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[Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign](#)

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Reviewed by Massimo Ciaravolo

Except from a performance of *A Doll's House* in 1889, the introduction of Ibsen's modern drama in Italy, as regards both staging and book editions, took place between 1891 and 1894. The protagonists of this launch were Icilio Polese and his son Enrico. Their campaign and its impact in the following decades are the object of Giuliano D'Amico's study, published in Italy but written in English, a slightly revised version of a Ph.D. dissertation with the same title presented at the University of Oslo in 2011.

The Polesees were not primarily intellectuals or committed Ibsenites. Their work within the Italian commercial theatre at the turn of the century was profit-oriented. Through their powerful theatrical agency they translated Ibsen's plays (Enrico Polese translated them with Paolo Rindler, a language teacher, using the German and French translations as main sources); sold the translations to theatre companies; supported their productions with favourable reviews in the agency's journal; and finally had the same translations published as books by culturally active publishing houses such as Kantorowicz and Treves. For the Polesees, D'Amico observes, Ibsen was a new European author in vogue; they may have recognized his greatness, but treated him nevertheless as a commodity.

In this mediation, Ibsen's plays were domesticated and transformed in order to suit the taste of the Italian audience. It was common practice for Polese and Rindler to cut the source text, so as to make it simpler, less 'philosophical', or, conversely, expand the text so as to explain what was intentionally concealed. As D'Amico argues, Icilio, the father, was the driving force behind this project, convinced that it was necessary to adapt Ibsen's purportedly unbridgeable otherness in order to appreciate his stature. This process corresponded to the construction of a both familiar and foreignizing image of the Other, summarized in the representations of Ibsen as (too) 'misty' and Nordic, a thinker rather than an artist. Another aspect is that the overt and often arbitrary domestication of the texts created objections, especially among those critics and artists who had access to more faithful French and German versions of the plays. In this case, it is argued, the domesticated translations made the translators particularly visible rather than invisible.

What is termed 'denial of coevalness' seems to affect the first Italian reception of Ibsen, among detractors as well as promoters; Ibsen was seen not as one of us but as an alien, a superior alien at best. Still, it is argued, the Polesees' enterprise was fundamental in the early dissemination of Ibsen's works. In the shape they gave to his plays, Ibsen was available to the Italian audiences as well as to critics and intellectuals. Their translations, and therefore their version of Ibsen and Nordicness, were influential until the 1930s. Interesting discussion is also dedicated to the system of roles in the Italian theatre companies of that time, and to the interpretations of Ibsen by two outstanding actors, Ermete Zacconi, who used Polese and Rindler's translations, and Elenora Duse, who disliked them.

The bulk of D'Amico's study is an analysis of the translation of eight of Ibsen's modern plays, which marked the progress and decline of the campaign: *The Wild Duck*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Pillars of Society*, *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *An Enemy of the People*. It was a campaign because, through Ibsen, the Polesees wanted to gain cultural and economic capital in the theatrical and literary field. Sometimes the objections were more against the form of the campaign than against Ibsen; so many productions in few years caused a sense of weariness in the critics and the audience, who were not given the possibility to assimilate the novelty of the new drama.

D'Amico draws on previous studies of Ibsen's first reception in Italy and of the early translations of his works (Alonge, Perrelli, Simoncini and others), but is originally able to set his own translation analysis in a wider cultural, economic and social context, also with the help of an amazing quantity of archive material, competently brought to light and explained. D'Amico convincingly connects different theoretical perspectives in order to shed light on his material: new historicism, reception studies, translation studies (especially Venuti and Carbonell Cortés), sociology of literature (especially Bourdieu and Casanova), and recent developments in Norwegian Ibsen studies, which emphasize the relationship between the modern writer and the market (especially Fulsås and Figueiredo). In so doing, the peculiarities of the Italian reception are seen from a European angle. Ibsen's dependence on commercial success was by no means an exclusively Italian phenomenon; the same applies to his contemporaries' difficulties in understanding and accepting his plays.

My only quibble is the following, and is elicited by the very quality of D'Amico's book: its ability to arouse curiosity. I would have liked to know more about the interplay between theatre performances and the critical response of outstanding intellectuals who appreciated Ibsen and wrote about him at the end of the nineteenth and in the first decades of the twentieth century. The role of Benedetto Croce is touched upon in connection with the performances in Naples. Piero Gobetti in Turin is mentioned incidentally. Scipio Slataper from Trieste, who wrote an important book on Ibsen (1916), is not mentioned; nor is Antonio Gramsci's review of *A Doll's House* in Turin in March 1917 (though this production, with Emma Gramatica playing Nora, is briefly described). Gramsci observed the same 'denial of coevalness' D'Amico crucially points out in his study. Why doesn't the Italian audience recognize Nora's 'profoundly moral act'? Why do they perceive her and her author as aliens? Even Gramsci seems to find an answer in the idea of a morally superior otherness: Nora is acknowledged somewhere else, but not amidst the Latin bourgeoisie, lost, during World War I, in their myths of nerves, blood and masculine power. Domesticating Ibsen for Italy remains an extremely valuable contribution, a brilliantly written and vivid analysis, which displays consistent connections between the body of theory and the case studies. As a literary scholar D'Amico is a competent reader of translation practice. But he has also written a piece of social history of the Italian theatre, and is able to contextualize in time and place the large number of documents he has examined.