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BECOMING LOVABLE – HOW WAS THE WORLD-FAMOUS IBSEN RECEIVED IN HUNGARY IN THE 19TH CENTURY?

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ABSTRACT. ***Becoming lovable – how was the world-famous Ibsen received in Hungary in the 19th century?*** [2]This study aims to show the controversies encountered in the early period of Henrik Ibsen's Hungarian reception (up till 1895). The Norwegian author and his dramas are deeply rooted in the local cultures, and, we can also gain insight into *glocal* literary modernities by examining local disputes about Ibsen. The global success of "The Doll's House" was divisive in the late 19th century, and the performance, in general, triggered ambivalent responses from the audiences: while some critics and viewers greeted it as a world-famous, modern work exploring contemporary social issues, others viewed it as an immoral drama that would have a harmful influence on society. The play triggered a major debate on the role of the women in Hungarian society and their emancipation.

Keywords*: Hungarian stereotypes, Ibsenism, ambivalence, marriage, divorce, Ibsen's visit, The North, reception.*

REZUMAT. ***Devenind iubit – cum a fost primit renumitul Ibsen în Ungaria în secolul al 19-lea?*** Acest studiu își propune să arate controversele întâmpinate în perioada inițială a recepției maghiare a lui Henrik Ibsen (până în 1895). Autorul norvegian și dramele lui sunt adânc înrădăcinate în culturile locale și de asemenea, putem obține o perspectivă asupra modernităților literare glocale, examinând dispute locale despre Ibsen. Succesul global a dramei „O casă de păpuși" a fost divizibil la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, iar performanța, în general, a declanșat reacții ambivalente din partea publicului: în timp ce unii critici și spectatori salutau ca o operă de renume mondială, modernă, explorând probleme sociale contemporane, alții au văzut-o ca pe o dramă imorală care poate avea o influență dăunătoare asupra societății. Piesa a declanșat o dezbatere majoră asupra rolului femeilor în societatea maghiară și emanciparea lor.

Cuvinte cheie*: stereotipuri maghiare, ibsenism, ambivalență, căsătorie, divorț, vizita lui Ibsen, Nordul, recepție.*

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General remarks

Henrik Ibsen is one of the most popular authors in the late 19th century. Nineteenth-century theatres often staged his dramas: "A Doll's House", "Hedda Gabler", "Ghosts", "The Wild Duck", etc. could often be seen in the major theatres of the world. But his presence and the reception of his dramas are not only global phenomena, but also deeply rooted in the local cultures. By examining local disputes about Ibsen, we can gain a much better understanding of *glocal* literary modernities. All these controversies are excellent opportunities to understand the glocal stereotypes and clichés regarding not only Ibsen's works, but also the cultural stereotypes his oeuvre was framed with.

My research will give insight into the multi-layered Hungarian reception of Henrik Ibsen from the early period up till 1895. These texts foregrounded and debated not only Ibsen's personality and works but also geopolitical stereotypes and images of the North and Norway. Consequently, I will focus on: (1) the first plays and their translations establishing the writer's name in Hungary; (2) the success of "A Doll's House" in Hungary; (3) the Hungarian stereotypes about the *North* recycled through the discourse upon Ibsen; (4) Henrik Ibsen's visit in Budapest interpreted as a turning point in the author's reception. The latter is also a remarkable juncture in the discourses regarding Ibsen because this play triggers a major debate on the women's role in society and their emancipation.

First steps – the Hungarian audience and Ibsen

Even before staging Ibsen, Hungarians already had encountered a strong German discourse on his personality and plays, and this determined the later translations of his texts.[3] The Hungarian pieces and news on Ibsen often mirrored a mixed German discourse on the opinion of foreign critics' on Ibsen, on the impressions of Hungarian writers living abroad, but also on innumerable scandals around the writer or his plays. Thus the Hungarian readers met Ibsen's works before the texts could be read, or the plays were staged in Hungarian.

The very first Ibsen play to be staged in Hungarian was "The Pillars of Society" in Arad in 1879. It had no success even though Ibsen's figure was already known and had received attention in the Hungarian press. The failure of the play contributed to the defocusing of the critical attention, and Ibsen still needed to be rediscovered again much later.[4] That is why the first meaningful and impressive theatrical experience of a work of Ibsen in Hungary was "A Doll's House" on 4th October 1889. The play was translated from German by

[3] About Hungarian Ibsen's dramas translations, bibliography, performances (Staud 1943; Rubinyi, 1919).
[4] On the play's reception at Arad (Enyedi 2014, 11–14).

Gyula Reviczky under the title "Nora" following the similar German title. This play divided and shocked the Hungarian audience and made Ibsen extremely interesting and challenging for the Hungarian general public and criticism.

In 1887 Jenő Péterfy, an important critic of the time, wrote a significant review about "Rosmersholm" and "The Wild Duck". He prescribed what kind of attitude the Hungarian readers and audience needed to have toward the plays and texts. According to him, Ibsen's dramas must be known by those who love European literature – implicitly by Hungarians, too. He argued that the dramas would always suffer from an ambivalent reception and Ibsen texts are too hard to read (Péterfy 1887, 427). Béla Lázár, a Hungarian literary critic, also had a strong impact on Ibsen's early Hungarian reception. He pointed out many times that Ibsen's work had to be introduced to the Hungarian public, and also suggested to the National Theatre of Budapest that Emília P. Márkus, one of the most popular actresses of the time, should play Nora, after he saw the play in Berlin and was not satisfied with the performance of the actresses who imbodied Nora.[5] Emília P. Márkus was one of the most iconic actresses in Budapest whose best performances included roles in which "she could have shaped the modern nervous life of a woman captivated by her whims and passions."(Cenner 1961, 34). Despite that Emília P. Márkus as Nora did not renew the established and used theatrical techniques which were based on French dramas, the play brought an innovation to contemporary drama at the level of ideas (Pukánszkyné Kádár 1940, 344).

The National Theatre accepted the advice, and "Nora" premiered on 4th October 1889. The press heavily debated whether this and similarly immoral dramas can be performed in the theatre – and this was a recurring issue for the National Theatre, too. Their main problem was that audiences would expect original, valuable plays from the Hungarian National Theatre, written exclusively by Hungarian authors (Margócsy 2005, 34). Should the audience not get them, the public-sponsored theatre program would be attacked by the press and by the public because of an alleged decline of Hungarian culture.

Encouraged by the success of "Nora", another play, namely "The Pillars of Society", was translated from Norwegian by Béla Lázár ("The National Theatre" 1890, 3) and premiered on 18th April 1890. Still, the press did not like it and compared the play to "Nora". Two other plays by Ibsen were received in a similarly negative manner: "Ghosts" in Kolozsvár/Cluj on 23rd April 1890 ("Ibsen in Paris" 1890, 1131), and "An Enemy of the People", premiered by the National Theatre

[5] „Returning to the theater, I would like to talk about the success of the poet who came into vogue here: about "Nora" of Ibsen. (…) but that "Nora" could expect even greater success here with Mrs. Emília Márkus, is certain. This "Nora" is a play with a special air, Ibsen's most interesting play with the most dramatic effects so far." (Lázár 1888, 2569)

on 25th September 1891 in Budapest. However, the criticism framed the plays of Ibsen as acceptable, arguing that all these plays should be legitimate also on the Hungarian stage since they are played all over the world ("Hedda Gabler" 1893, 900).

Throughout the debates surrounding the staging of these plays the term *Ibsenism* was introduced and used as a swearword or cultural illness, and the Hungarian press treated it like a contagious disease, giving a double interpretation of this phenomenon. In one interpretation, *Ibsenism* was characterized by a sense of strangeness, clichés about the *North*, linked to the dramas of Ibsen, which were said to be immersed with darkness and oddity. The second interpretation used *Ibsenism* as characterized by psychological and non-action-driven dramas, which seemed innovative not only for critics but also for the audience.[6] The concept of *Ibsenism* was strongly framed especially by dilemmas and tensions regarding the institution of marriage in Ibsen's plays. Both of the interpretations were debating Nora's decision to leave her husband and children after eight years of marriage, and whether a woman had the right to 'turn her back on her duties' in a 'selfish way' only because her marriage was not based on love ("Hedda Gabler" 1893, 899). Hungarian interpreters of the time suggested that instead of writing about people in general, Ibsen wrote about probable but rare cases that were lacking any moral sense.

The Hungarian success of "Nora" and the debate on the nature of marriage and divorce

The global success of "Nora" was divisive in the late 19th century. Even though more famous actresses chose to impersonate the main character, the performance, in general, triggered ambivalent responses from the audiences. While some critics and viewers greeted it as a world-famous, modern work exploring contemporary social issues, others viewed it as an immoral drama that would have a harmful influence on society. The Hungarian press of the 1880s also stigmatized the play and perceived it as an interesting but immoral drama (Szinnyei 1880, 641). The stigma and ambivalent labels were taken over from foreign media reports, and this controversial rating of the drama continued to be commonplace in the later Hungarian discourse. As a response, Hungarian Ibsen fans interpreted Ibsen's dramatic texts and their worldview as a universal experience, which had a revealing power in portraying current tensions. They emphasized that social issues and problems, such as the issue of

[6] About the „well made play" tradition: Booth 1995, 327; Baráthy 2005, 329; about the drama models mixture: Bécsy 1974, 273–284; about the analytical drama: Egri 1983, 13–83; Szeredás 1989, 279–296.

an unhappy marriage, were not bound to one culture. Ibsen's dramas were not well received by those who found inappropriate for literature to debate and represent social and religious issues, and by those who feared the power of literature and its impact on society, and by who thought that these dramas represent unacceptably human relationships and a false image of femininity.[7]

"Nora" was more than just a play; it broadened the discursive boundaries of thinking about women and gender roles and even shaped contemporary ideas and debates about literary representation. Critics opposing Ibsen's dramas attacked this as a 'Nora-mediated ideology.' They labeled the drama-mediated female type immoral, sick, ungrateful, perceiving it as alien, unrealistic, outrageous, and out-of-the-box (Timár 1889, 2068–2069). In 1894, a change took place in the Hungarian legal system, when the rules of civil marriage were laid down (Gáspár 2007, 77). This was so close to the first Hungarian premiere of "Nora" that the audience felt the play was alluding to this fierce debate about the institution of marriage and the possibility of divorce.

In 1892–93, Eleonora Duse was invited for some guest appearances in Budapest, and among other plays, she showed her talent in the role of Nora to the Hungarian audience. Her performances provided an opportunity to intensify and to add new nuances to the debate on female emancipation. Critics highlighted her hand and wrist movements, the naturalness and simplicity of her acting style, but her interpretation was followed by a comparison between her performance and the well-known acting style of P. Márkus. Duse was among the actresses who refused earlier to play "Nora" with the original ending (Rubinyi 1919, 59), when Nora leaves her family, but it seems that in Budapest, in 1892 she played "Nora" in the original way Ibsen had written it.[8] This change in her attitude also includes the actress' new conception of "Nora" that developed over time.

Before the premiere in 1889, "Nora" was explained as a drama that portrays a type of marriage unknown by Hungarians. It seems that the play and its interpretation by Duse foregrounded and empowered the fearful "female emancipation". Actually, it only served as an incentive of a series of emancipatory gestures that were already present in the Hungarian discourse on urbanization. It had also been the influence of the French dramas, which established new patterns in the traditional Hungarian society (Pukánszkyné Kádár 1940, 343).

There have been divergent views on the Italian actress' casting of Nora. These were not surprising since the clichés about Ibsen and the way his drama should be played have already been institutionalized. These disagreements

[7] About Hungarian naturalism: Borbély 2014.

[8] The "happy" ending can be found between pages 172–173 in the original Hungarian textbook of "Nora", under the sign N.Sz.N.117 in the National Széchényi Library's Theatre History Collection. This means that the National Theatre knew this ending as well, but the articles I know do not suggest that it was performed with the rewritten one.

reinterpreted the protagonist's actions: they had been discussed along with the latest patterns of female emancipation. It seems that by 1893 the Hungarian public finally came to accept Nora's deed that had been stigmatized and unacceptable before: to leave an unhappy marriage and her children. Hungarians mainly associated this new attitude with the world-famous acting style of Eleonora Duse, even though Hungarian actress, P. Márkus had vaguely alluded to this in her former performances.

Despite the fact that "Nora" was accepted on Hungarian stages, and the general view was that the main character can be understood, there were a few articles in Hungarian press which highlighted the fear that (Hungarian) women in the real life could behave in this "cruel way" under the influence of the play. This ambivalence in the interpretations show that Nora became a symbol, and staging the play years after years triggered a common opinion about women's role in the society. One critique argues ironically and belittling that "[t]he idea is beautiful and noble that a woman with whom the husband only had played with like a puppet but did not live in a spiritual community should show the husband that she can face the serious tasks of life and rise to the ideal height of morality through independent work and struggle" (Robin 1893, 8), but is impossible that a real, self-sacrificing woman/mother/wife could leave her husband and children. The contradiction in the review is in the end when the critic sums up he did not like Duse's performance because the actress could not show Nora's moral ascension.

The series of Duse's guest appearances in 1893 was concluded in Budapesti Hírlap by a striking debate between two well-known public figures of the age. The opinions of Bernát Alexander and Sarolta Geőcze, differed sharply in relation to "Nora", and thus also about the female emancipation aspirations of the time. Bernát showcased his fears about the emancipated woman from a "male" perspective, and even he maintained that he understands that a fictional character as Nora is able to take this decision (Bernát 1893, "Duse as Nora", 8; "The real Nora-question" 1–4). On the other hand, according to Sarolta Geőcze "you men, can judge in any way: for us, for women, Nora will always be understood. And no one knew the female soul better than Ibsen." (Geőcze 1893, 3).

It is striking that the guest appearences of Duse had a major impact on the reception of "The Doll's House" in Hungary. The spread and wider discussion of the discourses on early feminism of the 1890s moderated, changed, and clarified the preconceived notions about "Nora".

Ibsen, "the Viking king without crown"

Preconceived notions, clichés, imagological schemes of the Northern landscape have been incorporated into the reception of Northern writers in

Hungary, in this case Ibsen, influencing how Ibsen's dramas and person can be understood, interpreted and imagined. Thus, dramatic interpretations, critiques, press articles had raised prior expectations and ideas in the readers' minds that have not really stood in their way. In fact, readers of contemporary Hungarian press and literature were able to get to know Ibsen earlier, as a representative of "the cold and dark world of the North", whose personality carried not only the features of his dramas, but also the attributes, the associated values and interpretations of his homeland. It seemed natural to Hungarian critics that "in the land of Ibsenism, in the Scandinavian north" ("King Midas" 1890, 828), in the far country, everything should work differently from their home country. According to contemporary sources, Ibsen seems to have become a prototype of the North, to whom not only the aftertaste of his drama but also all the (supposed) features of mystical Scandinavia[9] have been attributed by metonymic contact to these interpretations. Identifying the North with Ibsen and the atmosphere of his plays, and not least blending the drama heroes and the real Norwegian people, led to Hungarian criticism not being able to deal with the real Norwegians, and their supposed eccentric behaviour.[10] The aspect of strangeness has arisen many times in the minds of Hungarian critics, who ceaselessly projected their geographical conceptions on the interpretation of dramatic texts and plays based on these, while they began to interpret the North through the Ibsen dramas and relations met in these works. These Northern stereotypes were taken as interpretive frames for Ibsen's "weird" characters and themes and they were considered completely unknown in Hungary.

The Edda's mythological world was also used in this reception to convey the strangeness of the Norwegian/Northern world. These mythological elements and characters known by Ibsen works were used for landscape descriptions and for portraying Norwegian women.[11] The sense of strangeness and the urge to

[9] „The mystical fog that flows through its fjords takes shape and is constantly changing, playing with colors and becoming different; then comes closer, then leaves, once tears, then the sun's rays pass through it, now dense and serious, again fine and breathable. And the sea, with its ripples and murmurs, its miraculous mystery and changing shape, which reminds us of the Infinite, the Accidence. The Norwegian writer also has this changing mood, his figures are embodied researchers, everyone wants to know Everything and Nothing. They long for fresh air and are held in handcuffs by the sea." ("The Consecration of the Bridge by Arany and its relatives" 1889, 1938)

[10] "Ibsen needs to know if his Scandinavian people are really such stupid Philistines as he portrays them, and whether the few clever people, really are so unscrupulous, useless, what they look like in his dramas. Of course, what we find impossible, incomprehensible, he can say: Yeah, that's the custom in Norway." ("Hedda Gabler. Henrik Ibsen's new play" 1890, 2)

[11] "Coldness would fire you because you foolishly believe there are warm passions behind this cold Walkyr armor… But you are disappointed. Even if you embrace these Walkyr-beautiful bodies, the citadel: the soul of the Hedda Gabler's remains incomprehensible: elusive." (Pekár "From the country of the midnight sun" 1895, 2)

idealize defined the basic critical texts in a twofold way; while classifying it as exotic and distant, it constantly referred to like the unfamiliar world of Ibsen dramas. Their oddity was mainly explained by stereotypes about the North and the nature of the North, so Ibsen and his dramas became fundamental works in the interpretation of a mystical Scandinavia.[12]

Ibsen's visit was a very important event, as the newly discovered Norwegian writer was able to get to know the Hungarian audience not only from his descriptions and portraits, but even in person during his trip to Budapest in 1891 between 19–24 April (Lázár 1891, 265). The news of Ibsen's coming spread like wildfire, and artistic and writing circles prepared to welcome him ("Ibsen in Budapest" 1891, 3).

Ibsen's welcoming was not unique because it triggered entirely new schemes or gestures from contemporary event organizers, but because the Norwegian author, who had been known in Hungary for almost two years, was treated like an old acquaintance, an exiled Hungarian, or a returned world-famous local actor. The Norwegian author became familiar to the Hungarians, creating a new Ibsen-image: an old, prestigious, kind writer who loves to be in Hungary. The writer was surrounded by an attitude, which foregrounded what the Hungarians thought of themselves, their nation and ethnicity in general: "[Ibsen] wandered to Budapest, at the call of his admirers, to see the strange nation that lives here, not speaking any language related to the European language, but speaking one language completely different in material as well as in form; which nation is nevertheless part of European civilization, is in the community of this European culture, worships the same gods of art, and walks the same paths of knowledge." ("Ibsen" 1891, 1). The warmly welcome secured the position of the Hungarian nation in the European cultural world and pointed out that despite its lingual and numerical differences, it was able to remain in it.[13] The contradiction in this discourse is that Ibsen was not well-liked by Hungarian critics for his mainly demoralizing dramas, and because he was constantly understand as a foreign and incomprehensible person.

The series of events related to the visit reinforced this impression. The Hungarian attitude towards Ibsen was strange even for the writer, because he

[12] „On this ibsenlike day, I am leaving Ibsen, with the last impression of the country's greatest genius, the realm of Nordkap. With its shreds of fog, the inexplicable, unsettling daughters of Ibsen's genius rippled in front of my eyes as I travelled: the Noras, the frighteningly masculine Hedda Gablers, the Petras, the West Rebekas, and Wangel Hildas. They accompany me, I feel on myself the look of their blue walkyr glances" (Pekár "At the Viking king without crown" 1895, 4)

[13] "And Ibsen can tell his native people about us that he was a guest of people compared to whom others are several in numbers, but they are not as receptive as they to what is beautiful and noble and not more grateful to whom who approaches them with his heart, not even the largest in number." ("Ibsen" 1891, 2)

was not used to being so loved and approached, because at that time he was not even celebrated in his own country in a similar way like in Hungary. The author was welcomed every night with banquets where the most important politicians and artists gave their speeches; saw the most famous Hungarian actresses in theatres (Emília P. Márkus performing Nora; Mari Jászai performing Elektra; Lujza Blaha performing in *The Red Purse*); visited the statue of Sándor Petőfi (one of the most well-known poet of 19th century in Hungary), and also met the press.

Ibsen's visit in Hungary was described by the Hungarian press as exemplary for the rest of the world, since no other nation had given "a similar celebration" to him before April 1891 ("In honor of Ibsen" 1891, 5) – and it was very important in contemporary public opinion as it proved just how warm and welcoming Hungarians were. The Hungarians treated Ibsen and the Western, foreign culture as one and identified them as justifying the acceptance and attitude of the Hungarian nation towards foreigners by fully satisfying the wishes of the Norwegian author during his stay in Budapest. During the visit, everyone celebrated the Norwegian author and stated that Ibsen must be loved by all Hungarians, as Ibsen also loves Hungarians.

The imprint of the visit was also felt in later literary and theatre criticism as the attacks on the author and his works diminished and almost disappeared.The fact that Ibsen came to Budapest and saw "Nora" meant also that Hungary was a part of the European cultural world, and that this was mainly linked to the presence of the playwright. The poem "To the Hungarians", which Ibsen wrote during the War of Independence of 1848–49, was used as a reference, a precursor to this connection ("Ibsen at Budapest" 1891, 277).

Becoming lovable. The early Ibsen in Hungary

Henrik Ibsen and his dramas were often mentioned in the Hungarian press in context and in company with Émile Zola, Ivan Turgenev or Gerhart Hauptmann. Ibsen's reception and canonization should not be interpreted as peculiar or unique, but must be seen in this context. Zola's Hungarian reception included almost the same oppositions, ambivalence, and cultural problems that arose in connection with Ibsen (Schreiber 1934, 13–30). Russian literature was also introduced to the Hungarian readers with the help of German and French languages, and only under the influence of Turgenev did the formation of a more realistic image of Russia begin (D. Zöldhelyi 1983, 53). Hauptmann was also only meaningfully dealt with by Hungarian critics in the next century (Rózsa 1938, 11–15) because of the bad plays (like Ibsen after the premiere in Arad).

However, Ibsen's visit to Budapest played a significant role in popularizing the author in Hungary. He had been introduced only two years ago in the

cultural sphere and he was celebrated by the capital's nobility like a good old friend – and this moment was decisive in the author's reception. Hungarian critics spoke moderately about Ibsen from the mid-1890s: they acknowledged that his dramas could be shown in theatres, and if they were condemned for some reason, they did so either because of the acting of the actors or on the basis of preliminary clichés (due to thematization of social issues, etc.). It is this reference to familiarity that defined the early phase of Hungarian Ibsen reception and distinguished the way Ibsen and his plays were interpreted in comparison with his contemporaries: literary nationalism tamed the writer, making him specifically glocal.

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