

## IBSEN IN CONTEXT

Henrik Ibsen, the ‘Father of Modern Drama’, came from a seemingly inauspicious background. What are the key contexts for understanding his appearance on the world stage? This collection provides thirty contributions from leading scholars in theatre studies, literary studies, book history, philosophy, music and history, offering a rich interdisciplinary understanding of Ibsen’s work, with chapters ranging across cultural and aesthetic contexts including feminism, scientific discovery, genre, publishing, music and the visual arts. The book ends by charting Ibsen’s ongoing globalization and gives valuable overviews of major trends within Ibsen studies. Accessibly written, while drawing on the most recent scholarship, *Ibsen in Context* provides unique access to Ibsen the man, his works and their afterlives across the world.

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# IBSEN IN CONTEXT

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## *Preface*

In 1880, the year after he had published and first seen performed his epochal play *A Doll's House*, Ibsen toyed with the idea of a very different kind of work.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to his Danish publisher, Frederik V. Hegel, he proposed that he write a short book that would supply the reader with information 'on the inner and outer conditions under which each of my works was created'. Ibsen, already established as a great poet and dramatist in Scandinavia, wanted, in short, to present himself in context.

That was not to be. His publisher conceded that such information could be of some use in certain instances, but was worried that his writer, by disclosing 'private matters', might make the audience 'conceited and create a new basis of negotiation over your future works, with which you might not be well served'.

Ibsen did not quite leave the thought behind, and at the end of 1881 mentioned the possibility of a journal article along the same lines. After the intervening controversy connected with *Ghosts*, Hegel had completely taken against the idea, however. He would, he now noted, wish that after Ibsen's death there would 'exist no papers in that line'. The reason was that the writer's most ordinary remarks might immediately become public property, the publisher warned:

Your works stand as a series of statues in a gallery and should, like real statues, keep the beholder at a certain distance. Were the statues to climb down from their pedestals and engage with the audience, they would only suffer, because the audience has always and will always be forward and, furthermore, rarely turn up with clean hands.

Hegel noted that 'Every one of your works, after all, speaks for itself and says, as clearly and penetratingly as is possible, what it has to say.'

Ibsen ended up paying heed to his publisher's advice. He had already for some time kept himself relatively aloof from politics and refrained from direct interventions in the public sphere. From this point onwards he did

even more to decontextualize himself and his works. His *oeuvre* came to be seen as self-sufficient. His works, and in particular his last ‘cycle’ of twelve plays, should be approached as an aesthetic whole, in the writer’s opinion, with their own, internally consistent logic. This was strengthened by the fact that Ibsen had ended his career by writing a series of self-reflexive plays, and it was confirmed through the early publications of his Collected Works in German, Dano-Norwegian and English. Ibsen’s own famous reticence, his unwillingness to pass comment, has since been followed up through many more or less ahistorical approaches and contributions in criticism and scholarship. In other words, Ibsen has to a large extent been seen out of context.

The powerful topos of exile helped strengthen a sense of the writer’s detachment. The master narrative of Ibsen’s biography, the story of a man misunderstood at home, who had to escape to the continent in order to experience modernity and thus become ‘The Father of Modern Drama’, is a powerful one, and is still alive and well. Ibsen became a myth while alive, and was turned into a model of the completely autonomous artist by modernists such as James Joyce and Rainer Maria Rilke. It is nevertheless necessary, we would argue, to question this narrative, to confront it with historical evidence, to reconsider our inherited truths. We think and hope that this book will be a contribution toward such rethinking.

We should certainly acknowledge Ibsen’s need for autonomy, and indeed emphasize the relative degree of autonomy that he achieved. This book rests, however, on the premise that even he could not escape his own contexts, and that literary autonomy is itself contingent on extra-literary preconditions, like the ability to live from one’s authorship, being protected by copyright, or being received with a certain reverence in appropriating cultures. We are convinced, furthermore, that Ibsen appears no less complex and interesting a writer if we help (re)situate him in some of the most relevant of these contexts. We approach both him and his plays as embedded, just as his continuing afterlives are embedded and therefore produce new readings, interpretations and performances all the time.

*Ibsen in Context* – as far as we can see, there is nothing quite like this book available to the Ibsen student and scholar, in English or indeed in other languages. *The Cambridge Companion to Henrik Ibsen*, edited by the eminent Ibsen scholar and translator James W. McFarlane, comes closest. The *Companion* was published in 1994, however, and, while it is a solid and lasting contribution to Ibsen studies, a great deal has since happened in Ibsen scholarship. This includes a number of major contributions, many of which will inform the various chapters of this book, but let it suffice to

mention the new critical edition of Ibsen in seventeen volumes, *Henrik Ibsens skrifter* (2005–10; [ibsen.uio.no](http://ibsen.uio.no)) and the large performance database Ibsenstage ([ibsenstage.hf.uio.no](http://ibsenstage.hf.uio.no)), a sign that Ibsen has moved into the digital age. Both must be seen as important groundwork for what follows.

In addition to a number of influential individual works of scholarship, as well as all manner of theoretical approaches that have influenced theatre and literary studies since 1994, be they feminist, postcolonial, world literary, queer, book historical, theatre historical, performance studies, reception and adaptation studies, or translation studies, both Ibsen and Ibsen studies have, perhaps most importantly, experienced a ‘global turn’. While Ibsen became an international, even global author already in his own lifetime, there is now a sense that some of the most interesting uses and analyses of him come from other parts of the world than Europe and North America, not least from Asia. The international Ibsen Festival at the National Theatre in Oslo has documented this in recent decades, as have the biannual international Ibsen conferences organized by the Centre for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo. Mapping Ibsen has thus become more difficult than ever. But one place to start is IbsenStage, with its, as we write this, some 24,000 registered ‘events’ in some 9,800 different venues worldwide.<sup>2</sup> And more productions, both new and old, are steadily being added. In existence is also a plethora of reception and performance analyses of individual productions and translations.

Ibsen began as a writer from the periphery and he was, as someone writing in a small language, dependent on others. As such he was up for grabs at the centres of culture, and he was used, translated and adapted for all kinds of purposes. Since then he has become a classic, and this status has clearly endowed his works with a new kind of potency, one which in significant ways speaks from the centre, giving new reasons for variation and adaptation. Being a classic also involves having guardians or gatekeepers, however. Some of the more serious versions of the negotiations surrounding a classic, between certain notions of a ‘real’, or, better, original and Norwegian Ibsen, and those of an Ibsen received and appropriated abroad, found in numerous versions in other languages, may also play themselves out in this book.

We ought to note that *Ibsen in Context* has a different structure from other books available on the topic. Instead of relatively few and long essays on a limited number of themes, the book presents as many as thirty shorter contributions on a wide range of topics selected by the editors and written by twenty-four different authors. We do of course hope that these pithy accounts of contexts we have identified as central to Ibsen’s life, works and



afterlives will come across as both informative and authoritative, although not at all as exhaustive and definitive.

In addition to this book's global perspectives, which we acknowledge could have been even more extensively covered, we would like to draw attention to the fact that Ibsen at home, and in most cultures today, has been a double phenomenon. When his works first reached an audience, it was as both book and performance, on page and on stage. For a long time Ibsen scholarship was dominated by purely literary approaches to his works, but in recent decades it has been corrected and enriched by impulses from theatre and performance studies. To this we would like to add the value of book history and the history of reading, approaches that acknowledge Ibsen's important historical existence as book.

*Ibsen in Context* is divided into five main parts, 'Life and Career', 'Culture and Society', 'Scandinavian Reception', 'Internationalization' and 'Afterlives'. The first part gives an account of Ibsen's Scandinavian origins, sketching his biography and important historical and political contexts, in addition to his early career in Norway, his move to a Danish publisher and the phenomenon of the creation of a modern middle-class tragedy. In the second part, 'Culture and Society', we consider Ibsen's engagements with philosophy, science, capitalism and feminism, while also outlining significant cultural and aesthetic contexts: genres, realism, the theatre, visual arts, and music. Part III examines Ibsen's early reception and gradual canonization in his home markets, in Scandinavia. What did the original Ibsen books look like? Who were his publishers and readers? And how was he received? Here we have also aimed at bringing out the striking phenomenon of Ibsen's contemporary celebrity status. In Part IV, 'Internationalization', we move on to Ibsen's early reception abroad. This involves considerations of the early German, British and French receptions, as well as of the early globalization of his works. Here we also establish important contexts like the parodic treatment to which he was exposed, and the issues of copyright and censorship. In the final part, 'Afterlives', we look at Ibsen's reception further afield from his contexts of origin, in the USA, Japan, China and India, as well as at how he has lived on in a number of other media than the original ones. 'Afterlives' also involves the way in which Ibsen's life has been represented in biographies, and how one might categorize the main approaches of Ibsen scholarship.

Ever since he started out as a dramatist, Ibsen has been put to use, and we do not believe that it has ever really been possible to consider his works as statues in an art gallery, even if this has not been for want of trying. Nor do we, as did Frederik V. Hegel, fear that those who are exposed to more

*Preface*

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knowledge about Ibsen's contexts will become 'conceited', though we share his conviction that such information will 'create a new basis of negotiation' over his works. All of those approaching Ibsen with a primary interest in his texts, perceived as aesthetic artefacts, on the page or in performance, will, we think, benefit from understanding the contexts presented in this book. We even believe that such encounters with Ibsen will be enriched. We also trust that *Ibsen in Context* can help readers understand more of where Ibsen came from, as well as of how he became world drama, the second most frequently produced playwright after Shakespeare, a truly global phenomenon.

We would like to thank the Centre for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo for generously hosting a workshop in May 2018. Our editor Kate Brett and her assistant Eilidh Burrett have provided excellent support and advice all along. Finally, we are proud to note that many of the most prominent Ibsen scholars of recent years have agreed to write new essays presenting their path-breaking research for this book, in addition to younger scholars who have just begun to make their mark in the field of Ibsen studies. Thanks to all of them, *Ibsen in Context* has become a truly collective effort.

**Notes**

1. The sources for this discussion can be found in Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 119–23.
2. See IbsenStage, [ibsen.hf.uio.no](http://ibsen.hf.uio.no), checked on 29 January 2020. An 'event' is defined as a production in a new place.

## *Notes on the text*

Quotations from Ibsen's contemporary plays are made from the *New Penguin Classics* edition, vols. 1–4 (London: Penguin, 2014–19), edited by Tore Rem. From this edition we have also adopted the title *Pillars of the Community* for the play usually called *Pillars of the Society*.

Ibsen's letters and prose texts, if translated, are usually quoted from existing sources, like *Letters and Speeches*, ed. E. Sprinchorn (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965). Otherwise, translations are by the authors and the reference will only give addressee and date (for example: 'Henrik Ibsen, Letter to G. Brandes, 29 August 1872') or title and year for prose texts (for example: 'Den nyere tids naturforskere', 1881). The latest editions of Ibsen's letters and prose texts are *Henrik Ibsen skrifter*, general ed. Vigdis Ystad, vols. 12–16 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2015–10), digital editions [www.ibsen.uio.no/brev.xhtml](http://www.ibsen.uio.no/brev.xhtml) and [www.ibsen.uio.no/sakprosa.xhtml](http://www.ibsen.uio.no/sakprosa.xhtml).

In the nineteenth century the name of the Norwegian capital was Christiania, gradually replaced by 'Kristiania' from the 1870s, before becoming Oslo in 1925. We use 'Kristiania' consistently for the capital while for institutional names we follow the institutions' own practices, like Christiania Theater, where the old spelling was preserved until the theatre was closed down and replaced by Nationaltheatret in 1899.

Ibsen's wife was christened Susanne (Thoresen), while Ibsen in his letters called her Susanna when referring to her and, from 1873, Suzannah when addressing her. Although the last form has prevailed in Ibsen scholarship, her son Sigurd insisted on Susanna. We follow this spelling since Susanna is the form adopted by the latest critical edition, *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*.

## Chronology

- 1828–43: Skien**  
 1828, 20 March Born
- 1843–50: Grimstad**  
 1850, 12 April *Catiline (Catilina)* published
- 1850–1: Kristiania (Oslo)**  
 1850, 26 September *The Burial Mound (Kjæmpehøien)* performed  
 (published January–February 1854)  
 1851, 1 and 8 June *Norma, or: The Love of a Politician (Norma eller en Politikers Kjærlighed)* published
- 1851–7: Bergen**  
 1853, 2 January *St John's Night (Sancthansnatten)* performed  
 (published 1909).  
 1855, 2 January *Lady Inger (Fru Inger til Østeraad)* performed  
 (published May–August 1857)  
 1856, 2 January *The Feast at Solhoug (Gildet paa Solhoug)*  
 performed (published 19 March 1856)  
 1857, 2 January *Olaf Liljekrans* performed (published 1902)
- 1857–64: Kristiania (Oslo)**  
 1858, 25 April *The Vikings at Helgeland (Hærmændene paa Helgeland)* published  
 1860, January The poem 'On the Heights' ('Paa Vidderne')  
 published  
 1862, 23 February The poem 'Terje Vigen' published  
 1862, 31 December *Love's Comedy (Kjærlighedens Komædie)*  
 published  
 1863, October *The Pretenders (Kongs-Emnerne)* published

**1864–8: Rome**

1866, 15 March

*Brand* published

1867, 14 November

*Peer Gynt* published**1868–75: Dresden**

1869, 31 September

*The League of Youth (De unges Forbund)*  
published

1871, 3 May

*Poems (Digte)* published

1873, 17 October

*Emperor and Galilean (Kejser og Galilæer)*  
published**1875–8 Munich**

1877, 11 October

*Pillars of the Community (Samfundets støtter)*  
published**1878–9: Rome and Amalfi****1879–80: Munich**

1879, 4 December

*A Doll's House (Et dukkehjem)* published**1880–5: Rome**

1881, 13 December

*Ghosts (Gengangere)* published

1882, 28 November

*An Enemy of the People (En folkefjende)*  
published

1884, 11 November

*The Wild Duck (Vildanden)* published**1885–91: Munich**

1886, 23 November

*Rosmersholm* published

1888, 28 November

*The Lady from the Sea (Fruen fra havet)*  
published

1890, 16 December

*Hedda Gabler* published**1891–1906: Kristiania (Oslo)**

1892, 12 December

*The Master Builder (Bygmester Solness)*  
published

1894, 11 December

*Little Eyolf (Lille Eyolf)* published

1896, 15 December

*John Gabriel Borkman* published

1899, 19 December

*When We Dead Awaken (Når vi døde vågner)*  
published

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1898–1900

Collected Works (*Samlede værker*) vols. 1–9  
published

1906, 23 May

Dies

For a detailed chronology, see Ståle Dingstad and Aina Nøding: ‘Tidstavle 1828–1906’, in Narve Fulsås ed.: *Biografisk leksikon til Ibsens brev – med tidstavle*. Acta Ibseniana X–2013 (Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2013), pp. 483–555.