

THE PENGUINISATION OF IBSEN

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The history of Ibsen's English-language reception begins with a book. The story has been told before. On a hot day in July 1871, the young Edmund Gosse, having returned from a trip to the Lofoten Islands, went into a Trondheim bookshop in order to buy a Tauchnitz novel in English. Having asked the bookseller whether there were any Norwegian poets he ought to read, he came out with a little green volume in Dano-Norwegian; it was called *Digte* and was written by Henrik Ibsen (Thwaite, 1984, 107).

The more general reception of Ibsen was from early on a double phenomenon, of course, and in studying it attention should be paid to the book, to the performance and to the dynamic and historically contingent relationship between the two. My undertaking here is limited, however, to a particular aspect of Ibsen's reception as *book*, namely the story of when and how he was "Penguinized", i.e., introduced into Penguin Classics, arguably the most important mediator and purveyor of the Western canon in English. My main questions here are: How has Penguin served Ibsen? And, more tentatively towards the end, how should we go about creating a new Penguin Ibsen?

After much initial hostility and cultural warfare in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Ibsen underwent a relatively swift canonisation in Britain. William Heinemann's 12-volume *Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen* (1906-1912), translated by William Archer, which began publication in the year of Ibsen's death, and the several Ibsen volumes in Everyman's Library from around the same time, can be seen as signal events in this canonisation process. *Ghosts* was not formally granted a licence by the censor's office until 1914, but by the early 1920s Ibsen had assumed what Dr. Johnson claimed for Shakespeare, "the dignity of an ancient" (de Grazia, 1991, 5).

Allen Lane's Penguin, with its first titles published a few decades after Ibsen's initial triumphs, in 1935, quickly became a powerful and "distinctive brand"; it was in fact soon made synonymous with "the paperback" (Lewis, 2005, 69). Lane did of course not invent the paperback, nor was he, by any means, the first to utilize the potential which lay in publishing cheap books from out-of-copyright titles. In the UK alone he had predecessors in series such as W.T. Stead's Penny Poets and Penny Novels, Grant Richards' World's Classics and J.M. Dent's Everyman's Library (ibid., 71). But Lane hit the right moment in introducing, as he himself put it, "'branded goods' to the book trade", including new notions of "corporate image", "house style" and "logos" (ibid., 76). The low price, combined with a recognizable typeface and distinctive design, helped sell both the imprint and individual books. Lane's ambition, both commercial and democratic, was that people would start collecting Penguins, so that each book would help sell new companion books.

In January 1946, a new series, the Penguin Classics, began publication with E.V. Rieu's translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. The success of this book, which ended up selling over three million copies worldwide, helped ensure the continuation of the series, and Penguin Classics gradually established itself, with few rivals, as "the most comprehensive paperback library of world literature" ("Guidelines", 2). *The Odyssey*

was first followed by books by a series of authors, predominantly, if not exclusively, Greek and Latin (De Maupassant, Sophocles, Voltaire, Tacitus, Dante, Xenophon, Virgil, Turgenev, Cervantes, Apuleius, Goethe, Prevost, Homer's *Iliad*, and Flaubert). The first Ibsen volume to appear in this series came in 1950, and that as only the sixteenth book in the series. This is conspicuously early, not least considering how few modern writers the list contained at this point.¹ In any case, the choice of including Ibsen in this company, followed up with new volumes of Ibsen plays later in the same decade and in the next, can in hindsight be said to have helped secure his status in the English-language canon of classics, and to have prepared the way for his further dissemination within a circuit of world literature.

When Penguin Classics began publication, it took part in the Penguin business concept, with colour-coding and engraved roundels on the cover. *Penguins Progress*, a book published to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Penguin Books in 1960, took particular note of Penguin's function as "the Popular Educator of our times". Furthermore, it highlighted this publisher's strong emphasis on design, that is, on a certain common "Penguinity" shared by all Penguin books "through the use of our famous devices and simple but distinct graphic elements" (*Penguins Progress*, 1960, 46). From the 1960s the Classics were given their distinctive black covers that have since "remained a constant" (Ibsen, 1964, 304), and this strong branding of Penguin becomes, by implication, also a branding of Ibsen. Ibsen gains from the trademark; the trademark gains from Ibsen. Penguin, it has been argued, became something much more than an ordinary publisher, no doubt due to its stress on quality and accessibility, and its role in the general democratizing movement of the middle decades of the twentieth century. It seemed, at least for a few decades, more akin to the BBC, a cultural institution devoted to the common good, rather than a competitor to its rival publishing companies (Lewis, 2005, 267).

By 1968, Penguin Classics still only had 190 titles in print, and 73 of them were from Greek and Latin (Radice, 1969, 130). Four were Ibsen volumes, containing a total of 13 plays. Since then, Ibsen has been a mainstay in Penguin Classics, even if he is necessarily not quite as conspicuous a presence on the list now that it has reached more than 1300 titles, but this expansion has potentially, as already noted, done other things for him, in placing him more solidly within world literature rather than just the Western canon (Ibsen, 1964, 304).

The most important paratextual category in the Penguin Ibsen editions is probably the introduction, if we assume that it is being read. For the four volumes of society plays, the introductions are relatively brief compared with many of the more recent Penguin editions, ranging from 11 to 19 pages. I can only make a couple of points about these introductions here – two of which are written by one translator, Una Ellis-Fermor, two by the other, Peter Watts – and the issue of temporality is what primarily concerns me. When Ellis-Fermor sets out to explain that certain words in Norwegian will have different "associations and overtones" now than what they had at the end of the nineteenth century, she refers to "the speech that would be used by a contemporary dramatist such as Helge Krog or Nordahl Grieg" (Ibsen, 1961, 7). Quite apart from not mentioning the fact that Ibsen wrote in what was in effect Danish, and that Grieg died in 1943, Ellis-Fermor's point must necessarily come across as enigmatic or esoteric when her introduction is reprinted and

presented to the English-language reader of the twenty-first century. The reason is of course that the introduction was written for the first edition of this volume, in 1950, and that it has often been reprinted but never revised.

Another point may be made about Peter Watts' introduction to *his* first Penguin Ibsen volume, written for the first edition in 1964. This introduction starts in an apologetic manner: "Seeing that he is one of the half-dozen greatest dramatists that the world has known, Ibsen is surprisingly misunderstood even by the well-informed"; Watt continues by claiming what is probably the greatest "popular misconception", that he is "dull and stodgy", thus drawing attention to a stereotype (Ibsen, 1964, 7). The intentions may be good, and Watts tries to show why Ibsen is exciting, but the effect is nevertheless that during the last fifty years, every new generation of Penguin readers have been met with the claim that many people, albeit mistakenly, think of Ibsen as boring.

The four introductions generally suffer from a number of inaccurate, questionable, dated or outright wrong claims, such as the information that *Peer Gynt* was the play which brought Ibsen fame (Ibsen, 1964, 9), that Ibsen belonged to "a race of fine integrity", that "though the great age of Norwegian literature lay in the far past, its spirit was still potent", that he saw German literature as the only vital force in Europe (Ibsen, 1961, 8), and even that *When We Dead Awaken* was "unfinished at Ibsen's death" (Ibsen, 1958, 8). The tendency to present Ibsen as naturalist, albeit seemingly used near-synonymously with realist, is detectable throughout, and is also communicated in Ellis-Fermor's reluctance, in the volume headed by *The Master Builder*, to accept "what is often called symbolism", preferring instead the term "imagery" (Ibsen, 1958, 11). The editions generally appear as dated, thus cementing a 1950s and '60s version of a nineteenth-century writer.

One organisational feature of the Penguin Ibsens deserves mention, however briefly. The habit of selecting a single play for the title of a three- or four-volume play, such as in *A Doll's House and Other Plays* or *Ghosts and Other Plays*, may be seen to delete or at least reduce the importance of plays which in other contexts may be thought of as having equal artistic merit. While the argument for such choices seems related to the demands of the college or university markets, the existing Penguin editions, by never changing this structure between 1950 and 2012, may have helped preserve a certain emphasis or hierarchy within Ibsen's *oeuvre*. The organisation also seems idiosyncratic or arbitrary. *Ghosts* appears with what is here called *A Public Enemy* and *When We Dead Wake*, *A Doll's House* is grouped with *The League of Youth* and *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler* with *The Pillars of the Community* and *The Wild Duck* and, finally, in a four-play volume somewhat closer to a chronological organisation, *The Master Builder* appears with *Rosmersholm*, *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Quite apart from the fact that this way of presenting the volumes breaks with Ibsen's own stress on the strict and dialogical relationship between his society plays, as well as the scholarly and historical reasons, it is hard to see what is gained by such organisation, apart from the more famous play helping the dissemination of the others. The selection of *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* as the four key plays clearly communicates certain priorities within the English-language Ibsen canon.

The translators of the Penguin Ibsens offer at least some insights into their own approaches to translation. The back cover of the most recent edition of the first book of the series, Ellis-Fermor's *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays* (simply called *Three Plays* between 1950 and 1961), notes that her translation "renders Ibsen's naturalistic dialogue in fluent modern English". While it is possible to query whether "naturalistic" is the right term for the language of *The Wild Duck*, or at least to point out that this description pulls Ibsen in a particular direction, the more interesting point lies perhaps in the potential contrast between this information and Ellis-Fermor's own statements about her practice. The very first sentence of her introduction makes the claim that "This is an attempt to translate into the English of today three plays written in Norwegian at the end of the nineteenth century" (Ibsen, 1958, 7). Towards the end of her introduction, Ellis-Fermor returns to her ambition: "The present volume attempts the impossible task of pretending that Ibsen wrote his plays in the English of 1950" (Ibsen, 1958, 22). The reason for this particular approach, the translator adds, is "the knowledge that the undying imagination of the greatest modern dramatist is as much alive today as it was in 1870 or 1890 and that there must therefore be some kind of modern equivalent for his speech" (Ibsen, 1958, 22). While standard British English may have evolved less than some other European languages during the last 60 years, it is, to return to the back cover pitch, in any case hard to be convinced that this is "fluent modern English". In Ellis-Fermor's second volume, *The Master Builder and Other Plays*, the text on the back cover makes a similar claim, noting that her "lucid translation does full justice to Ibsen's naturalistic dialogue", and this in a volume containing, besides the title play, *Rosmersholm*, *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. While Ellis-Fermor goes on to discuss a number of translation issues in this volume, as she does in the earlier introduction, and while she stresses the idiosyncratic language of the characters and what she calls evocative "patterns of words" running through the plays (Ibsen, 1958, 15), her main strategy is again one of strong domestication. While arguing that period costumes should be used in productions of the plays, she nevertheless finds it necessary to modernise such period features for her reading version. She has, she points out, "turned bonnets into hats, a morning-dress into a house-coat, and evening tea into supper when it seemed necessary for the continuity of the reading" (ibid., 26). This also goes for a number of unspecified "similar modifications". The translator is sensitive that sticking too closely to the Dano-Norwegian will create involuntary comic effects.

The two last volumes of society plays, translated by Watts, also come accompanied by claims on the back covers. The first "maintains the colloquial tone of the original dialogue" and the other is a "lively modern translation". But Watts' somewhat more recent editions, from 1964 and 1965, in fact operate with quite different translation strategies from Ellis-Fermor's. In an argument which seems to place the two Penguin translators in opposite theoretical camps, and thus pitting two of the volumes against the two others, Watts rejects the choice of "up-to-date colloquial English", noting that such a translation would "bristle with improbabilities and inconsistencies" and cause "innumerable small anachronisms" (Ibsen, 1965, 20-21). This translator stresses the fact that Ibsen's plays "belong irrevocably to the late nineteenth century" and that they are "essentially Norwegian". His conviction leads to the choice of deliberately retaining some Norwegian words ("Storthinget") and

titles, and to the adoption of what Watts calls “a simple undated English that is not unduly modern and yet that does not seem out of keeping with the period costumes that the speakers would wear in the theatre”. The translation is, then, explicitly not “modern”, contrary to what the reader is told on the back cover.

While his translations veer slightly towards archaization and foreignisation, Watts is not consistent, and he domesticates in terms of speech pattern and vocabulary. He notes, for example, that retaining Ibsen’s pairs of words or doublets would lead to the translation being “woolly and repetitive” or, in an alternative formulation, “too long-winded and tautological” (Ibsen, 1965, 21; Ibsen, 1964, 18). In the first of these volumes he even introduces a term for this simplification, i.e., “to telescope”, the ambition being to “find a single English word that conveyed the whole sense”. In the introduction to *Ghosts and Other Plays*, Watts also notes that he has tried to create dialogue which “would sound as natural now as Ibsen’s original must have done to the audiences of his day” (Ibsen, 1964, 16). There is a tension here also between Ellis-Fermor’s insistence on the fact that her translation is for reading and Watts’ claim that his dialogue will be “easy for actors to speak”. The current Penguin editions suffer, then, from a lack of coherence or a unified approach. They are, as noted, in certain respects at war with each other. All in all, it is possible to conclude that the Penguin Classics Ibsen volumes live up to one out of three of its publisher’s ambitions for the series, namely that the “editions are up-to-date, authoritative and affordable” (“Guidelines”, 2); unfortunately, it is the last one.

The most striking thing about the Penguin Classics Ibsen is the fact that it has been, in textual and even, with the exception of texts for the back covers, in paratextual terms, static for more than 60 years (if we go back to the publication of the first volume). The problem is not primarily that Ellis-Fermor’s introduction adopts a spiritual approach or that Watts presents somewhat naïve, biographical readings and simplistic renderings of literary history; the introductions are not without merit. The main problem is the fact that this is still what introduces the Penguin reader to Ibsen. While the decades that lie between first publication of these editions and our own day have seen a flood of new translations into English and numerous academic works that have helped reshape our views of Ibsen, Penguin have stuck faithfully to its old translations and its original paratexts, only putting on new covers.

The historical meanings of texts change, even as they themselves remain unchanged. This is, firstly, true of the very language of the translations. Whether the translators explicitly tried to be true to the idioms of their own time – staying as close to the language of 1950 as they could come – or strove to achieve a more generic and undated modern English, they nevertheless worked within particular regimes of translation, quite apart from the fact that the language at their disposal necessarily belongs to a particular moment in the history of English and, more generally, to a number of other historical contexts. But it is, secondly, a matter of the various bibliographical codes, framing devices and paratexts that come with these editions. In these terms, Ibsen appears as he did to these translators in 1950, 1958, 1964 and 1965 respectively. It is tempting to quote a truism from Gérard Genette: “From the fact that the paratext always fulfils a function, it does not necessarily follow that the paratext always fulfils its function well” (Genette, 1997, 409).

The Penguin Ibsens currently in print must, among other things, be said to appropriate Ibsen for naturalism, much in line with the dominant Ibsen tradition in British theatre (Robinson, 2000, 171-90). This clearly implies “spilt poetry” (W.B. Yeats in Setterquist, 1951, 9; Ewbank, 1998, 51-74). These are also editions which, in terms of translation strategies, are in conflict between themselves, two volumes opting for strong domestication, the other two for a somewhat more foreignising approach. The muddle even extends to different signals being sent from different parts of the paratextual apparatus, the back cover text and the introduction. Most significantly, the readers are presented with an Ibsen who is bound to appear dated, both in terms of language, translation methods and scholarship.

The very apparatus which brings us Ibsen in each case, the material, critical and institutional apparatus which has framed and mediated him, does more than “deliver Ibsen”; it shapes him, constructs him afresh and situates him within new linguistic, cultural and temporal contexts. As Margreta de Grazia has noted in connection with Edmund Malone’s famous Shakespeare edition, in the reproduction of a text, in making it “again available and accessible”, the apparatus “specifies a text’s ontology and epistemology”; the text, in short, “predisposes the reader to specific modes of reading and understanding” (de Grazia, 1991, 11-12).

In preparing a new generation of Ibsen editions for Penguin Classics, a number of challenges present themselves to the editor, translators, introducers and publisher’s readers. The first and foremost relates to the ideology of translation which has most often characterised the Western canon in English, namely that of fluidity and domestication. The particular institutional context, i.e., in this case the publisher, may also in itself be seen to smooth out difference, to prioritise sameness, at least in terms of a general “Penguinity”. To resist this – if only by increasing the reader’s awareness of the fact that he or she is reading a translation, and a particular translation at that – is clearly part of a new “pedagogy of translated literature”, one which will attempt to historicize our ways of receiving the foreign, one which recognizes the translated status of the text and the work done by the language which makes the translation possible (Venuti, 1996, 330 and 333). Readers will necessarily construct their own temporal and cultural representations of the translated text, and this, I believe, is aided by the institutional context. But how can we make sure that these constructions are not reduced to the easiest of assimilations, but that they are rather informed by a certain ethics of difference? Is it possible to trust Ibsen’s texts more, to “surrender to the text” when translating, as an exercise in “the most intimate act of reading”, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, without the translation becoming unnecessarily or even comically stilted or inelegant? (Spivak, 2011, 54). And how may we take care of the inventiveness of Ibsen’s language, an inventiveness which tends to disappear when he is smoothed out into standard English?

Ibsen is, in world literary terms, a vulnerable author, one deeply dependent on mediation. There are inescapable transformations taking place when an author who was originally from the periphery, who wrote in a “small language” and was perceived as provincial when received in the cultural centres, appears in the world’s most famous classics list, translated into what has become the world’s leading, and probably first truly, “global language” (Crystal, 2009, 1-71), and certainly its currently most influential and hegemonic one. A transparent Ibsen available in the

same way to all cultures and languages of the world is, as noted at the beginning, not a possibility; linguistic and cultural reframing will inevitably embody difference. As bibliographers note, books can be compared with performances, an edition is one way of staging the text. The challenge is to exploit the privilege which comes with this opportunity, including the potential dissemination of Ibsen and the preservation of his status, while resisting the mechanisms that work towards too much sameness, domestication, homogenisation. The task is to negotiate between the universal and the local, domestication and foreignisation, continuities and discontinuities, sameness and alterity, to successfully accomplish a form of transculturation by retaining as many as possible of the quirks, oddities, neologisms and cultural specificities, if only by way of paratextual self-reflexivity, to preserve, in short, Edmund Gosse's yearning for the North, while not in the end transforming Ibsen into an exotic, or one "essentially Norwegian". Textual endurance relies on renewal, on ever new mediations or reframings in the form of new editions. The shifts a work of world literature may go through, David Damrosch notes, "do not reflect the unfolding of some internal logic of the work in itself"; it is related to "often complex dynamics of cultural change and contestation" (Damrosch, 2003, 6). In this more or less intense struggle, new editions can help texts make "comebacks", and that on terms and conditions which they can, at least to an extent, both prescribe and initiate (de Grazia, 1991, 11). In spite of what we may think of as his central position in our inherited canons, Ibsen, in this respect, continues to be a dependant.

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Biographical note

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Summary

This article investigates the current generation of Penguin Ibsen editions, translated by Una Ellis-Fermor and Peter Watts and dating back to the 1950s and '60s. It sketches the development of Penguin's publishing profile, and goes on to consider the role played by Penguin Classics in maintaining Ibsen as a central writer in the Western canon, and, with time, in world literature. By examining paratexts, materiality and translation strategies, the main part of the article considers how these editions construct their particular Ibsens. It looks, among other things, at the organisational principles and the scholarly apparatus. The article concludes by briefly noting some possible ambitions for, as well as challenges facing, a new generation of Penguin Ibsen editions.

Keywords

Penguin, translation, canonisation, paratext, reception, materiality, branding, datedness.

ⁱ Further archival work will perhaps throw light on the reasons why Ibsen was selected by Penguin Classics at such an early stage.