

Adaptation

The first adaptation of *Et dukkehjem* was written by Henrik Ibsen. In a letter to the editor of *Nationaltidende* written in Munich (1880a, 24–25), he explains why he adapted his own work:

Immediately after *Nora* was published, I received from my translator and business manager for the North-German theatres, Mr. Wilhelm Lange in Berlin, a message that he had reason to fear that another translation or ‘adaptation’ of the play with a changed ending would be published, and that this would most likely be preferred by several North-German theatres.

To prevent such a possibility I sent him a proposal for a change to be used in case of [emergency] in which Nora does not manage to leave the house but is forced by Helmer over to the children’s bedroom door; here they exchange a couple of lines, Nora sinks down at the door and the curtain falls.

I have myself described this change to my translator as a ‘barbaric act of violence’ against the play. Thus it is entirely against my wishes to use it; but I entertain the hope that it won’t be employed by too many German theatres.¹

Ibsen never enjoyed full copyright protection. Artists have been free to cut, substitute, condense, reorder, retitle, and add new material to *Et dukkehjem* from the beginning of its production history.² As a consequence, we include every performance described by producing artists as a version of *Et dukkehjem* within IbsenStage, however far it strays from Ibsen’s text. In the first hundred years, changes to the text were handled by translators, actors, and directors, and only 59 artists in 1809 records of *Et dukkehjem* productions are credited for adaptation. In the 1978 records of productions since 1980, this number has risen to 328, signalling not

only a change in theatrical practice, but also the growing demand for adaptations of canonical dramas in the international arts market.³

Adaptation has been taken up as a genre in film studies (Leitch 2009) in particular, with adaptations of classic writers like Shakespeare being perhaps the most popular in execution and in analysis. Understood frequently as a literary analytical tool, adaptation is less well articulated in performance, perhaps because theatre is already adaptive. Linda Hutcheon (2006, 2013) and Julie Sanders (2006) are the best-known commentators in the field, and both of them argue that adaptation is about transformation and change. Like many other scholars, they bridge the divide between the natural sciences and the humanities by appropriating evolutionary theory to argue that art is an adaptive human function developed through natural selection (Hutcheon 2006, 31; Sanders 2006, 160). Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* provides an approach to analysing adaptation, while Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation* tackles the politics of form. Hutcheon uses the model of the palimpsest, insisting that 'an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing' (2006, 9). Sanders, on the other hand, explores adaptation 'as a form of collaboration across time and sometimes across culture or language' (2006, 47). They agree that adaptation changes the original, with Hutcheon suggesting that 'traveling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments' (2006, 177), while for Sanders, '[t]exts feed off each other and create other texts' (2006, 14).⁴

Hutcheon and Sanders make reference to Richard Dawkins's meme theory, the most prevalent application of Darwinian thought in the field of literary and dramatic adaptation, to suggest parallels between genetic and cultural reproduction (Dawkins [1976] 1989). Meme theory has achieved some traction in adaptation studies because it suggests that ideas or stories propagate themselves like selfish genes within the human imagination (Hutcheon 2006, 31; see also Sanders 2006). This theory has been used by Nina Witoszek to explain the global success of *Et dukkehjem*. In her study of the foundations of modern Nordic identity, she argues that a powerful meme lies at the heart of the play: 'the emancipatory ideal of modernity yielded a new meme authored by Henrik Ibsen: that of Nora, a disillusioned female leaving a bourgeois "doll house" in pursuit of self-realisation' (Witoszek 2011, 18). Yet if a selfish meme is a replicator 'in its own right', as is suggested by Susan Blackmore in her development of meme theory (1999, 24), where does this leave the agency and creative

energies of artists? To follow Witoszek and adopt meme theory as the cross-disciplinary theoretical model for our study of *Et dukkehjem* would result in analysing the similarities within *Et dukkehjem* adaptations as naturally occurring phenomena. As it is a physical impossibility to replicate a live performance, it makes little sense to work from a theory that makes replication the default position. By following the gestalt shift in evolutionary thinking proposed by McShea and Brandon (2010), we view sameness as the result of constraint and increasing diversity as unforced. To further support this premise we have taken inspiration from a compelling rereading of Darwin's theoretical writings on sexual as opposed to natural selection by the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2011). Darwin devoted many hundreds of pages in *The Descent of Man* to documenting the extraordinary complexity with which the energy associated with sexual selection is deployed, diversified, and made manifest in the activities of living beings (1871). He suggested possible connections between the aesthetic production of song in birds and music in humans. Following Darwin, Grosz argues that artists engaging in cultural production are drawing on the same reservoirs of excess energy that are used in the aesthetic activities of other living creatures, because '[s]exual selection unveils the operations of aesthetics, not as a mode of reception, but as a mode of enhancement' (Grosz 2011, 132). The possibility that there is a reservoir of natural energy fuelling aesthetic production adds further weight to our argument that it is not creative innovation but interpretative repetition that requires explanation.

Despite our hesitations regarding meme theory, we agree with Sanders's broader premise that '[a]daptation studies are, then, not about making polarized value judgments, but about analyzing process, ideology, and methodology' (2006, 20). Our analysis of *Et dukkehjem* adaptations in Chapter 4 shifts from visualisations of touring maps and networks of productions to visualisations that compare dramaturgical structures, the manipulation of character, and narrative substitutions. The patterns they produce lead to explorations of the social and aesthetic forces that have influenced the adaptation process. One of the strongest patterns we uncover concerns the representation of female characters; to explore this pattern further, Chapter 5 zooms in on a single moment within Ibsen's play-script to find repetitions in multiple adaptations of Nora's tarantella dance. We take images of this performance moment from seventy-nine productions and arrange them in a tree diagram according to choreographic repetitions in the dance or overall conceptual approaches to the

scene. The trunk and branches of this tree reflect different interpretative strategies; they are composed of images from different eras, geographical locations, political systems, and theatrical cultures. The analysis looks at each of these strategies to consider the ways in which distinct social, aesthetic, and ideological forces intersect to produce similar constraints over the representations of sexuality and gender.

NOTES

1. In his letter to Heinrich Laube (1880c, 25–27), Ibsen included his German ending:

NORA That we could make a real marriage out of our lives together.

Farewell. (*begins to leave.*)

HELMER Well then—go! (*seizes her arm.*) But first you shall see your children for the last time!

NORA Let me go! I *will* not see them! I *cannot*!

HELMER (*draws her towards the door, left*). You shall see them. (*Opens the door and says softly*) Look, there they sleep, so carefree and calm. Tomorrow, when they wake up and call for their mother, they will be—motherless.

NORA (*trembling*). Motherless...!

HELMER As you once were.

NORA Motherless! (*struggles with herself; lets her travelling bag fall, and says*) Oh, this is a sin against myself; but I cannot forsake them. (*half sinks down by the door*)

HELMER (*joyfully but softly*) Nora!

[*The curtain falls.*]

Both letters are translated by May-Brit Akerholt with amendments by Frode Helland.

2. The first international copyright agreement, the Berne Convention, was drawn up in 1886. Norway signed the agreement in 1896, but as Ibsen published the Dano-Norwegian texts of his plays in Copenhagen, he was not covered by the Convention until Denmark signed in 1903. Every country where his work was published and performed represented a new arena in which he had to establish his rights as a dramatist, maximise possible royalties, and ensure the quality of the translations of his plays. His strategies included citing bilateral trade agreements, publishing his own translations, signing an agreement with a major European theatre agency, working with

a publisher in London to secure British performance rights, joining the French Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques, authorising translations of his work, and controlling simultaneous publications of his work to maximise royalty protection in different nation states.

3. A further discussion of this phenomenon appears in the last part of Chapter 3, which deals with the international 'Ibsen industry'.
4. Sanders expands the effects of adaptation, arguing 'how frequently adaptations and appropriations are impacted upon by movements in, and readings produced by, the theoretical and intellectual arena as much as by their so-called sources' (2006, 13). Hutcheon's revised edition, meanwhile, expands the concept in a different direction, focusing on new ways in which adaptation is being addressed. In this second edition, she writes with Siobhan O'Flynn to address a broader scope of objects of analysis, specifically incorporating intermediality and the even faster and more diverse ways in which multimedia have an effect on the adaptive process (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013). Both critics seek a greater depth of response to texts and 'intertexts' (Sanders 2006, 160).