

Introduction

After having been met with nothing but misunderstanding, bordering on persecution, Henrik Ibsen left his native country in 1864, becoming an exile. First in Italy and later in Germany, he encountered a European modernity which changed the course of his work and gave him the necessary impulses to become the 'Father of Modern Drama'. Through his twenty-seven years of exile, Ibsen managed to escape the provincial conditions and mentalities at home, completely freeing himself from his backward and restrictive domestic contexts. Meanwhile in Scandinavia, he was championed by the Danish critic Georg Brandes, who helped bring about the so-called Modern Breakthrough on his behalf. The conservative and puritan forces were defeated, at least for a short while. Ibsen, the autonomous, self-made artist, became the exemplary European avant-gardist, hailed by those in the vanguard of theatrical and literary innovation (Figure I.1).

The main features of this master narrative of Ibsen's career originated in the author's own time, and were in part created by himself. They have enjoyed endless uncritical reproduction ever since. We could cite numerous instances of this interpretive pattern, and we will return to some of them, but we trust that anyone even faintly familiar with Ibsen will recognise the existence and power of this narrative. 'Ibsen had the misfortune', to quote just one Ibsen scholar, of being 'born into a provincial, limiting, and repressive society from which he spent his lifetime liberating his imagination'.¹

Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama is a history about the Scandinavian origins and early European appropriations of Henrik Ibsen's plays. Its aims are threefold. First, it fills a gap in the field of Ibsen

¹ Brian Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 8; see also Johnston's 'Introduction' to the Norton edition of *Ibsen's Selected Plays* (London: Norton, 2004), xv.

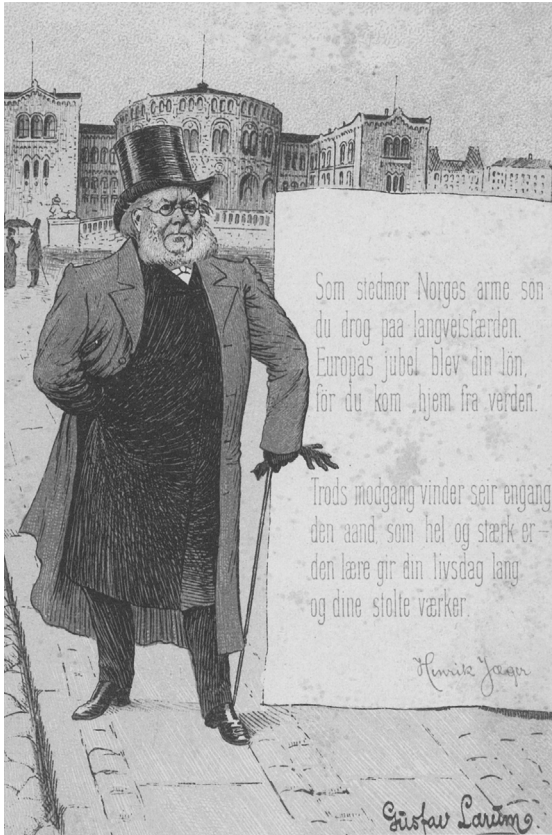


Figure I.1 Ibsen at Karl Johan's street in 1891, with the Parliament building (*Stortinget*) in the background.

On his return to Kristiania, basic elements of the overall narrative of Ibsen's troubled relationship to Norway were confirmed. The poem by the Ibsen biographer Henrik Jæger installed in Gustav Lærum's picture reads: 'As stepmother Norway's poor son / you went far away. / Europe's jubilation was your reward / before coming "home from the world". / In spite of hardships victory will eventually be won / by the spirit whole and strong - / that lesson we learn from your life's long day / and from your noble works.'

studies between predominantly biographical approaches on the one hand and literary and performance studies on the other. In this gap, areas like publishing history, author's economy, copyright, translations and other issues of 'book history' have remained largely unexplored. Second, taking up these fields of inquiry leads to a questioning of several dominant

narratives and interpretations informing Ibsen studies, from the author's own time up until the present. This holds particularly for the largely negative perceptions of Ibsen's relationship to his originating cultures. Third, the Ibsen case will serve to question and challenge some influential theories and models within literary and theatre studies, as well as within the field of world literature.

We set out to challenge the narrative of exile and rupture in the first part of this book. Our account then moves on to the first attempts at disseminating Ibsen beyond Scandinavia, his European breakthrough by the late 1880s and early 1890s, and end by considering his position in Scandinavian and major European literatures and theatre cultures by the turn of the century.

In Chapter 1, we will revalue the overwhelmingly negative account of Ibsen's time spent in the service of the Norwegian theatre in the 1850s and early 1860s. Alongside emphasising the extraordinary training and occupational opportunities this project offered, we will underline the transnational context of this theatre project and also how this came to shape Ibsen's publishing strategy when he transferred his attention to the book market in the latter part of the 1860s.

We continue by addressing the exile topos which has informed the understanding of Ibsen's move from Norway and his twenty-seven-year stay in Italy and Germany. 'Exile' implies both an initial traumatic break and a barrier to return; Ibsen's stay abroad had none of these characteristics. There were certainly real obstacles to the unfolding of Ibsen's creativity at home, and moving away helped him overcome some of these. His residence in Europe should not, however, be equated with a break with Scandinavian literature, culture and society.² Rather, we should recontextualise the way Ibsen, after leaving Norway, rephrased authorship in terms of vocation and antagonism between artist and society, and also realise that his first 'European' experiences were not just about liberation but as much about defeat and alienation.

In Chapter 3 we question the commonly held assumption that Ibsen with *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) definitely left the historical play behind and decided to take up contemporary drama. We bring out the many competing plans he was entertaining by the middle and late 1870s, complicating the impression of a unidirectional movement towards 'the

² In the last major Ibsen biography Ivo de Figueiredo adds nuance to the received picture of Ibsen's suffering at home, but nevertheless concludes that 'When [Ibsen] left Norway and went to Rome, he cut his ties to Norwegian society', *Masken* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2007), 507.

social plays'. With *Pillars of the Community* (1877), Ibsen was signaling a reorientation, but this reorientation was consolidated only with the gravity unfolding from the Scandinavian 'Literary Left', which formed independently of Ibsen at the end of the 1870s.

Chapter 4 takes *A Doll's House* (1879) to be a decisive turning point in Ibsen's authorship. We argue that this play and the following *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) had predominantly Scandinavian contexts of origin. Literary and political tensions overlapped to spur a literary dynamic which enabled Ibsen to overcome aesthetic restrictions, articulate his political-social reasoning in a dramatically productive way, and regain the position as the leading Scandinavian author, a position which had been questioned by the late 1870s. Very soon, however, Ibsen set out to distance himself from the party affiliation bestowed upon him by these early 'social plays'.

The Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian literature was permeated by an avant-garde rhetoric. In Chapter 5, we will show how this, by being uncritically appropriated by so much later scholarship, has obscured the astonishing commercial success of Ibsen's contemporary plays. We attribute the extraordinary attention paid not just to Ibsen but to the whole 'golden age' generation of Norwegian literature to the importance of literary prestige for a small and young nation seeking recognition and a sense of equality.

Moving beyond Scandinavia in Chapter 6, we relate Ibsen's own, early and largely unsuccessful efforts to promote his work in German. We argue that it was only with the contemporary plays that Ibsen acquired a potential for 'European' relevance, and that his breakthrough was made possible only when he was appropriated by local agents as an asset in their struggle to change existing aesthetic hierarchies and norms. A common denominator among his mediators was a shared commitment to a revival of 'literary drama' and a perception of a widening gap between book and theatre. Apart from that, they were highly divergent and ended up constructing very different 'Ibsens'.

Chapter 7 gives an account of the remarkable European position obtained by Ibsen in the 1890s and shows the importance of intellectual property regimes to the different European dissemination patterns. One reason Ibsen existed in such a variety of circuits was, we argue, the transitory state of copyright, the author being protected in all his Scandinavian home markets while being unprotected beyond.

In Chapter 8 we assess Ibsen's status in European cultures by the turn of the century and the impact made by his drama outside of Scandinavia.

A threefold pattern can be discerned. In northern Europe, Ibsen was already firmly appropriated both as book and theatre. In Britain, his existence was conditioned on the still-existing divide between literature and theatre, with Ibsen soon being established as literature, while belonging to the 'independent', minority theatre sector; in France, he remained a minority interest both as book and performance.

To make our case, we will highlight areas which have largely been ignored and under-researched, such as the issues of Ibsen's finances and publishing history. These tell a story very different from that of indifference or hostility. But this is also an account of how literature became its own primary context, that is, how Scandinavian literature developed into a relatively autonomous field of cultural production. Ibsen's turn to contemporary prose plays, the plays which made his name in Europe, would not have happened without it. This is not to say that we now pretend to give *the* contextual account of Ibsen's achievement. Contexts are never closed, they are always constructed anew from changing historical vantage points, and they always come in the plural. We have, for example, to a large extent left out intellectual and aesthetic discourses and influences, not because we deem them irrelevant, but because we have wanted to emphasise significant areas which we think have been given far too little attention, and which will help us reconsider a number of earlier contextualisations, both explicit ones, and, equally often, implicit ones.

Relating this history in a basically chronological order, the approaches, issues and emphases will vary between and within the different chapters and will include elements of biography, political history, book history, theatre history, with some ventures into literary interpretation. Our over-arching ambition is to explain 'the Ibsen phenomenon', to address the question of how a world drama arose from such seemingly inauspicious origins.

Ibsen poses a challenge to our own efforts at contextualisation and has forced us to rethink basic theoretical assumptions about modern literature and its institutional settings. In the last part of this introduction we would like to single out four of our recurrent theoretical concerns. The first one is paying attention to Ibsen's poetics: How did he construct and reconstruct his authorship and what Michel Foucault called 'the author function': the 'author' as the privileged offspring and unifying principle of the literary work?³ This is an area which has been prone to the essentialisation of a

³ Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in David Finkelstein & Alistair McCleery (eds.), *The Book History Reader*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2006), 281–91.

handful of authorial statements, not least those about Ibsen being ‘a fighter in the intellectual vanguard’ and always ‘at least ten years ahead of the majority’.⁴ We will try to demonstrate that this avant-garde rhetoric belongs to a restricted phase of Ibsen’s authorship, the time around *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*, and that we should be careful in giving it a wider or even general reach. There are certainly signs of a poetics of distance, emerging by the early 1860s, in sharp contrast to his poetics of the 1850s.⁵ But this poetics undergoes a series of significant reformulations, from the dichotomous opposition between art and society in the 1860s to the bourgeois artists of the late plays. These reformulations are indications of the degrees of artistic autonomy experienced at different stages, we will suggest, and should be re-historicised in that perspective. What is remarkable is that already by the early 1880s the author-function ‘Ibsen’ was so powerful that his publisher strongly advised against compromising it with biographical information. Ibsen was asked to cultivate elevation and silence.

A second concern is the relevance and at the same time the limitations of the theory of the literary field. According to this theory, the world of literature is an instantiation of the market of symbolic goods, organised around the opposition between small-scale and large-scale circulation. This makes literature an ‘economic world reversed’, not only distinguishing between, but opposing sales and literary recognition. In Pierre Bourdieu’s analyses of French literature and art, Gustave Flaubert and others ‘affirmed the autonomy of literature from the market in the second half of the nineteenth century, by claiming the superiority of the judgement of their peers and other specialists over those of the uninitiated public’.⁶ As the wider theory of symbolic goods indicate, however, there is nothing completely new or particularly French about the opposition between aesthetic value and commercial value. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard held the quality of a book to stand in an inverse relationship to its number of readers. He oscillated between deploring this fact and cultivating the idea of authorship as sacrifice. When *Enten-Eller (Either-Or)* immediately

⁴ Ibsen, Letter to G. Brandes, 12 June 1883, *Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), 220.

⁵ The poetics of distance has been underlined, but not historicised, by Bjørn Hemmer, *Ibsen* (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2003), 19, 557.

⁶ Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Autonomy Revisited: The Question of Mediations and Its Methodological Implications’, *Paragraph*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2012) 34; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); see also Bourdieu, ‘The Field of Cultural Production’, in Finkelstein & McCleery (eds.), *The Book History Reader*, 99–120.

sold out on its first publication in 1844 and the publisher suggested a new edition, Kierkegaard first opposed the idea ‘on principle’.⁷ The later Modern Breakthrough relied on a rhetoric of the split audience and the opposition between ‘free art’ and ‘bourgeois demand’. It is imperative that we acknowledge the productive role of this discourse in framing literary positions, oppositions and possibilities. It certainly had a transformative effect on Ibsen’s authorship. But it is equally important to realise that this logic does not correspond to actual circulation. Ibsen could not, like Kierkegaard, afford to neglect the market; in fact, his contemporary plays consolidated his position not just at the top of the literary hierarchy but also as a bestseller. As indicated, we will suggest that a major reason for this success was the national importance of and the national stakes in literature in Norway. It was, then, the intersection of the ‘law of the field’ and the logic of national literature that made Ibsen possible; his literary drama could never have emerged from within a Scandinavian avant-garde.

A third recurring concern regards cultural asymmetries. Asymmetries were used by the literary agents at the time as a means of positioning themselves in cultural struggles at home and abroad.⁸ At home, they would often resort to the language of ‘Scandinavian backwardness’ while positioning themselves as ‘European’, as in the often quoted introduction to Georg Brandes’s famous *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (*Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 1872): ‘we are this time, as usual, forty years behind Europe.’⁹ Abroad, however, Brandes would more than once attack ‘the provincialism of the centre’, an accusation that Ibsen in fact directed precisely against Brandes himself and what *he*, as a Norwegian writer, perceived to be the ‘Copenhagen parochialism’ of *Main Currents*. While we direct attention to such highly situated uses of centre-periphery rhetoric, we also acknowledge that asymmetries represented very real obstacles for authors trying to achieve literary autonomy and, eventually, a place within ‘world literature’. They wrote in marginal languages, worked in less developed and differentiated cultural environments, and would often be immediately exposed to political and national pressures. However, we should not from such restrictions draw the general conclusion that ‘being peripheral’ is antithetical to having agency and that ‘periphery’

⁷ Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse [2007] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 508, see also 513–19 and 545–48.

⁸ Stefan Nygård & Johan Strang, ‘Facing Asymmetry: Nordic Intellectuals and Center-Periphery Dynamics in European Cultural Space’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2016), 75–97.

⁹ Georg Brandes, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1872), 15.

and 'province' are only positions of disadvantage. In Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, there seems to be three ideal-typical strategies available for peripheral authors: total assimilation to a dominant culture and language, joining the strategy of nationalising language, literature and theatre, or breaking with the national model in order to pursue recognition in the literary centres, notably Paris, as a way of obtaining autonomy.¹⁰ Her model has been much criticised, but it corresponds well with the critical orthodoxy which has never really considered Scandinavia as the primary context of origin of Ibsen's modern drama. The master narrative related above has depicted Scandinavia as a restricting, not as an enabling environment, and the Modern Breakthrough as initiated by import. Against such perceptions we will highlight certain 'advantages of backwardness', or 'resources of the periphery', such as, not least, the continued existence of drama as a vital literary genre – without which Ibsen's achievement is hard to imagine in the first place – as well as the national importance attached to literature. Furthermore, we will argue that Norway and Scandinavia were, with expanding markets, rapid urbanisation and extended education, able to provide a relatively high degree of literary autonomy and to facilitate something like a homegrown modern literature far beyond what Brandes had imagined at the beginning of the 1870s.

Finally, a central aim of *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama* is to reintroduce historical contingency to inherited narratives. In canonised authorships, the power of teleology and closure is overwhelming. Indications of this power is the recurring tendency in Ibsen biography and Ibsen scholarship to harmonise apparent 'deviations' and contradictions, for example, by explaining that 'essentially' Ibsen was radical all the time and that what may 'look like' socially affirmative plays are more subversive than they appear.¹¹ The ideas of 'habitus' and 'field' might actually help underpin such notions, by suggesting an all-encompassing mode of making intellectual subjects.¹² Our aim is rather to underline discontinuity and situational variation. That is one reason why we, to take one example, have wanted to draw attention to the 1870s, highlighting the indeterminacy of Ibsen's situation through most of that decade and trying to restore the sense of surprise with which *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* were met at the time.

¹⁰ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 173–347.

¹¹ This has been done, for example, with respect to *The League of Youth* and *Pillars of the Community*, see on the first, Helge Rønning, *Den umulige friheten* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2006), 193–94 and on the latter, James W. McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning* (Norwich: Norvik Press, 1989), 85, 89.

¹² Henning Trüper, *Topography of a Method* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 221.