

REVIEW

Giuliano D'Amico

Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's *Ibsen Campaign*

BARI: EDIZIONE DI PAGINA, 2013, 358 PAGES.

In his book *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign*, Giuliano D'Amico discusses the role Enrico and Icilio Polese's theatre agency had in making Henrik Ibsen's plays better known in Italy.¹ Giuliano D'Amico focuses on the Italian translations of Ibsen's plays represented by the "Poleseian" agency and the reception of their premiere productions. The author emphasizes aspects that are "traceable at a textual level".² In addition to portraying the four-year *Ibsen Campaign*, D'Amico gives a comprehensive account of events that took place before and after the campaign together with the relevant cultural and social context. D'Amico's study places an emphasis on translations, though his concept of translation is wide, which entails also including the cultural context of the performances.

The author has chosen to examine his topic within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's "idea of literary production as a social space, a 'field' of struggle in which authors seek recognition or 'cultural capital', and interact with other agents (critics, publishers, patrons, etc.)."³ D'Amico uses Bourdieu's theories to show how translators and

reviewers have an integral part in adding value (cultural capital) to the original text, and thereby increasing the possibility of the dissemination of, in this case Ibsen's plays, onto the Italian market.

He bases his investigation on Franco Moretti's model for the distribution of novels in Europe: new genres are created by dominating countries (France, the United Kingdom and Germany), from where they transfer to semi-peripheries (Spain, Italy, Poland) and peripheries (mainly the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe) that usually adopt and further develop foreign literary trends. It is possible, however, that temporary sub-centres emerge in the periphery, as was the case with Ibsen. The knowledge of Ibsen's work travelled from Norway to the semi-peripheral Italy through two dominating countries, Germany and France. The study confirms the notion that "the dominating countries monopolize literary legitimacy through their established institutions."⁴ A key concept in the book is "domestication", which entails "the abbreviation, simplification or explanation of the most obscure and complex passages, and softening of those aspects that might have been perceived as offensive or

scandalous."⁵ Even though the concept was primarily connected to translations, it turns out that the "domestication" of the plays was an important factor in making Ibsen better known in fact it helped canonize Ibsen in Italy. One of the aspects of "domestication" was in Polese's construction of 'Nordicness', which was a way of dealing with an unknown 'Other'. The 'Nordic' and 'Nordicness' were seen through a local filter, by doing so Polese was able to counter the reception of the Nordic as something grotesque, disturbing and even dangerous for the healthy traditions of Italian dramatic literature."⁶ D'Amico also reflects on the difference between domestication and adaptation and the external factors that influence the translation process, as well as the translators relationship to Italian culture.

The book includes an introduction to the late 19th century Italian theatre system, casting practices, conventions of bourgeois drama, production system, agents, and periodicals that covered drama and the status of drama in the book market. This is all justified so that we can place Enrico and Icilio Polese and their periodical, *L'arte drammatica*, in the context. The informative introduction shows how Bourdieu's concept of the 'field of struggle' is useful in this case because there are several competitors in the domestication of drama ranging from culture to economy. Finally, a surprisingly small part is left for artistic capital. The introduction and the following chapter, giving a rather detailed account of Ibsen's position in Italy prior to the campaign, account for almost a third of the book.

Still, the discussion on Ibsen's image prior to the campaign is meaningful and largely significant in order to understand the work of the Polese's. D'Amico highlights Germany's role in the distribution of Ibsen's plays in Italy. Ibsen himself spoke German and he was familiar with the approaches of different translators as well as their forms and degrees of domestication. Furthermore, the French translations of Ibsen's plays had an impact on the perception of translation. The first Italian production, *A Doll's House* by Eleonora Duse, and the early critical

response established some of the key interpretations of the play and of Ibsen's dramaturgy and convinced Enrico Polese that the translation itself - not only the stage production - required domestication in order to be understood.⁷ The handling of copyright issues is also interesting, as these issues intertwine with the discussion on early translators and translations. D'Amico also gives us an insight into the financial objectives of the Ibsen Campaign.

Icilio and Enrico Polese Santarnecchi ran their theatre agency, *L'arte drammatica*, in Milan. Between 1891 and 1894, they introduced and marketed eight Ibsen plays ranging from *The Wild Duck* to *An Enemy of the People*. Enrico Polese translated the plays together with Paolo Rindler. As theatre experts, the Polese's had a clear understanding of how Ibsen would gain a foothold in Italy, but they also wanted to turn the Norwegian author into a profitable investment. "The Italianized Ibsen, which the Polese's served to Italian audiences, was in many respects a different playwright from the one Norwegian audiences were acquainted with, and also different from the one which audiences in various other European countries were used to."⁸

The Ibsen Campaign was launched in the wake of Eleonora Duse's production of *A Doll's House* as the divided opinions in the press had made Ibsen a household name. The Polese's acquired the script of *The Wild Duck* through the German literary agency Felix Bloch Erben. The collaboration between Paolo Rindler and Enrico Polese entailed that Rindler would undertake additional literary translations, while Polese would take care of domestication and make the play fit for the stage. *A Doll's House* was made famous by the stage production of the Ermete Novelli Company, with the director himself playing the role of "old"-Ekdahl. D'Amico gives a detailed account of the reception of the performance and the image it built of Ibsen: bringing foreign culture to the Italian theatre was not without complications, despite the domestication and "exotification" of the text and the stage production, several misunderstandings tarnished the authors reputation. There were also variations

in the reception between different cities. The translations of *A Doll's House* turned out to be a fascinating example of domestication, and D'Amico's meticulous analysis of the process is well informed and interesting.

The great breakthrough of Polese's *Ibsen Campaign* took place a year after *The Wild Duck*, when the Manzoni Company staged *Ghosts*. The Polese's produced the project and Ermeti Zacconi a star of the Italian theatre played the role of Oswald, rendering it with exact realism. The performance was followed by another show, a farce, which was typical of the time, but rare in connection with Ibsen. Besides the translation, the success of the play owes much to Zacconi. In addition to the favourable reception of *Ghosts* across the country, D'Amico describes and compares different variations of the play text. Thereafter, *Hedda Gabler* is analysed in detail and its translation turns out to be more exact than many others. Theatre companies and the leading actors had a vital part in the success, however the reception varied in different parts of the country. The *Ibsen Campaign* peaked in 1892, coinciding with the production of *The Pillars of Society*. The Cesare Rossi Company made an emotionally appealing production of this play and earned success even in Rome, where Ibsen's reception was the most reserved.

The *Ibsen Campaign* was short and intense. If it had not been for the early death of Icilio Polese, the Campaign might have lasted longer. Despite Enrico continuing the running of the agency, he did not translate any new plays after the season of 1893-1894. Meanwhile, the agency had, in the last year of the Campaign, managed to publish four plays. Out of the four plays the most successful on the Italian market was *An Enemy of the People*, closely followed by *Ghosts*. Yet again, it was Ermeti Zacconi who contributed to the success of *An Enemy of the People*, by his rendition of the part of Dr. Stockmann. *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea* were the three other plays published and produced in the season of 1893-94. In D'Amico's opinion, an important reason for the abrupt ending of the campaign seems to be that, despite Enrico being

the translator of Ibsen's plays, it was Icilio who was mainly interested in publishing Ibsen's dramas. Therefore, upon the death of the father, translation work started to pile up on the sons desk. However, Ibsen had, by now, gained a foothold in Italy as D'Amico briefly points out in the last part of his book.

Domesticating Ibsen for Italy gives a detailed account of Enrico and Icilio Polese's part in establishing Henrik Ibsen's dramas on the Italian stage. The study is based on a large body of archive material; this extensive groundwork is reflected in the book, but not in the book title. In my opinion the title could have pointed to this larger context, or, alternatively, the "*Poleseian Ibsen Campaign*" could have been introduced with a more concise cultural and theatrical background. However, the context as it stands also makes an interesting read. The methodological introduction shows the significance of varied activities and frames the fact that the agency was also a commercial business. Still, the most relevant parts of the book are its traditional, meticulous textual analysis and the conclusions drawn from it, as well as the close reading of the Italian translations of Ibsen's dramas. D'Amico's work ought to serve as an inspiration for a comparative study, for example, from a Nordic perspective.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Father and son, Enrico and Icilio Polese, ran the agency.
2. Giuliano D'Amico and fakultet Universitetet i Oslo Det humanistiske, "Domesticating Ibsen for Italy : Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign," Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, 2011, p. 8.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. p. 11.
5. Ibid. p. 4.
6. Ibid. p. 21.
7. Ibid. p. 90.
8. Ibid. p. 4.