unfolding of events. It is a temptation which is not resisted here. In her eagerness to

emphasize the centrality of Suzannah's role in her husband's life, Sæther suggests that she was the direct inspiration for several of the protagonists in his dramas, from his early Viking warrior maidens to Rebekka West; indeed the erotic triangle in *John Gabriel Borkman* "kunne meget vel være en beskrivelse av forholdet i familien Ibsen, mellom Marie, ham selv og Suzannah" (could very well be a description of the relationships in the Ibsen family between Marie, himself and Suzannah (p.300))! The fact that Suzannah translated some plays from French and German which were performed under Ibsen's direction as theatre manager becomes a strong indication that she helped him to learn how to write for the theatre (p.83). And she is directly compared to such important figures as Camilla Collett and Aasta Hansteen, women who played a far more prominent role in nineteenth-century Norway, both as authors and as pioneers of the women's movement.

There are a number of further problems in this biography which a good editor might have helped to avoid. The difficulty of interpreting the rather scant evidence has resulted in several contradictory statements. For example, we are told on p.122 that the fact that Ibsen borrowed many books from the Scandinavian library in Rome meant that he *did* read books despite saying he did not – only to be told in the next sentence that it was Suzannah and Sigurd who read them. On p.337 the narrator wonders whether Suzannah could bear, after Ibsen's death, to be "henvist til sin egen alminnelighet" (reduced to her own ordinariness), only to claim on p.356 that "hun var aldeles ikke alminnelig" (she was not at all an ordinary person). Information is repeated, sentences are garbled, and some apparently factual statements are not backed up by any reference to sources.

It is a pity that this is not a better book. Suzannah Ibsen was an intriguing figure, and there is material here which deserves to be more widely known and made available to non-Norwegian readers. If the speculations, repetitions and exaggerations were removed – and the length accordingly reduced – and the question of interpreting the evidence discussed more fully with reference to the wealth of studies of life-writing which have been published in recent years, one would welcome an English version as a useful contribution to Ibsen studies.

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