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“A Doll’s House Conquered Europe”: Ibsen, His English Parodists, and the Debate over World Drama

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Abstract: The London premieres of Henrik Ibsen’s plays in the late 1880s and 1890s sparked strong reactions both of admiration and disgust. This controversy, I suggest, was largely focused on national identity and artistic cosmopolitanism. While Ibsen’s English supporters viewed him as a leader of a new international theatrical movement, detractors dismissed him as an obscure writer from a primitive, marginal nation. This essay examines the ways in which these competing assessments were reflected in the English adaptations, parodies, and sequels of Ibsen’s plays that were written and published during the final decades of the nineteenth century, texts by Henry Herman and Henry Arthur Jones, Walter Besant, Bernard Shaw, Eleanor Marx and Israel Zangwill, and F. Anstey (Thomas Anstey Guthrie). These rewritings tended to respond to Ibsen’s foreignness in one of three ways: Either to assimilate the plays’ settings, characters, and values into normative Englishness; to exaggerate their exoticism (generally in combination with a suggestion of moral danger); or to keep their Norwegian settings and depict those settings (along with characters and ideas) as ordinary and familiar. Through their varying responses to Ibsen’s Norwegian origin, I suggest, these adaptations offered a uniquely practical and concrete medium for articulating ideas about the ways in which art shapes both national identity and the international community.

Keywords: Drama; Norway; England; national; international; Ibsen; parody

1. Introduction

In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Shaw [1913] 1958b), Bernard Shaw twice declared that “A Doll’s House conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art” (p. 213). Actress Elizabeth Robins (Robins [1928] 1973), recalling her first encounter with Ibsen’s plays, described the 1889 first London performance of *A Doll’s House* in even more sweeping terms, calling it “an event that was to change lives and literatures” (Robins [1928] 1973, pp. 9–10). To Shaw and Robins, Ibsen was not primarily a Norwegian dramatist, but simply a dramatist. With their theatrical innovations, uniquely lifelike characters, and bold challenge of popular morals and ideals, his plays transcended national boundaries and united artists and audiences from widely disparate national artistic traditions.

Many London critics disagreed. Reviewers labeled the plays as dull, unpleasant, and immoral and pointed to their foreignness as an explanation of these faults. The *Sunday Times* complained that *A Doll’s House* was “too obstinately unsympathetic to please English playgoers” (“Plays and Players” 1889, p. 7). An anonymous writer in *Truth*, responding in 1891 to J. T. Grein’s production of *Ghosts*, wrote less politely: “Ibsen, as far as I can see, is a crazy, cranky being who has derived his knowledge of life from some half-civilised Norwegian village . . . He sees filth in his Norway society, and imagines that all the world is filthy as well” (qtd. in (Archer [1893] 1984a), p. 45). While Shaw hailed Ibsen’s “conquering” of Europe with enthusiasm, many English critics saw the plays’ presence in London as a hostile takeover, or at best as a faddish attempt to impose foreign theatrical tastes on English playgoers.

The London controversy about Ibsen's work was, like virtually any critical conversation surrounding a foreign literary text in translation, largely a debate about cultural identity. As translation scholar Lawrence Venuti (1998) has argued, audiences who read (or attend performances of) foreign works in translation tend to demand that such texts "conform to domestic aesthetic values" and that translators therefore tend to construct "a domestic representation for a foreign text and culture" (pp. 67, 68). Such representations are created, Venuti points out, not only through a translator's choice of words and cultural allusions, but by the selection of foreign texts for translation, the decision to translate some texts and to leave others untranslated. William Archer's translation of *A Doll's House*, and his choice to translate it at all, seemed to many early London viewers to fly in the face of English "domestic aesthetic values"; hence, the play was viewed with suspicion by critics who subscribed to those values and praised by others, such as Shaw, Robins, and Archer himself, who considered those values in need of disruption.

Whether they welcomed or decried his plays, Ibsen's English critics implicitly asked questions about artistic cosmopolitanism: What connection is there between art and the artist's home country? How much of a work's meaning or artistic value can be translated or conveyed from one cultural setting to another? To what extent does (or should) a nation's political or economic prominence correlate with its artistic or intellectual influence? These questions were vigorously debated in late nineteenth-century London as experimental actor-managers (and actress-managers) introduced Ibsen to English playgoers. And as Toril Moi (2006), Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (1999), and Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem (Fulsås and Rem 2018) have shown, the debate was not limited to England; throughout Europe, Ibsen's plays stimulated discussion regarding national theatrical traditions and the possibility of an international tradition.

The cultural and political context offers some insight on the debate. As Peter Fjågesund and Ruth A. Symes (Fjågesund and Symes 2003) have pointed out, Britain for most of the nineteenth century was the chief world superpower, a center of military might, economic activity, and culture, while Norway was a scantily-populated country that had yet to gain full political independence from its Scandinavian neighbors. In travelogues and in collections of Viking sagas and folklore, English writers presented Norway as a mysterious land and its people as simple peasants. Ibsen's modern prose dramas and their portrayals of ordinary middle-class home life did not fit within these familiar categories.

A Doll's House and its successors arrived on the London theater scene, moreover, at a transitional moment in English dramatic history. English drama had, for decades past, been largely dominated by adaptations of the French melodramas and comedies of Eugène Scribe, Victorien Sardou, and Dumas fils—plays relying on stock character types and formulaic, well-made plots. With scanty monetary compensation for dramatists and inadequate copyright protection, English writers had little incentive for the labor of original composition. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, a number of dramatists were endeavoring to develop a national playwriting tradition, distinctively English, in contrast to borrowed French works. As Ibsen's plays gained notoriety in the 1890s, these writers worried that imported Norwegian drama, like imported French drama, would become simply another substitute for English plays. Dramatist Arthur Wing Pinero (Pinero [1892] 1974) expressed this concern in a letter to theater critic William Archer, the chief English translator and promoter of Ibsen's work:

"A few years ago the native authors were working with a distinct and sound aim and with every prospect of popularizing a rational, observant, home-grown play. Then came the Scandinavian drama, held up by the New Critics as the Perfect drama and used by them as a means of discrediting native practice". (p. 135)

By aggressively promoting Ibsen's plays, Pinero argued, Ibsen's enthusiasts were reinforcing the popular perception long inculcated by French adaptations—the perception that to be worth seeing, a play must come from the continent.

Archer, though a staunch Ibsen supporter, shared Pinero's insistence on the need for an English national dramatic tradition. He saw the promotion of Ibsen's plays in England as a step toward creating

better-quality English drama. About a year after receiving Pinero's letter, he published an essay titled "The Mausoleum of Ibsen" (Archer [1893] 1984a), in which he concluded:

"It is scarcely to be expected . . . that they [Ibsen's plays] should take deep and permanent hold upon the English stage. Scarcely to be expected, and scarcely to be desired; for no theatre can for long live healthily on imported material. Each nation should produce, in its own theatre, its own criticism of its own life. Criticism of life from a foreign standpoint and illustrated by foreign examples, may be very interesting and fascinating, but cannot, in the long run, satisfy our souls". (p. 51)

Though impatient with English critics who condemned Ibsen unheard simply on the ground of his foreignness, Archer believed in the need for a distinctly English dramatic tradition. Like Pinero, he feared that a too-tenacious partisanship to Ibsen, or to any foreign dramatist, might erode that national tradition. The existence of a thriving national culture, he insisted, was a necessary precondition for any satisfying international cultural exchange.

Archer's and Pinero's efforts toward a reinvigorated playwriting tradition made marked progress in London in the close of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. Pinero's fashionable West End society plays and those of Henry Arthur Jones, the start of Shaw's long playwriting career, and the beginnings of female-led theatrical initiatives such as the Pioneer Players and the Actresses' Franchise League all contributed to returning social relevance and intellectual prestige to the drama in England.

How much of a role Ibsen's influence played in this theatrical renaissance is a matter on which Gretchen Ackerman (1987), T. Carlo Matos (2012), and Joan Templeton (2018), among others, have debated. However, his plays were unquestionably a driving force behind an earlier collection of creative pieces that appeared in the months and years immediately following the 1889 Novelty Theatre production of *A Doll's House*. These were the parodies, sequels, or alternative endings to Ibsen's work, written either for the stage or for magazine publication—pieces such as Walter Besant's "The Doll's House—And After" (Besant 1890), Bernard Shaw's "Still After the Doll's House" (Shaw [1890] 1934), and F. Anstey's (Thomas Anstey Guthrie's) *Mr. Punch's Pocket Ibsen* (Anstey 1895). These adaptations, no less than lectures and performance reviews, were a prominent part of the Ibsen debate in London. In some cases (Anstey's in particular), these texts probably reached a much more numerous English audience than the plays themselves. As Tracy Davis (1985) has observed, these texts served as a humorous medium in which anti-Ibsenites "express[ed] the frustration that arose when their efforts to ignore, deride, or curse Ibsen failed to prevent new productions" and Ibsen's partisans "demonstrate[d] they were not necessarily as morbid and degenerate as they were portrayed" (p. 87). What these adaptations had in common was their uniquely concrete, multifaceted response to the plays, the authors' readiness to show, rather than merely tell, what they thought of Ibsen. Moi (2006) has argued that Ibsen's "sustained metatheatrical reflections," his persistent depiction of "self-theatricalization in everyday life," is one of his chief distinguishing marks as the founder of theatrical modernism (pp. 2, 10). In this respect, his English rewriters, whether they admired or ridiculed the plays, followed his lead, debating literary conventions through the media of fiction and drama.

Like many vehement reviewers, these adapters and parodists frequently brought issues of nationality to the forefront of the discussion. They raised questions about the links between Ibsen's ideas and his nationality and the possible implications of transferring or translating those ideas into an English setting. If, as Venuti (1998) has argued, translation "inevitably domesticates foreign texts" and creates "peculiarly domestic canons for foreign literatures," then the writings of Jones, Anstey, and the others might be seen as picking up this process of domestication where translators such as Archer had left off (p. 67). If Ibsen's place within England's "domestic canon" had been a matter of dispute before, these rewritings reshaped the canon, placing the dispute itself at its center. In this essay, I examine several of these texts, mostly rewritings of *A Doll's House*. I call attention to ways in which texts either exaggerate Ibsen's exoticism, attempt to assimilate his plays into normative Englishness, or make Englishness itself the object of scrutiny. In arguing over the values of English, Norwegian, and

international drama, they created texts that, like Ibsen's, resisted classification into any single one of these categories.

2. Domesticating Nora

The first known English rewriting of *A Doll's House* appeared five years before the unadapted *Doll's House* made its debut at the Novelty Theatre. Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman adapted Nora's story into an English domestic melodrama titled *Breaking a Butterfly*, which was produced at the Prince's Theatre in March 1884. For the first two acts, the play follows the outline of Ibsen's plot, with the naïve child-wife hiding her past accidental crime and the villainous creditor threatening her with exposure. The sudden break from the original comes late in the play, at the moment of discovery; whereas Ibsen's Torvald Helmer, in discovering his wife's unwitting forgery, denounces her as a criminal, Jones and Herman depict the husband protecting his wife by claiming guilt for her crime, thus preserving the wife's domestic ideals intact and displaying the heroic manliness Torvald fails to achieve. Jones and Herman's adaptation doubly domesticates Ibsen's play, not only in the moral and familial sense, with strictly appropriate gender roles and a conventional happy ending, but also linguistically, giving English names to characters and places. Torvald Helmer becomes Humphery Goddard, Nora becomes Flora, and the blackmailer Nils Krogstad becomes Philip Dunkley, who is foiled in his villainous schemes by the eccentric but good-hearted Dan Birdseye. Jones later described this adaptation as an attempt to turn Ibsen's drama into a "sympathetic play" along the lines of Tom Robertson, the father of cup-and-saucer comedy and an early pioneer of modern English playwriting (qtd. in [Cordell 1968](#), p. 52).

Along with this inspiration from Robertson, *Breaking a Butterfly* carries pronounced echoes of Shakespeare and Dickens. Flora Goddard is nicknamed "Queen Titania" and "the Fairy Queen" for her sprightly, mischievous ways ([Jones and Herman 1884](#), pp. 13, 15). She is presented as a child-wife with babyish tricks and speeches reminiscent of Dora Spenslow, the frivolous young bride in *David Copperfield*. Like Dora, and unlike Ibsen's Nora, Flora Goddard has no moment of awakening independence, but remains a naïve child-wife whose husband must humor and protect her. Jones and Herman likewise give Flora a wise confidante and sister-in-law named Agnes, a dramatized counterpart of Dickens's Agnes Wickfield—a Kristine Linde who would never compromise her womanliness by working in a bank or proposing to a man. As in *David Copperfield*, the women in *Breaking a Butterfly* ([Jones and Herman 1884](#)) are repeatedly labeled as "child" and "good angel" and they do little to contradict those labels (p. 60). Through Dickensian touches, orthodox gender roles, and a conventional happy ending, Jones and Herman asserted the quintessential Englishness of their adaptation. Shaw ([1906] [1958a](#)) may well have had *Breaking a Butterfly* in mind when he declared, years later, that, though "critical stupidity" had led reviewers to liken Jones's writing to Ibsen's, Jones was "clearly in the line of descent from our great English master, Charles Dickens" (pp. 241–42).

It is tempting to speculate that Dickens may have been an influence for Ibsen's original play, as well as Jones and Herman's adaptation, albeit an influence to be critiqued more than followed. Inga-Stina [Ewbank \(1999\)](#) has pointed out that, although Ibsen "was notoriously unwilling to admit that he read anything, let alone that he was influenced by anything," he borrowed a Danish translation of *David Copperfield* from the Scandinavian library in Rome during his time there in 1868 and later acquired a copy of his own, which was in his study at the time of his death (p. 299). Ewbank also notes that Dickens's novels were widely read in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark from the 1850s onwards. In an 1894 poll conducted by a Norwegian magazine to identify the twenty-five most influential authors, readers voted Dickens eighth—lagging behind Ibsen and the Bible, but far ahead of Shakespeare (twelfth place) and Walter Scott (twenty-first), the only other British authors on the list ([Ewbank 1999](#), p. 299). While it might be a stretch to claim that Ibsen took Dickens explicitly as a model or an object for criticism, it is fair to conclude that Dickens was widely recognized in Scandinavia (as elsewhere in Europe) as a leading proponent of the cults of domesticity and feminine innocence—cultural ideas that Ibsen singled out for critique in *A Doll's House*. Jones and Herman, then, might have seen their play as

restoring the wholesome Dickensian spirit that Ibsen had distorted by his cynicism; if so, the explicit *David Copperfield* allusions in *Breaking a Butterfly* might have served to signal this restoration, as well as to underscore the play's reassuring Englishness.

Critics, while not enthusiastic about the play as a whole, generally concluded that these Anglicizations were changes for the better. *The Times*, in particular, while disdainfully describing the plot as “a storm in a tea-cup,” credited Jones and Herman with “[v]ery wisely . . . allow[ing] villainy in the long run to be defeated, and happiness to be restored to the troubled home” (“*The Theatres*” 1884). Regarding Ibsen's original, the *Times* reviewer added that “The Norwegian *dénouement* is, indeed, of a kind hardly likely to commend itself to the ordinary playgoer in this country” (“*The Theatres*” 1884). Archer (1884), reviewing the play for the monthly magazine *The Theatre*, concurred, albeit regretfully, declaring himself convinced of “the impossibility of modern tragedy on the English stage” (p. 214).

The English makeover that Jones and Herman gave Ibsen was echoed and exaggerated seven years later by socialist organizer Eleanor Marx and dramatist Israel Zangwill (Marx and Zangwill 1891) in “‘A Doll's House’ Repaired.” In response to the Novelty Theatre *Doll's House* production and the critical outrage that followed the discussion scene and Nora's final exit, they composed an alternate ending, one more in keeping, they snidely announced, with the demands of the conservative critics. Instead of having Nora reproach her husband and then depart, they made Torvald lecture his wife and slam the bedroom door in her face, having banished her to the guest room; their marriage was to continue in name only, for the sake of respectable appearances. Published in Ernest Belfort Bax's magazine *Time*, it included a sarcastic preface in which the authors repeatedly praised the “English critics, whose sound English common-sense revolts at the manifestly impossible, nay, immoral conclusion” of Ibsen's play—the critics who “have shown . . . how ridiculous—and hateful—the conception of a woman abandoning husband and children must be to an English audience” (pp. 239, 241). They added that their rewriting of the final act “cannot fail to satisfy the English sense of morality and decency” (p. 241).

Along with the conservative English critics, Jones and Herman received a share of tongue-in-cheek approval in Marx and Zangwill's preface, having set a “noble precedent” in “transform[ing] the ‘Doll's House’ past all recognition” (p. 239). Another direct homage came in the script itself, as Nora answered Torvald's rebuke with the protest: “[Y]ou are too hard on a poor little thing like me—it is breaking a butterfly” (p. 249). Like Jones and Herman, Marx and Zangwill gave Torvald a sister; in a footnote, they credited Jones for this innovation (p. 248). They also took a cue from the earlier adapters in their use of Dickensian echoes. In particular, as Torvald scolds Nora for being an “actress”—that is, for pretending to be a helpless, frivolous child when she has really been no such thing—he recalls that, as a child, Nora used to be her “papa's infant phenomenon” (p. 248). This allusion to Ninetta Crummles, the diminutive star of the touring theatrical troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby*, is apropos, given that Dickens's Infant Phenomenon, like Nora, is known for acting and appearing as a child when she is in fact an adult, or nearly so. To give their parody a fuller flavor of English theater, Marx and Zangwill made Torvald complain: “I thought it real when you were only playing before me, just as the children did when we took them to the pantomime” (p. 248). The authors added in a footnote:

“Although Ibsen, when he re-writes his “Doll's House,” will not be able to translate this—pantomimes are not performed in Norway—it is a touch which, like the comic lover [Dan Birdseye] introduced by Mr. Jones, will please the English public”. (p. 248)

Through their repeated acknowledgments of Herman and Jones and of the “English critics,” and through their repeated insistence that to make anything more English must be an improvement, Marx and Zangwill caricatured the controversy over Ibsen and, more specifically, the Anglocentrism that they saw pervading the hostility to Ibsen's plays.

3. Norway: Exotic and Provincial

Rather than reconstructing *A Doll's House* as an English story, as Jones and Herman did, historian and novelist Walter Besant (1890) stressed the play's foreignness, geographical and cultural, in his

sequel, “The Doll’s House—and After.” This grimly didactic short story, published in the *English Illustrated Magazine* in January 1890, denounces the selfishness of Nora’s departure by depicting the miseries of the Helmer family twenty years later. The story contrasts Nora’s success as a novelist and feminist spokeswoman with Torvald’s status as an unemployed chronic drunkard, son Robert’s forgery (supposedly a tendency inherited from his mother), and daughter Emmy’s humble virtue, unmerited shame, broken engagement, and eventual suicide; in the story’s conclusion, Nora’s decision to leave the family is declared to be the cause of these disasters.

The story’s opening paragraphs describe the Helmers’ squalid lodgings in a vein reminiscent of Besant’s earlier slum novels. But they combine this grim description with a touch of picturesqueness that might have come from a tourist advertisement or a magazine travel piece:

“[T]here was no carpet on the floor, the window had no curtain, only a blind; there were no bookshelves, books, pictures, ornaments, or anything pretty at all . . . [I]t was the evening, but at nine o’clock[,] and for that matter at midnight, in Norway, there is still plenty of daylight . . . Overhead, a pure and brilliant sky; an evening when one might long for the pleasant noise of streams leaping over cascades and might dream of the placid waters of the fjord”. (p. 315)

Besant underlines the misery of the scene as it is by contrasting it with the beauty its readers and characters “might long for,” the scenic majesty many readers might have associated with Norway based on their previous reading.

Besant continues, throughout the scene, to evoke the Norway familiar to well-to-do English visitors, as the description shifts from the shabby room to Emmy Helmer herself, who works long hours for scanty pay as a seamstress, creating traditionally embroidered products to sell to tourists.

“[S]he made the beautiful embroidered work which the foreign ladies came to buy; so good a hand she was, that the ladies always chose her work and took it home with them and exhibited it as proudly as if they themselves had made it; and so contented a maiden was she, that she never asked or cared to know what her employer charged for the work which he got so cheaply”. (p. 315)

Besant, who had dealt in many of his previous writings with the hardships of sweatshop labor and the plight of the urban poor, used his story’s Norwegian setting to illustrate the international impact of these issues; while prosperous travelers from abroad might admire the scenery and prize the ornate embroidery, they think little of the local residents who are shut out from the former as they toil over the latter. While these social problems are a peripheral issue in this short story, the contrast between the hardworking Emmy and the rich “foreign ladies” who enjoy the fruits of her labor underscores the more direct contrast that will later be drawn between Emmy and her mother, the prosperous, well-traveled, and undutiful Nora. Likewise, Emmy’s meek, unquestioning contentment, while it renders her an easy source of profit for her employer, marks her (in Besant’s assessment) as morally superior to her mother, whose discontentment and questions have led to her departure and to her family’s misery.

The Norway Besant describes has much in common with the tourist destination described in popular British magazines in the 1880s, though with the seamy underside of poverty and exploitation more visible than usual. The seemingly innocent northern Eden has been tainted by industrialization and also by new people and new ideas. Besant presents the country as a symbolic space, a land outstanding among nations both for its moral uprightness and its unforgiving rejection both of transgressors and of their friends and relatives, who are judged guilty by association. It is, above all, the site contaminated by the Helmer family’s shame. In describing Nora’s writings and adventures, the narrator remarks that “the worthy Norwegians thought the curse of Paris was about to fall also upon fair Norway” (p. 320). He adds:

“Perhaps it would have been kinder to her own children . . . had she practiced her convictions in some other place, say in St. Petersburg, where everything is permitted; or in Paris, where

everything is done; or in London, where everything may be done and nothing need be known". (p. 320)

If Besant's Norway stands for rigid morality and tradition, Nora's unrooted cosmopolitanism marks her as a carrier of a moral plague.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, over the course of the story, more than half the members of the Helmer family leave the country, or contemplate leaving. Nora, to avoid reminders of her children, prepares to decamp for some more tolerant locale—"to Paris, to London—anywhere" (p. 324). Robert, to escape prosecution for forgery, flees to New York. Emmy and her fiancé, the son of now-respectable Nils Krogstad, plan to begin their married life by emigrating. Young Nils tells her:

"We will go to America—not to the place where the Norwegians congregate—there we should find nothing but this town over again, with all the old stories—no, no—we must go to some place by ourselves, and quickly learn to talk English, and bring up our children . . . as if their parents were of the English race—not Norwegian". (p. 319)

For Besant's Emmy, Nora's disgrace pollutes not only Norway and Norwegian expatriate communities in the American Midwest, but Norwegian identity itself, regardless of locale. Emmy seeks to escape this shame by adopting the identity "of the English race." Failing in this plan and forcibly separated from her sweetheart by the intervention of Krogstad Senior, she can exit her country and her inherited disgrace only by exiting life, drowning herself as her mother had once planned to do.

In addition to offering an object lesson on the evils of the female independence presented in Ibsen's play, Besant, the journalist-historian, also offered a concise illustration of the ways in which modern mobility, both of persons and ideas, was affecting one small northern European country. His *Doll's House* sequel begins with observations and purchases of privileged foreigners visiting the country; it ends with an exodus of its native-born inhabitants, pressed by poverty, persecution, or other factors—much as many Scandinavian emigrants were in fact doing over the second half of the nineteenth century.

Bernard Shaw (Shaw[1890] 1985a), as he explained in a letter to actor Charles Charrington, was revolted by Besant's "middle class evangelical verdict" on Ibsen; he retorted with a sequel of the sequel, published a month later in *Time* (p. 239).¹ Shaw's sequel allows Nora to speak in defense of her choices and also strips away the exoticism from the story's Norwegian setting. Besant had closed his story with Nora setting out for the train station, pausing in the street to view her daughter's drowned corpse and hear Christine Krogstad's reproaches with cold indifference, then driving on, her plans presumably unchanged. Shaw (Shaw [1890] 1934) began his sequel with a reversal of Nora's departure: "Nora did not drive on to the station. Her instinct forbade her to run away from her daughter's death and Christine's tongue" (p. 127). From the start, Shaw contradicted Besant's persistent emphasis on Norwegian picturesqueness, Norwegian disgrace, and Norwegian emigration. Having chosen to stay in the country, Nora returns to her lodgings and stays there. The space receives little description; Besant's word-pictures of traditional embroidery and daylit summer evening skies are conspicuously absent. The entire action of Shaw's story consists of a dialogue between Nora and Krogstad, who secretly chafes against his respectability and his wife and has made a confidante of the woman he publicly condemns. Their discussion, which ranges over marriage, morality, and the responsibility for Emmy's death, might easily have taken place in almost any English or European town. As in Shaw's past unsuccessful novels and subsequent plays, the setting is a secondary consideration; the dialogue and the clash of ideas are paramount.² The only suggestion of Norwegian local color Shaw adds

¹ Charles Charrington, along with his wife, Janet Achurch, had produced and acted in the Novelty Theatre production of *A Doll's House* in June 1889. For the following two years, the couple performed *A Doll's House* on a tour of Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, returning to revive the play in London in 1892.

² Joan Templeton (2018) has suggested that "it was in writing a sequel to a play, and a play that represented the 'new drama' that he was fighting for, that it occurred to Shaw that perhaps his real talent lay in writing plays" (p. 28).

is in the names of Krogstad's fellow bank directors. Shaw's Nora comments on "Heyerdahl's illicit brokerage, Arnoldson's son's drunkenness, Sverdrup's sham family pretensions," and the fact that "Johansen's wife beats him" and "Falk's wife ought to beat him" (pp. 131–32). However Scandinavian the names might be, the domestic misdeeds and misfortunes and the respectable exteriors that conceal them have nothing distant or exotic about them.

Shaw, in his sequel, refused either to resituate the story in England, as Jones and Herman had done, or to follow Besant's example in stressing the foreignness of the narrative and characters. Rather, he kept the story's Norwegian setting, but presented that setting as mundane and familiar. This decision may have been what provoked readers, even friends and fellow Ibsen enthusiasts such as Eleanor Marx and William Archer, to condemn the story as "slosh, rubbish, dull dreary Philistine stuff &c &c &c," as Shaw ([1890] 1985a) reported to Charrington (p. 239). These critiques of Shaw's story were, in fact, closely akin to some of the most frequent unfavorable judgments voiced by Clement Scott and other conservative critics regarding Ibsen's work, in particular, that his plays were "provincial," "suburban," "parochial." As Tore Rem (2004) has noted, while these terms were used as complaints against Ibsen's plays in many countries, they were especially common in London; while highlighting the works' foreignness and their focus on middle-class life, the "suburban" label also marked "the sense of the distance between centre and province, major and minor," a rigid difference in geopolitical status between the "metropolis of the world's greatest empire" and the obscure, sparsely-populated nation represented by Ibsen's plays (pp. 208–9). In calling Ibsen "suburban," hostile critics thus sought to dismiss him as both alien and trivial.

While Archer and some other pro-Ibsen partisans denounced this idea of "suburbanism" as simple podsnappish prejudice, Shaw ([1896] 1932) gleefully welcomed the label. With characteristic table-turning relish, he recast the stigma as a compliment:

"The happiest and truest epithet that has yet been applied to the Ibsen drama in this country came from Mr. Clement Scott when he said that Ibsen was "suburban." That is the whole secret of it. If Mr. Scott had only embraced his discovery instead of quarrelling with it, what a splendid Ibsen critic he would have made! Suburbanity at present means modern civilization . . . [Ibsen's] suburban drama is the inevitable outcome of a suburban civilization (meaning a civilization that appreciates fresh air)". (p. 256–57)

In expounding on the suburbanism shared by Ibsen and modern civilization, Shaw ([1896] 1932) dwelt upon the suburbanism of middle-class English life itself:

"[I]f you ask me where you can find the Helmer household . . . and all the other Ibsen households, I reply, "Jump out of a train anywhere between Wimbledon and Haslemere; walk into the first villa you come to; and there you are." Indeed you need not go so far: Hampstead, Maida Vale, or West Kensington will serve your turn". (pp. 256–57)

The people of *A Doll's House* or any of Ibsen's modern prose plays, Shaw suggested, might credibly be transplanted into a middle-class English household, since suburbanism was a trait common to Ibsen, Norway, England, and the late nineteenth century. By imaginatively relocating the Helmers to the suburbs of London, Shaw offered both a mocking retort and a reassurance to Ibsen's hostile critics; for those wary of foreign drama, Shaw argued, Ibsen's characters and ideas might not be so foreign after all. Shaw ([1893] 1985b) reinforced this claim in a letter to Archer: "Ninetyfive per cent of an Ibsen play is as true of any English town as it is of Christiania . . . [M]odern commercialism levels all nations down to the same bourgeois life, and raises the same problems for realist playwrights" (p. 386). Shaw insisted that modernity, with its easy exchange of people, things, and ideas, both muted the differences between nations and cultures and also widened the possibility of an international culture, of plays, books, and artworks that would be equally relevant for audiences in many nations.

In the context of this debate on Ibsen's provincialism, the nondescript Norwegian setting Shaw offered in "Still After the Doll's House," sharply contrasting with Besant's exotic descriptions, could

well be read as a strategic choice. In the unexciting one-room space in which Nora and Krogstad carry on their dispute, he underlined the equation of suburbanism with universality, which, he insisted, lay at the heart of Ibsen's plays. In presenting the Norwegian setting as mundane and nondescript, he showed it as familiar to his English audience, rooted in everyday life, impossible to dismiss as exotic or picturesque. This familiarity, he hoped, along with his provocative defense of Nora's "unwomanly actions," would stir up public curiosity regarding future Ibsen productions in London; as he explained to Charrington, "the ball must be kept rolling on every possible pretext, so that . . . everybody who has not seen the Doll's House will feel quite out of it" (Shaw[1890] 1985a, p. 386).

4. Parody Packs a Punch

The rolling Ibsenian ball picked up speed the following year, which saw the much-discussed London premieres of *Ghosts*, *Rosmersholm*, and *Hedda Gabler*. Close on the heels of these productions came another set of Ibsen adaptations, perhaps the best-circulated, a series of spoofs written by journalist Thomas Anstey Guthrie, published in *Punch* under the pseudonym of "F. Anstey." The series included parodies of *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House*, and *The Wild Duck*, and Anstey later added installments mimicking *The Master Builder* (Anstey 1893) and *Little Eyolf* (Anstey 1895). These spoofs, which Davis (1985) has argued to be the texts most "indicative of the general perception of Ibsen in late-Victorian England," gained sufficient popularity to be compiled into a volume titled *Mr. Punch's Pocket Ibsen*, published by William Heinemann in 1893, with an expanded edition appearing in 1895 (p. 88). In the preface, Anstey (1895) described his parodies as "a reverent attempt to tread in the footprints of the Norwegian dramatist," though he jokingly apologized "that his imitation is painfully lacking in the mysterious obscurity of the original . . . and that the characters are not nearly so mad as persons invariably are in real life" (p. vi). By professing admiration for the traits frequently attacked by Ibsen's hostile critics, Anstey not only lampooned Ibsen and his plays, but also dramatized the English debates surrounding them.

This simultaneous ridicule of the plays and their critics calls to mind Williams's (2011) definition of parody as an artistic technique that "blurs the distinction between inside and outside—of the body, the nation, the theater, the parodic work itself" (p. 7). Anstey's parodies featured Norwegian characters who (no less than their English readers) make their foreignness a matter of persistent comment and scrutiny, and who seem, like their audiences, fully aware that their lives and actions take place within a play, for the entertainment of spectators.

Throughout the book, Anstey deflated the declared "reverence" of the preface with repeated digs at the playwright's "Norwegian" traits and those of his characters. The foreignness that had been erased by Herman and Jones, embroidered by Besant, and rendered ordinary by Shaw was treated as a running joke by Anstey and used as a ready-made explanation for all the plays' perceived eccentricities or immoralities. Rem (1999) points out that "*Punch* never missed an opportunity to parade its patriotism," suggesting that these jokes might serve, at least in part, as a reassurance to English readers who saw Ibsen's sudden prominence as a threat to English literary prestige (p. 216).

Many of the parodies' "Norwegian" jokes are directed at the plays' alleged dullness and humorlessness. Anstey's Rosmer declares, "I have no sense of humour—no respectable Norwegian *has*" (p. 20). The newly-awakened Nora, as she prepares to forsake her home and educate herself, announces: "I shall *begin* with a course of the Norwegian theatres. If *that* doesn't take the frivolity out of me, I really don't know what *will*" (p. 75). Judge Brack, sizing up Tesman's thesis on "the domestic interests of the Cave-dwellers during the Deluge," compliments him as "an uncommonly clever man of letters—for a Norwegian" (p. 91).

The plays' Norwegian origin is likewise given as an excuse for their oblique sexual suggestions. While reminiscing over her photo album with Eilert Lövborg, Hedda slyly recalls their "beautiful fascinating Norwegian intimacy" (p. 101). In *Little Mopsëman* (based on *Little Eyolf*), the jealous wife takes her husband to task for spending too much time in company with his sympathetic "sister,"

warning him that “Sympathising and philandering, Alfred, are synonymous terms in the Norwegian drama” (p. 238).

Anstey likewise mimics the plays’ linguistic origins with new pun-ridden character names—Alfred and Rita Allmers become Alfred and Spreta Früyseck (a play on *fruit sec*), and the road-builder Borgheim becomes Sanitary Engineer Blochdrähn (a jab at the much-discussed scatological filthiness of Ibsen’s plays, *Ghosts* in particular). Some of the plays receive new titles, together with gibberish faux-Nordic “original” titles: Anstey informed readers that *Pill-Doctor Herdal* (a sequel to *The Master Builder*) was originally titled *Mester-Pjil-drögster Herdal* and that *Nora; or, The Bird-Cage* was translated from *Et Dikkisvöet*.

Despite their irreverence, the parodies were popular among Ibsen’s admirers as well as his detractors. Archer (Archer [1901] 1984b) rebuked the faux-Norwegian names and phrases as ignorant snobbery, annoyed with Anstey for implying “that there is something inherently absurd in the Norwegian language”; yet he enthusiastically praised the burlesques as “very clever,” having “irresistible” humor (p. 64). Anstey’s mockeries of Norwegian language and culture did not prevent the parodies from drawing audiences in Norway as well as England. Less than a year after the compilation’s first London publication in 1893, the Olaf Norli publishing house in Christiania produced *Punch’s Lomme-Ibsen*, translated by Karl Fischer and Christopher Brinchmann. While the gibberish play titles that drew Archer’s sternest censure (*Mester-Pjil-drögster Herdal*, *Et Dikkisvöet*, etc.) were left out of the Norwegian versions, the translations retained both the punning character names and most of the original’s jokes on “Norwegian” naughtiness, eccentricity, and other character traits. As Ibsen’s plays spread and gained enthusiasts internationally, so did the cartoonish image of Norwegian life depicted by his parodist—a caricature that evidently drew a fair number of amused readers, even in Norway.

Williams (2011) theorizes that “Parody can be—and often simultaneously is—both conservative and progressive, since it preserves the memory of past forms while turning away from them into its own, more highly valued, present” (p. 7). This idea might help to explain the enthusiastic reception Anstey’s spoofs received from Ibsen’s supporters and skeptics alike. For those suspicious of the foreign plays and the widespread attention they received, the parodies’ irreverent jokes could be taken as reassuring proof that the plays were only a fad after all, quickly passing, perhaps already *passé*. For audiences eager for the spread of Ibsen’s work, both in England and Norway, to have the plays parodied at length in one of the most widely-read periodicals in the country offered unrivalled publicity, carrying Ibsen, his plays, and his characters and ideas to readers who would never go to any London theater, much less a performance of *A Doll’s House*.

5. Conclusions

David Damrosch (2014) has argued that while, in the past, texts generally spread “downstream,” from “imperial centers to peripheral regions,” modern world literature is in part defined by “an increasingly multipolar literary landscape,” a setting that “allows writers from smaller countries to achieve rapid worldwide fame” (pp. 1–2, 5). Ibsen’s much-resisted rise on European stages might be taken as an early example of this reversal of “downstream” circulation. In today’s drama classes—“Intro to Drama,” “World Drama,” “European Drama,” “Modern Drama”—Ibsen often holds a prominent place in textbooks and syllabi. Yet his status within the canon remains ambiguous. He is seen as remote yet universal, a forerunner of modernism, yet too entrenched in nineteenth-century realism to be a true modernist himself. Harold Bloom (1994), while acknowledging him as a “Western dramatist of true magnitude,” also describes him as “consistently weird” (p. 355). Moi (2006) argues that the exotic aura of “Ibsen the Norwegian” persists to the present, perpetuated by biographers and contributing not only to a continued “boredom, disdain, or condescension” toward Ibsen among Anglophone scholars, but to inaccurate stereotypes of Norwegian people generally (pp. 1, 37). And, as Ibsen’s position within world literature remains a matter for debate, so does the concept of world literature itself—for, as Rem (2004) reminds readers, the term “world literature” begs the questions: “Whose world? Whose literature?” (p. 219).

Ibsen sparked fierce debate in late-nineteenth-century England largely because critics, both admiring and hostile, struggled to navigate these tensions between local and cosmopolitan, remote and familiar. While these tensions were discussed in reviews, essays, and lectures, the more creative responses—parodies, sequels, and adaptations—offered a uniquely practical and concrete medium for articulating thoughts about the place and culture of the author, and of the audience as well. Marx and Zangwill declared, tongue in cheek, that their alternate ending for *A Doll's House* restored Ibsen's original intentions and their statement is, perhaps, a telling description for all the texts I have examined here. The act of rewriting or parodying a text carries an inherently prescriptive implication—rather than simply arguing over the value of the play, as a review does, the rewriting makes a statement, whether seriously or jokingly, about how characters *should* act, how the story *should* end, and, perhaps, where the action *should* take place. Hence, such a work offers insights not only about how the parodists perceive the original author and work, but also of how they view themselves, their audience, and their context. Jones and Herman sought to Anglicize *A Doll's House*. Besant and Anstey, in their different ways, highlighted the play's strangeness. Shaw kept the Norwegian setting but insisted on its ordinariness. In the process, each suggested definitions for Norwegianness, for Englishness, and, more broadly, for national identity and its role in literary creation.

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