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A SHORT HISTORY OF IBSEN RECEPTION STUDIES

GIULIANO D'AMICO

If reception studies, as Ika Willis (2018, 1) puts it, “involves looking at texts from the point of view of [...] readers, viewers, listeners, spectators and audiences”, then this sub-field of Ibsen Studies originated with and developed alongside Ibsen’s own career as a dramatist. From very early on, in fact, critics, scholars and theatre practitioners showed interest in and studied how people read, watched, interpreted, and responded to Ibsen’s plays, with an emphasis on the cultural, literary, and theatrical contexts in which these acts of receptions took place. It can be argued that many of these early contributions belong more to neighboring fields like theatre and literary criticism and/or memoirs than to “proper” reception studies. But there is, in these early attempts at studying Ibsen’s fortune in Norway and abroad, a distinct interest in understanding how readers and audiences interpreted his texts, which kinds of afterlives they had in new cultural contexts, and, in the most advanced cases, exploring and reflecting upon the nature of interpretation of these texts. These are, as Willis points out in her influential book, *Reception* (2018), the cornerstones of reception studies as we understand it today. In this article, I will give an overview of the main lines in the history of Ibsen reception studies, from its origin to the latest developments sponsored by the Centre for Ibsen Studies (CIS).

Ever since the late 1880s, when Ibsen’s plays began being performed on major European stages, theatre and literary critics started to lift their gaze from single reviews of local performances and reflect on larger trends concerning the reception of Ibsen in a given environment or country. As early as 1882, the Danish

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GIULIANO D'AMICO

newspaper *Morgenbladet* issued Pauline Ahlberg's report on "Ibsen evaluated in France" ("Ibsen bedømt i Frankrig"), and a few years later, following the success Ibsen's plays started having on the German stage, playwright Ludwig Fulda (1886) and critic Georg Brandes (1885) wrote on his reception in Germany. Interestingly, most of these contributions were not concerned with Ibsen's reception in Scandinavia, which was, with regard to single performances, covered in a long tradition of theatre criticism. It was only in biographical accounts such as Henrik Jæger's *Henrik Ibsen* (1888) that critics occasionally reported on larger trends in the audiences' responses according to different places and theatrical conventions.

Having championed Ibsen's drama in England, providing translations, supervising rehearsals, and publishing criticism, William Archer was the first to approach and systematically analyze the (mainly negative) criticism Ibsen's plays had received there. Pieces like "Ibsen and English Criticism" (Archer 1889), "Ghosts and Gibberings" (Archer 1891), and "The Mausoleum of Ibsen" (Archer 1893) pinpointed and criticized the idiosyncrasies, prejudices, and lack of understanding of many critics and theatregoers (these and other texts by Archer were later collected in Michael Egan's sourcebook *Ibsen – The Critical Heritage*, Egan 1972). Understanding such a biased reception, which Archer reported on and exposed, was crucial for later scholarship that concentrated on the cultural significance of such responses as tokens of Ibsen's renewal of modern drama, of the dialectics between different literary and theatrical traditions, and of the history of audiences.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, other key European critics discussed the reception of Ibsen abroad. This is the case, for example, of Alfred Kerr (1896), Francisque Sarcey (1896) and, again, Brandes (1893, 1894, 1897). Most of the contributions from this period focus on productions in England, France, and Germany, where Ibsen's plays had been staged intensively during the first half of the 1890s. This is not only a quantitative question, however, as these countries acted as a core from

A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

which Ibsen then spread to Eastern Europe (in the case of Germany), Southern Europe (in the case of France), Ireland, the USA, and Australia (in the case of England) (D'Amico 2014). These essays contributed to the establishment of a British, French, and German Ibsen that in turn influenced and shaped receptions in other countries.

It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that scholars started producing book-length studies of Ibsen's reception abroad. Not surprisingly, the core countries mentioned above were the first to be thoroughly studied. Miriam Franc's (1919) doctoral dissertation *Ibsen in England*, has often been considered the first standard account of Ibsen's British reception, while William H. Eller's 1918 monograph *Ibsen in Germany 1870-1900* stands as its German equivalent. Contributions on France date from about a decade later, with A. Dikka Reque's (1930) monograph *Trois auteurs dramatiques scandinaves: Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg devant la critique française 1889-1901* (Three Scandinavian dramatic authors: Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg in French criticism 1889-1901) and Aurélien Ligné-Pöe's (1936) memoir, *Henrik Ibsen*, which mixes theatre history and personal recollection from the point of view of a theatre producer. In the interwar period, however, there were also isolated attempts at studying other countries and areas outside the core, as with Wilhelm Eisenthal's *Ibsen und das Wiener Theater* (1923; *Ibsen and the Viennese Theatre*), Halfdan Gregersen's (1936) *Ibsen and Spain: A Study in Comparative Drama* and Arthur C. Paulson's (1937) *The Norwegian-American Reaction to Ibsen and Bjørnson 1850-1900*. Norwegian critics, on their part, continued to refer sporadically to Ibsen's reception at home and abroad, though without a specific interest in how his fortune was shaped by different cultural traditions (Gran 1918; Bull 1937).

It was only after WWII that the field of Ibsen reception studies started gaining a truly international, if not global, status. Einar Haugen's (1956) and Nils Åke Nilsson's (1958) pioneering work on Ibsen in the USA and Russia respectively opened the floodgates for new studies on Japan (Sato 1962), Italy (Gabrieli 1964), Poland (Michalik 1971), Romania (Munteanu 1977) and later on

Hungary (Balogh 1984) and Canada (Salter 1988). David E.R. George's (1963) doctoral dissertation, defended in Cambridge and published in 1968 as *Henrik Ibsen in Deutschland: Rezeption und Revision* (Henrik Ibsen in Germany: Reception and Revision) is an important contribution for at least two reasons. First, it conceptualizes and reflects upon a "second wave" of Ibsen reception in Germany, and, as scholars later understood, in Europe at large. The early Ibsen reception (1870-1900), which gave Germany a key role alongside England and France in the canonization of Ibsen into world literature, was followed by a challenging period on the European stage, due to the renewal of dramatic forms that was taking place in contemporary theatre. George was one of the first to hint at this challenge among Ibsen scholars. The second reason is that George's study epitomizes how the field of Ibsen reception studies hardly seems to have been influenced by the theoretical impulses coming from Hans Robert Jauss' (1967) "aesthetics of reception" and the so-called "Constance school" he founded. Jauss' pioneering work *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory) came out four years after George's dissertation and one year before its publication as book; understandably, George does not reference it, but it is striking how the many valuable contributions to the study of Ibsen's reception in the years to come rest more upon an implicit, theatre historiographical method than upon a hermeneutics of how texts are received and interpreted. This is less a problem in this scholarship than a token of how the outputs of the Constance school, however important, never fully managed to attract the interests of scholars who conceived of reception studies as a predominantly cultural phenomenon, embedded in and explained by its historical context, and not as a study of text-internal features. The multimodal nature of Ibsen's texts, received as they are on both page and stage, further contributed to this movement away from reception theory.

If one looks at the main and still very valuable contributions of the 1980s, they appear therefore much more indebted to the

A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

rise of New Historicism and related currents than to the Constance School. This is the case, for instance, in Thomas Postlewait's (1986) seminal *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign*, which emphasized Archer's role as Ibsen's middleman, translator, and dedicated critic, thus offering a different perspective than a pure "stage history" of Ibsen's plays in Britain. But it took time before such impulses gained ground in Ibsen studies. A narrative of his fortune on the stages of a given country continued to be the main focus of many reception studies from the 1980s and the 1990s; new ground was broken by studies on Ibsen in China (Eide 1986; Tam 1986), the USA (Schanke 1988), Spain (Siguan 1988), and Argentina (Dubatti 1992). These studies also emphasized the theoretical and methodological limitations of an academic field that oscillated between theatre and literary history, occasionally tipping into translation studies (Alonge 1988, 1995; Jan 1995), but never really taking up more general theoretical challenges. The foundation of CIS in 1992 reinvigorated and contributed to this field of research, though without significantly changing its nature, at least in the first decade of its existence.

A few contributions from the late 1990s set the standard for a flourishing of reception studies in the following decade. These were Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's (1997) *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre, 1890–1900*, the Ibsen contributions in the anthology *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents* (Ewbank, Lausund, and Tysdahl 1999), and, perhaps most importantly, Fritz Paul's (1997) article "World Maps of Translation: Ibsen from Norway to China", which was the first to identify and reflect upon the "waves" of translations and stagings that went from Norway to the core countries in Europe and traveled East and West through a complex network of relay translations, guest performances, and the inspiration of local writers. These studies also had the merit of taking up Postlewait's mantle and opening up the field, shifting the focus from stage history in isolation to a more comprehensive account of how Ibsen's plays interacted with local cultures and were reshaped by them, including, for instance, the activity

of critics, middlemen and actors, or Ibsen-inspired local playwrights.

These contributions were developed further in a series of monographs and anthologies that came out during the first decade of the new millennium, with CIS as a main stakeholder. He Chengzhou's (2001) PhD dissertation, *Henrik Ibsen and Modern Chinese Drama* (defended at the University of Oslo and published as book in 2004) was for more than a decade the standard work on the reception of Ibsen in China, spurring two international conferences (2006 and 2009) and a renewed academic interest in the Chinese Ibsen. Another PhD dissertation from CIS, Farindokht Zahedi's (2006) *Henrik Ibsen and Iranian Modern Drama: Reception and Influence*, broke new ground on the reception of Ibsen in Iran and paved the way for academic interest in Ibsen on the part of Iranian scholars that continues to thrive today. CIS, in addition, organized a number of conferences and related proceedings that focused on underexplored European countries or areas; two volumes of the in-house series *Acta Ibseniana* were devoted to Ibsen's reception in Russia (Brynhildsvoll 2005) and Poland and the Baltic countries (Brynhildsvoll, Sokól, and Kalnačs 2006) respectively. These studies were developed in parallel with a renewed interest in Ibsen's reception in Denmark (Wiingaard 2002) and Sweden (Ystad, Brynhildsvoll, and Lysell 2005), and were followed by substantial contributions on, for instance, Latvia (Burima 2007), the Czech Republic (Humpál 2008), Bulgaria (Ruskova 2008) and Ireland (Ruppo 2010), thus pointing at new directions in Ibsen reception studies in Europe. These impulses continue to bear fruit in more recent contributions on, for example, Poland (Mackała 2023).

The real global breakthrough for the field of Ibsen and reception studies was, however, spurred by the International Ibsen Conference in Oslo in 2006, which was organized by CIS and marked the centennial of Ibsen's death. This event, together with a number of ancillary conferences, festivals, and other events that took place across the globe, made an enormous contribution both to the spread of Ibsen's plays on a global scale and to the

A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

academic investigation of how Ibsen's drama has been received, interpreted, and reconceptualized in theatre cultures that are far removed from Ibsen's own. Such impulses were concretized by the collaborative research project *Ibsen between Cultures*, hosted by CIS between 2008 and 2013, which resulted in a number of PhD dissertations focusing on Bangladesh (Ahsanuzzaman 2012), India (Huq 2014), China (Xia 2013), as well as monographs and anthologies presenting case studies from the global South (Fischer-Lichte and Christel 2011, Helland and Holledge 2016).

The main focus of these studies was on performance analysis of intercultural theatre, and they are therefore presented in more detail in the article on performance in this volume. The important contribution of these texts to the field of reception studies was that they offered a global audience a new way of conceptualizing Ibsen's reception as entangled in a complex web of cultural and theatrical elements and contexts. Capitalizing on Paul's intuition from the late 1990s, these studies showed that Ibsen's global reception consisted of much more than a linear movement from Norway to a given target country, but was the product of a negotiation between already established foreign Ibsen traditions (such as the Anglo-American, the French, and the German) and new territories where Ibsen's dramas were reconceptualized and adapted according to local cultures. This intuition was also at the foundation of an important sourcebook on Ibsen in Great Britain, entitled *Henrik Ibsen/Henry Gibson*, which opened with the eloquent punchline "Ibsen er engelsk" (Ibsen is English) (Rem 2006, 17). The now widespread scholarly recognition of Ibsen as a phenomenon of world literature, lies at the core of the renewed interest in his European reception that marked most of the contributions on reception in the 2010s.

Such a trend may be traced back to my own PhD dissertation *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy* (D'Amico 2011, published as a book in 2013), which focused on the early agents and translators of Ibsen in Italy. This book, together with the ancillary article "Six Points Towards a Comparative Ibsen Reception History" (D'Amico 2014) mixed classical reception theory with sociology of

literature and translation studies, paving the way for a new focus on Ibsen's middlemen (translators, agents, critics) and the marketing of Ibsen as an author of world literature. This focus developed into a leading trend in the field, alongside the continuing interest in intercultural theatre (Helland 2015; Helland and Holledge 2016; Anku 2020). Iris Muñiz' (2018) PhD dissertation, *A Doll's House of their Own: Gregorio and María Martínez Sierra's Feminist Rewritings of Ibsen in Silver Age Spain*, for instance, also rereads the reception history of Ibsen in a given European context (in this case, Spain) not through the lens of theatre historiography focusing on great actors or interpreters, but with a focus on the work of middlemen often active in commercial circuits, whose translations – studied with advanced methods from translation studies – adapted, rewrote, and reconceptualized Ibsen's texts in a new context.

Such renewed interest in the European reception also led to substantial revaluations and corrections of given truths in Ibsen studies, as in Christian Janss' (2017) "When Nora Stayed: More Light on the German Ending". In this seminal article, Janss showed that Ibsen did not make the famous change in the ending of *A Doll's House*, in which Nora stays home, solely at the request of the German actress Hedvig Niemann-Raabe, but due to a complex marketing operation orchestrated by his German agent. More insight into the reception of already-studied countries also came from Thor Holt's (2020) and Cristina Gómez-Baggethun's (2020) respective PhD dissertations *Far from Home: Ibsen through the Camera Lens in the Third Reich* and *Spain in an Assembly: Fighting for a Future through Productions of Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People"*. These studies contributed to opening up the field of reception to intermedial studies, with a focus on film, radio, and television apart from theatre. In addition, they took up specifically political biases that were at work in the Ibsen reception in Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain, a line of research that had been pursued by Uwe Englert (2001), but not fully developed after.

The crowning jewel of this academic trend is arguably Narve Fulsås' and Tore Rem's (2018) monograph *Ibsen, Scandinavia, and*

A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

the Making of a World Drama, which draws upon an understanding of Ibsen's oeuvre as world literature by means of a marked focus on sociology of literature. In this monograph, strongly influenced by the work of, among others, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Gisèle Sapiro, and Martin Puchner, Fulsås and Rem reread the history of the European reception of Ibsen with an emphasis on England, France, and Germany, and set a new standard for understanding how Ibsen's drama was ingrained in a complex web of relationships related to aesthetics and politics, literary and geopolitical inequalities in the development of cultural capital, and an unrelenting tension between avant-garde and mainstream theatre and culture.

This study also epitomizes a renewed interest in the Norwegian environment in which Ibsen developed as a dramatist, in contrast to an earlier trend that saw Norway as a culturally impoverished country and emphasized instead the impulses that Ibsen had received during his stays in Italy and Germany. Rem and Fulsås, in addition to Jon Nygaard (2013) showed how Norway's cultural and economic infrastructure directly contributed to Ibsen's rise to stardom; this new scholarly trend has been corroborated by new studies on the Norwegian critical tradition on Ibsen (Hagen 2015, Hyldig 2019).

In the meantime, the development of tools and resources from Digital Humanities implemented at the Centre for Ibsen Studies, and especially the event-based relational performance database IbsenStage, opened the door to new ways of conceiving reception studies and new research questions involving larger amounts of data and information. IbsenStage makes it possible to visualize and explore metadata of over 25,000 historical and contemporary performances of Ibsen across the globe and has enabled scholars to study trends in Ibsen's reception history at a much larger scale than was possible previously. The co-authored book *A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (Holledge and Helland 2016), developed at CIS, was the first attempt to employ Moretti's map, graph, and tree visualizations to study the global trajectories of touring actresses playing Nora, the network of

Norwegian theatre personnel linked to the stage tradition of this play, and even the quantity and importance of the play's "plot events," comparing it with a number of global adaptations.

This book was the inspiration for a number of studies at the crossroads between reception studies, sociology of literature, and digital humanities, a trend that is still under development as this article is being written. A series of PhD dissertations at CIS epitomize this paradigm shift and paved the way for research outputs that are either in the making or are still to be initiated. Jens-Morten Hanssen's (2018) *Ibsen on the German stage 1876–1918: A Quantitative Approach* (published as a book the same year) drew heavily upon IbsenStage in order to identify clusters of activity related to Ibsen performers, agents, and touring companies; a similar framework informed Gianina Druță's (2020) and Svein Henrik Nyhus' (2020) respective PhD dissertations, *Ibsen at the Theatrical Crossroads of Europe: A Performance History of Henrik Ibsen's Plays on the Romanian Stages (1894–1947)* and *Henrik Ibsen in the American Theatre, 1879–1914*, which combined and reconceptualized classical historiographical concepts – for instance *histoire croisée* – with insights from digital humanities, unveiling new trends and patterns in the Romanian and American reception of Ibsen.

Apart from their methodological value and innovation, these contributions recontextualize the reception narratives in three countries that had been studied earlier. Given truths and established academic traditions were therefore challenged, corrected, and reevaluated. Such an operation was also at the core of two important articles by Liyang Xia (2018) and (2021), a current member of the CIS academic staff, "A Myth that Glorifies. Rethinking Ibsen's early Reception in China" and "The Silent Noras: Women of the first Chinese Performance of *A Doll's House*", which challenged and consistently rewrote the established account of the early Chinese reception of Ibsen, singling out for criticism ideological and cultural biases that have led to the given narrative.

To conclude, reception studies is a vital and ever-changing field of research, one that will continue to inform and shape the

A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

development of modern Ibsen studies. The current emphasis on digital humanities carried out at the CIS aims to provide new frameworks and perspectives for the study of well-known and still uncovered trends and patterns of reception. At the same time, the need for a historical awareness in Ibsen studies, that was advocated by Fulsås (2011) more than a decade ago and developed into a fruitful and long-lasting trend, emphasize how the insights scholars and critics came with more than a hundred year ago, are still awaiting a proper and thorough study. Future Ibsen reception studies will hopefully fill these gaps and provide new avenues of research.

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GIULIANO D'AMICO

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A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

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GIULIANO D'AMICO

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A Short History of Ibsen Reception Studies

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