The Trouble with Ibsen's Names

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Henrik Ibsen appears to have chosen or even invented many of his characters' names in order to signal to his audiences something about the characters. Although the meanings contained in the names are usually transparent to Scandinavian audiences, most remain opaque to English-speakers, who now constitute Ibsen's largest audience. The problem of how to deal with personal names, especially whether or not they should be translated, literally or metaphorically, is more general than Ibsen or Norwegian and extends to all literature translated from one language into another. Aspects of this problem are explored and several possible solutions are proposed.

Henrik Ibsen, like many authors, often selects names for his characters that convey or reveal to the audience a kernel description of that character. With literature written in English, the meaning of characters' names is generally accessible to English-speaking audiences. On occasion, English-speakers can also grasp the meaning of names drawn from such widely-known languages as German, French or Latin. When the language of the play and the characters' names belong to a minor language like Norwegian, however, the meanings are frequently obscured or hidden unless a translator makes special efforts to overcome the language barrier.

Translating names has been curiously neglected, both as an act and as an area of scholarship. As Sirkku Aaltonen observes:

> Proper names have never received much attention in the study of translation and the topic has been dismissed with a few rules of thumb: check whether a given name has an established translation; if so, use that; if not, transcribe the name and put a translation of it in brackets (or vice versa). (1985, 11)

Strangely, the translators of Ibsen's plays have usually chosen to avoid even the helpful use of translations in brackets, an omission that seems

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especially odd in light of the potent and often transparent meanings in Norwegian of his characters' names.

Many translators consider names untranslatable or unsuitable for interpretation. Such may be the case especially among translators of works into English,[1] many of whom assume as a general rule not to translate any name or adopt any equivalent. (A significant and apparently growing minority choose to flout the rule, however). Hermans (1988) summarizes the prevailing opinions:

> The majority view holds that proper names possess a certain deictic quality in that they point directly to a single, concrete referent. In contrast to common nouns, they have no real "meaning" of themselves: their specific and sole function is identification. A minority view, on the other hand, states that "no sharp line can be drawn between proper and common nouns, the difference being one of degree rather than of kind." (11)[2]

The majority view has a long history, dating back at least as far as 1387, when Sir John Trevisa wrote that "some...names...of persons...must be set and stand for themselves as their own kind" (quoted in Hermans 1988, 11). Indeed, Bantas (1994) suggests that the practice of not translating names dates back to the earliest translations of the Bible, establishing a "tradition of mere reproduction, rather than active interpretation, of names in literary works" (80). Much closer to our own time, Arrowsmith (1961) has dismissed outright the translating of any proper names, saying "we do not require our Greeks to bear English names" (125). More recently, Dutch translator M. C. van den Toorn (1986) has questioned whether translating names is even a viable option: "in contrast to common nouns, it is not really possible to translate proper names from one language to another" (quoted in Hermans 1988, 11).

Some who write translation guidelines say that to translate names would change the setting of the work and mislead the audience into thinking that the characters were playing out the scene in the audience's own environs. Peter Newmark, for instance, sees value in translating the suggestive names of characters in older literature such as *Tom Jones*, but not in modern works, "since this would suggest that [the characters] change their nationality" (1981, 71). Certainly no one would wish inadvertantly to transport Ibsen's plays out of Norway. Nevertheless, not translating some exceptional names, or at least providing a note about

them, disregards the playwright's intent and can affect an audience's interpretation. The effect is unfortunate for English-speaking audiences, which are left ignorant of important information that the playwright intended to convey. Scandinavian audiences gain this information immediately and, in most cases, effortlessly. Even worse than ignorance is the English-speaking audience's probable misinterpretation of a name, of Dr. Rank's name, for example, in *A Doll's House*, which, as we shall see, can happen all too easily and with the most unfortunate consequences for interpreting the character.

Such consequences may be avoidable. The current minority view, urging translators to interpret names, appears to be gaining adherents. Bantas (1994), for one, says that although translators may attract criticism for interpreting proper names like Dicken's *Bounderby* or Shakespeare's *Touchstone*, "one cannot disregard the fact that these names were created or chosen deliberately" (81). Bantas argues that translators who feel bound to the non-interpreting tradition are more obliged to serve both "their customers *(readers* or *spectators*) [and] the original product (*the author's work*)" (80) (emphasis in original) than they are to serve an old literary principle. In a similar vein, Jakobson (1959) appears diametrically opposed to van den Toorn's assertion that names are impossible to translate. He claims that all "classification is conveyable in any existing language," and suggests using "loan-translations"[3] (234). Hermans, in turn, advocates translating "loaded" names, which he defines as "motivated," and which range from "faintly 'suggestive' to overtly 'expressive' names and nicknames" (1988, 13). Citing Derrida, he asserts that as soon as a name

> is caught up in the contextual play of language and acquires "un sens commun, une généralité conceptuelle," it becomes a candidate for translation. If this applies to proper names in general, it must apply with even greater force to proper names in literary texts, given the tendency of the literary text to activate the semantic potential of *all* its constituent elements, on all levels. (13)

Winter (1961) sounds a similar note:

> [F]or all literature which depends on form to become an artistic whole, means for transferring as much of the original form as possible must be found or else replaced by other formal features which fulfill a function equivalent to that of the original forms. (76)

Even Newmark allows translations of literary proper names, at least in a glossary, once one has "determined whether the name is real or invented" (1993, 15).

One of Ibsen's early plays, *Love's Comedy*, provides an especially clear example of what happens both when names are translated and when they are left alone. What is particularly interesting about the names in this play is that one name is nearly always translated while certain others are not. The pastor *Straamand* (or *Stråmann* in modern orthography) nearly always appears as 'Strawman' in English translations. Several reasons appear to influence the translators' break with the traditional guidelines. First, the name is so clearly a deliberate attempt on Ibsen's part to describe the character outright; the name is an apt description of the one-dimensional, moralistically vapid stick character. Ibsen then has the hero, Falk, punch argumentative holes in this "strawman." Second, the name appears to be one completely made up by the playwright. *Straamand* is certainly not a common name in Norway. The name is absent from any recent edition of the Greater Oslo telephone book, a fairly reliable guide to names that occur throughout the country. Third, because of the historical development of the two languages, this particular Norwegian name closely resembles its English counterpart, so closely in fact that every translator from William Archer on has been tempted to adopt the English cognate.[4] These apparent reasons make a great deal of sense. An English-speaking audience has a clear impression of the type of character Strawman represents as soon as it reads the *dramatis personae*. Moreover, it is doubtful that anyone viewing or reading the play would believe the setting has been moved to England or that Strawman is an English pastor tending a flock of Norwegians.

Amazingly, the two main characters of the play, whose names bear metaphorical images just as strong as Strawman's, almost invariably appear in their original Norwegian. The hero's name, *Falk*, means 'falcon'. Falk's love and female counterpart is *Svanhild*. *Svan* is 'swan' and *-hild* is a common Old Norse suffix appearing on a number of female names, including the modern *Gunnhild*. Clearly, Ibsen selected these names to show the soaring freedom of his falconlike hero and the similarly free grace of his swanlike heroine. A Scandinavian audience recognizes this bird imagery at a glance. Some members of an English-speaking audience might guess at the names' meanings, especially if

they are familiar with other Germanic languages. Chances are, though, most would not. Even those who might venture a guess could not be sure of the meanings unless they looked them up.

Against this trend, at least one translator feels that the names should be rendered into English. Einar Haugen, in one of a series of lectures on Ibsen (published as Haugen 1979) translates *Falk* as 'Falcon' and goes one step further, translating *Guldstad* as 'Goldstead' (31). Using cognates in this way, Haugen makes the meanings behind the names so much easier for an English-speaking audience to grasp that one must wonder why a translator would change *Straamand* to 'Strawman' but leave *Falk* intact. Would *Falcon* and *Swanhild* really violate the "Norwegianness" of the characters and setting? Or would the characters and the design of the play be better appreciated if the audience more readily understood the imagery in the names? With a cue from Haugen, we can examine the ways in which other names in Ibsen are neglected, overlooked, or skewed, within a general framework of names and the way they and the naming process have developed, especially in the West.

Ernst Pulgram, in *Theory of Names* (1954), notes that proper names are almost without exception taken from common nouns and therefore have definite meanings, at least in their original forms. In most non-Western languages and societies, the meanings behind the names are still relatively transparent. Only in the West have the meanings become obscured. This is partially a result of the spread of Christianity and the associated popularity of names from the Bible; names such as *Rebecca* and *David* undoubtedly had readily apparent meanings in their original Ancient Hebrew; however, when they were transported into European languages, their original meanings disappeared. In turn, with the mix and flow of European peoples and their cultures, names originating in one European language have gained currency in another and names that had clear meanings in their original language(s) have lost those meanings when taken into another language; Britain and America in particular have experienced an influx of names from other languages, most of which have lost their original meanings in the process.

Westerners seem to be aware of this process and to realize that, outside their own societies, one can usually expect to discover with relative ease the meaning behind a name. Pulgram (1954) writes:

> Often when one encounters a name in a foreign, especially an exotic, tongue, one likes to ask just what that name "means," taking for granted somehow that, more often than not, an answer is possible. Significantly enough, with names taken from idioms usually identified with Western civilization, the query as to the meaning of a name occurs less frequently. Speakers of Western languages, in view of the prevailing semantic intransparency of the names in their several vernaculars, have resigned themselves to the fact that a large number of personal names do not mean anything in terms of current vocabulary. But they have also learned to expect that Eastern and "primitive" names are often translatable into meaningful words or phrases. (8)

The parallels here with Norway and Norwegian are important. Because many parts of Norway, particularly the mountain valleys, were isolated for so long, Norway was considered a primitive country in many respects until the 20th Century, a fact frequently acknowledged by Norwegians themselves. As a young man, Ibsen was appalled when, in a government-funded trip he took in the 1850's, he travelled the breadth of the Norwegian interior and discovered the primitive life so many of his fellow Norwegians endured. Even their names seemed to follow this basic, transparent, existence. From my own experience I can appreciate Ibsen's reaction. Just glancing at the names of my own Norwegian acquaintances, I can easily see the meaning behind their first names. *Øyvind*, *Ørnulf*, *Bjørn*, and *Liv* mean 'Island-Wind', 'Eagle-Wolf', 'Bear' and 'Life', respectively. (The first and last names of the Swedish tennis player *Björn Borg* mean literally 'Bear Castle'). Likewise, surnames often have an equally transparent meaning. Norway's prime minister during most of the 1970's was *Nordli*, which means 'north slope'. Many Norwegian surnames did not come into existence until the 19th Century. Before then, people in the valleys simply had no use for them, adding instead the *-son* or *-datter* suffixes to fathers' names, a practice still common in Iceland. Though we cannot be sure, since his travel notes were so sketchy, Ibsen was probably aware of the naming process going on in the valleys he was travelling through and probably took notice of the sources that families used to name themselves.

In many cases, mountainfolk of the 19th Century did not name themselves but were named by another, usually a government official. Quite likely the Norwegian situation paralleled the one in Austria reported by Pulgram (1954), who gives a lengthy account of the task an

Austrian schoolmaster was assigned during the census of 1816. Like Norwegians, valley dwellers in Austria had no reason to have family names, and so did not. It fell upon the resident schoolmaster, who was not a native of those parts and so had a surname, to assign names to his fellow citizens. For the most part the schoolmaster assigned names according to the occupation of the head of the family. In some cases, though, he picked out some prominent attribute, preferably one the recipient could be proud of. Realizing the gravity and longevity of his work, he usually consulted his subjects first. The result is that to this day descendants of those mountain-dwellers bear the names with which the schoolmaster dubbed their forebears.

The schoolmaster's task is not unlike that of the author. Just as people in real life select names for what they say about the people bearing them, the writer of fiction frequently chooses characters' names in the same way. As Farhang Zabeeh (1968) says:

> Some writers, like some parents, choose names for their characters because of their laudatory meaning (*Ernest*), derogatory connotation (*Murdstone*, *Dickens*), symbolic significance (*Godot*), or even just a sound (*Lulu*). (67)

A clear example is Nathaniel Hawthorne's use of names in *The Scarlet Letter*:

> Hawthorne, by giving names such as "Dimmesdale" or "Pearl" to two of his characters, prepares his readers to expect certain behavior befitting such names. This is not a mere inference from the meaning of such names or from the properties of their bearers. In a passage in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, the heroine addressing Dimmesdale, pleads, "Do anything, save to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame." (Zabeeh 1968, 67)

Hawthorne is hardly alone among authors of the English-speaking world in his attention to names. A scan of Henry James' notebooks (Metthiessen and Murdock 1961) reveals to what extent a writer will concentrate on names. Every few pages the notebooks are filled with names gleaned from the newspapers, recorded to christen future characters. Some of James' more picturesque examples include *Birdseye*, *Lightbody*, *R(h)ymer*, *Squirt*, *Ransome*, *Touchstone*, *Midsummer*, *Bigwood*, *Crookenden*, *Foot*, *Jump*, *Stark*, *Fury*, and *Trist*. Nor is attention

to names a phenomenon of the 19th Century. Anyone familiar with Shakespeare's plays will remember with delight the significance of the names *Sir Toby Belch* and *Sir Andrew Aguecheek* in *Twelfth Night*. One could find similar examples in Chaucer and Dante and so on, probably far back into ancient oral traditions.

Ibsen's interest in names manifests itself through several of his characters. In *The Master Builder* the newly arrived Hilde asks Master Builder Solness the name of his clerk. Solness says, "Her name is Miss Fosli." Hilde responds, "Yech, that sounds so cold!"[5] An audience of English speakers hearing this exchange must wonder what makes a name like *Fosli* sound cold. Nothing in the name's pronunciation sounds inherently cold, at least to an English speaker. And the name itself does not appear to convey any meaning to associate it with cold. In Norwegian, however, the meaning is clear. Indeed, virtually all Norwegian surnames bear clear meanings. In this case, the first syllable of the name, *Fos*, comes from *foss*, Norwegian for 'waterfall'. *Li*, as we saw earlier in the prime minister's name, means 'slope'. Thus, *Fosli* means, literally 'waterfall-slope'. Waterfalls in Norway are always cold. They carry the water from glaciers and mountain streams. The slopes next to them are often cooled by the mist thrown up from the falls. Hilde, then, quite naturally associates the name *Fosli* with cold. Just as important, a Norwegian audience would, too. By her reaction we can see that Hilde immediately assumes Miss Fosli must be a cold person. Hilde has never before met Miss Fosli, although the audience has. In contrast to her name, Miss Fosli the character is definitely not a cold person, as the audience already knows. On first hearing her name or reading it in the *dramatis personae*, the audience may well have had the same reaction as Hilde. At this point, however, the members of the audience have judged Miss Fosli by her own actions and not solely by her name. Nevertheless, this passage indicates the attention Ibsen gave to names and their meanings and the reactions he could expect from his fellow Norwegians toward the names with which he christened his characters.

Another play, *Little Eyolf*, also contains a passage which sheds light on Ibsen's interest in and use of names. The lead character, Alfred, is as much a characterization of Ibsen himself as is any character in his plays. Alfred is a writer questioning his own success and mission in life and the negative impact they have had on his family. He mirrors the ruminations and doubts Ibsen expressed about his own life during the

years he was writing the play. It comes as no surprise, then, that Alfred comments on the significance of his and his half-sister Asta's names: "Our family members' names have always begun with vowels. Remember how often we used to talk about that?"[6] Alfred is reading significance into names much as Ibsen seems to be doing throughout his plays and as he expects his native audience to do, as well.

Earlier in the same play Alfred's son, Eyolf, makes a metaphorical connection with a name. He is discussing the nature of the strange old *Rottejomfruen* 'the Rat Maid', (which is usually translated as 'the Rat Wife'), the wrinkled woman from the mountains who lures the rats from infested homes, a kind of Norwegian Pied Piper:

> Eyolf: Tante, er ikke det underlig, du, at hun heter Rottejomfruen?
> Asta: Folk kaller henne bare så fordi hun reiser rundt land og strand og fordriver alle rottene.
> Allmers: Egentlig skal hun nok hete frøken Varg, tror jeg.
> Eyolf: Varg! Det betyr jo en ulv, det.
> Allmers: Vet du det også, du, Eyolf?
> Eyolf: Så kanskje det kan være sant allikevel at hun er varulv om natten.
>
> Island-Wolf: Aunt Asta, don't you think it's strange that she's called the Rat Maid?
> Asta: People call her that because she roams around the country and drives out all the rats.
> Allmers: Actually, I believe her real name is Miss Were.
> Island-Wolf: Were! That means wolf!
> Allmers: You know that too, eh, Island-Wolf?
> Island-Wolf: So maybe it's really true that she's a werewolf at night.

Here Eyolf ('Island-Wolf') immediately makes the sort of association of name with image that Ibsen hopes his audience will make, both in this play and in others. The name reveals a metaphorical image of the character. In this case the name reveals more than just the possibility that the Rat Maid may be a werewolf. The name *Varg* reveals a connection with Eyolf himself. I have taken the liberty, unlike the translators, to translate *Varg* as 'Were'. I do this only to show in English the connection between *Varg* and *varulv*. *Varulf* is a redundancy, the first syllable *var-* stemming from the full form, *varg*. As Eyolf's reaction indicates, *varg* is not the more common word for wolf; rather

ulv is. Significantly, Eyolf sees the connections and immediately attaches *varg* to *ulv* to form *varulv*. This process is not as easy to duplicate in English since *were* never appears alone as a noun in Modern English.[7] Nevertheless, there is an historical basis for translating *Varg* in this way. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that a werewolf, also *werwolf* or *warwolf*, is a person transformed into a wolf. Immediately following this conventional definition comes the remark, "also, an exceptionally large and ferocious wolf." Among the word's etymological roots the OED lists "Danish and Norwegian *varulv*, Old Norse *vargulf-r* (by association with *varg-r* wolf)." Ibsen expected his audience to follow Eyolf's train of thought, something a Norwegian audience can do easily enough but something with which an English-speaking audience needs a little assistance to accomplish completely. Translating *Frøken Varg* as 'Miss Were' provides this assistance.

In this case the name reveals more than just the possibility that the Rat Maid may be a werewolf. The name *Varg* reveals a connection with Eyolf himself. Eyolf, a lame boy with a crutch, dies when he follows the Rat Maid into the water, just as the rats are said to do. He drowns, leaving behind only his crutch, found floating on the water. Eyolf's earlier fascination with the Rat Maid and her real name *Varg* now seems all the more ironic. *Eyolf*, like so many Norwegian names, can be broken into its component parts to reveal its meaning. *Ey-* is an alternate form for 'island', the more common form being *øy*. Indeed, in Norway the name *Øyolf* is at least as common as the name *Eyolf*, if not more so. *Øy-* appears frequently in the first part of names, as we have seen in the name *Øyvind* and can also find in the name *Øystein* 'Island-Stone'. The second part, *-olf*, is an alternate form of *ulf*, the Old Norse version of *ulv*, 'wolf'. (The vowels *o* and *u* frequently shift back and forth in the Scandinavian dialects, as in the words *bro* and *bru*, 'bridge' and *Kong* and *Kung*, 'King'). Thus, the name *Eyolf* means literally 'Island-Wolf' (a translation I have taken the liberty to use in the dialogue cited above). The name seems especially apt when, at the end of the first act, Eyolf's crutch is found floating like an island in the water, the boy lured there by 'Miss Wolf' or 'Were', the metaphorical werewolf. Granted, this critical leap is one that even many Norwegians might not make immediately, unless they are metaphorically minded, like Eyolf or Ibsen. Made aware of the connections, though, most people probably would agree that the leap makes sense. An English-speaking audience,

however, requires much more direction if it is to understand at all. Should Eyolf's name appear in translation as 'Island-Wolf' and the Rat Maid's actually be listed as 'Miss Were'? An examination of other names in Ibsen may provide an answer.

The name *Eyolf* is one of the hardest for a translator to deal with. However, one set of names in Ibsen's works never needs translation. In *Peer Gynt* four characters pop up, each rather one-dimensional and representing America, France, Germany, and Sweden. Ibsen dubs the American *Master Cotton*, the Frenchman *Monsieur Ballon*, the German *Herr Eberkopf*, and the Swede *Herr Trumpeterstråle*. Apparently he wanted to convey the stereotypical images of these nations at this point in history. Interestingly, their names are never spoken. The audience can know their names only by reading the list of characters or their cues in the text.[8] Their nationalities are made clear by their dress and the gist of the dialogue. Americans would, of course, have an easier time understanding the implications behind naming a character *Master Cotton* than a Norwegian would. They might stumble over the French and German names, but they would certainly understand their caricatured nature. They might even guess that Swedish *Trumpeterstråle*, 'trumpet blast', has something to do with a presumed Swedish proclivity for trumpet-like boasting. At any rate, this ensemble of names from Ibsen's own works points out Scandinavians' native ease and English-speakers' foreign difficulty in interpreting the names of Ibsen's characters. Names in English present no more of a puzzle for English speakers than Norwegian names present for Norwegians. Scandinavian names can vary from being nearly identical to English names to being misleading or even incomprehensible.

The next set of names, drawn from several plays, indicates the progressive difficulty for English speakers in correctly understanding and interpreting the significance behind the names of Ibsen's characters. An audience of English speakers does not suffer by not having a translation of the name *Brand*. *Brand* is Norwegian for 'fire' and the character Brand is a fiery hero who consumes his life and his loved ones in his wrathful flames of single-minded mission and idealism. The English word *brand* is close enough to its Norwegian cognate that an audience needs no help in seeing the relationship of the name to the character. Yet, despite this connection, most commentators, if not translators, give a translation of the name. Why they give one for this

name and only rarely for, say, *Falk* or *Svanhild* defies explanation. The obvious names seem to warrant assistance for non-Norwegian speakers; the truly difficult names do not.

One should note that despite the similarity of some of these names to their English cognates, Ibsen was not especially concerned at the time he wrote *Peer Gynt* with how they would be received by foreign audiences. After he had gained fame, however, he became concerned. In his later plays, from *The Pillars of Society* on, Ibsen "took good care to give his characters names that could easily be pronounced by foreigners" (Meyer 1971, 418). The names often do become noticeably more Continental and simpler to pronounce after that point. Names like *Hjørdis* and *Ingebjørg* vanish; names like *Hedda* and *Nora* appear instead.

Ibsen's new concern for his audiences abroad did not, however, prevent him from choosing Norwegian names or even inventing names if they bore significance in Norwegian. We have already seen how names like *Fosli* and *Eyolf* play a role. Three other names stand out in the later plays: *Bygmester Solness* from *The Master Builder*, *Eilert Løvborg* from *Hedda Gabler*, and the already-alluded to *Dr. Rank* from *A Doll's House*. Even an English-speaking audience can perceive the significance of the name *Solness*, though it may have to exert a bit more effort than a Scandinavian audience would. *Sol* is Norwegian for 'sun'; *ness* (or *nes*) means 'promontory', 'bluff' or 'point' (of land). The character Solness is a builder designing a steeple on his new home. Much earlier he built steeples on churches to the glory of God. On one occasion he climbed to the top of a steeple, despite his vertigo. There, as he indicates, he talked with God. Climbing atop the steeple glorifying his own abilities, he is reaching upward toward the sun and offering a pointed rival to the glory of the sun itself, just as he is rivaling God in placing steeples on his homes. *Sol*, associated with the sun, is common in a number of English words *(solar, solstice,* etc.), so most members of an English-speaking audience would be able to recognize the significance of the first part of the name. Audiences may not recognize *ness* as readily, but if they make the connection of *sol* with 'sun', *ness* may not be so important; the name's significance for the character is clear without it.

Eilert's surname is a bit more difficult. An English-speaking audience can easily understand Eilert's role in *Hedda Gabler* without

comprehending the meaning behind his family name. However, a Scandinavian audience will immediately see how the name *Løvborg* enhances the Dionysian image Hedda confers on her fancied lover. Hedda's oft-quoted description of Løvborg "med vinløv i håret" 'with vine leaves in his hair' resonates in the *Løvborg* name. *Løv* is the Norwegian word for 'leaf'. *Borg* can mean 'castle' but also 'stronghold'. In selecting the name *Løvborg*, Ibsen immediately shows his audience that Eilert is the 'leaf-stronghold' or, to put it in more idiomatic English, 'the stronghold of Olympian garlands'. Løvborg symbolizes the epitome of Dionysian splendor and power, much as the *borg* Akershus, a still-standing medieval fortress, represents Norwegian glory and might over the Oslo fjord. Witnessing the play's development, the audience can see easily enough that Hedda perceives Eilert this way. What it may not see is that Ibsen apparently intended for the audience itself to perceive Løvborg in this way, too, as soon as he is introduced by name. An English-speaking audience has to wait for the plot to proceed before it can understand Løvborg's image in Hedda's eyes; a Scandinavian audience does not.

An audience's ignorance of the meaning of a name, is, at best, unfortunate. Worse is an audience's misinterpretation of a name. Just how far awry an errant interpretation can go came home to me when I recalled, as a high school senior, reading *A Doll's House* for an English class and considering the heroine's friend, Dr. Rank. Discussing this play with the class, our teacher asked us what sort of an impression we had of a character named *Rank*. Naturally the class responded: "Not very good." The teacher supported this interpretation by citing Dr. Rank's disease, death, and morbid comments. Most of the class had no difficulty accepting this view, since, in most instances this teacher was exceptionally adept at interpreting literature, and there was no reason to doubt her on this point. Moreover, the name *Rank* conjured up in students' minds the only associations they could rightfully make: those connoting the English adjective "rank."

At that time I knew no Norwegian and the teacher's interpretation sounded plausible enough. Nevertheless, I was a bit suspicious. Rank just did not seem like a "rank" character. His actions toward Nora were magnanimous, if somewhat ill-placed, and he showed far more understanding toward the heroine than did her husband. In fact, none of the characters seemed innately "rank" in the sense that Shakespeare's Iago

is inherently evil. *Rank* simply did not seem appropriate as a name Ibsen would give this character. What made me even more suspicious was the fact that Ibsen was a Norwegian who had written the play in Norwegian. The teacher apparently neglected to keep this point in mind. Knowing the text we were reading was a translation, I wondered if *Rank* was indeed a Norwegian name, and, if it was, whether it meant anything. Later, on learning Norwegian, I discovered it certainly did. *Rank* is an adjective in Norwegian which is appropriately translated into English as 'proud' or 'upright'. Those descriptions are much more telling about the character Rank than the English word "rank." I have also checked the Oslo telephone book where I found that *Rank* is not a common Norwegian surname. Several editions showed no entries at all and the 1981 edition listed only one. Most likely, then, Ibsen chose such a rare name for what it suggested about Dr. Rank, the character.

Two words in the text applied to the doctor seem to echo from the name *Rank*. One is *ryggmarv*, literally 'back marrow' or 'spinal fluid'; the other is *ryggrad*, 'spinal column'. In a figurative sense both words can mean courage or fortitude, much like Norwegian *rank*. Together, these words act in unison to point out the doctor's fortitude in facing inevitable tragedy. An English speaker might say that *Rank* has 'backbone' in all its senses. Indeed, if Ibsen had written in English, he might have considered *Backbone* a suitable name for his doctor. But of course, he did not, and even the name he did give his character is lost on the English speaker or, even worse, misinterpreted to mean nearly its direct opposite. Without a translation or explanatory note, the audience unfamiliar with Norwegian is at a loss. The problem is especially acute when one realizes that, because of sheer numbers, Ibsen is far more widely read in English translation than in the Norwegian original. As a result, vast numbers of his modern audience remain ignorant of or misinterpret the significance behind Ibsen's use of names.

Three solutions to the problems of translating names (or not) present themselves, each appropriate according to the use and difficulty of the name. Each requires the judgment of the translators but also a bit more flexibility than translators have previously demonstrated.[9] First, as Ibsen's translators have already shown, contrived, artificial names like *Straamand* can tolerate direct translation and benefit the audience as a result. Other names, like *Falk* and *Svanhild*, are not artificial (real Norwegians bear these names), but are obviously chosen by the

playwright for the images they suggest to the audience. In these cases a bit of inventiveness on the part of translators may allow them to assist the audience to comprehend names in the way Ibsen originally intended. Forms like *Falcon* and *Swanhild* may to some degree violate the "Norwegianness" of the original names, but they certainly plumb with the intent Ibsen had in choosing them.

The second solution is for a translator to take more liberty with a name and provide an equivalent.[10] In *Dr. Rank's* case a name like *Dr. Goodman* or even *Dr. Pride* would convey to the audience much more accurately the meaning Ibsen intended his audience to perceive when he chose the name *Rank*. *Dr. Pride* may at first sound a bit artificial to the native English ear, but it certainly sounds no more artificial than *Dimmesdale* or *Sir Toby Belch*. Moreover, it sounds no more artificial than *Dr. Rank* does to the native Norwegian ear. Most important, it avoids the easy misinterpretation of *Rank*.[11]

The third possibility is to leave a name intact but provide a note in the text indicating how the name may be significant.[12] This is commonplace in any modern edition of Shakespeare's plays; *Sir Andrew Aguecheek*'s name, for example, always warrants a footnote. The same could be done easily enough in any future editions of Ibsen's plays. Such notes would alleviate the problem English speakers have in interpreting any of the names cited, but particularly names like *Løvborg* and *Eyolf*.[13]

Any of these solutions would improve the present situation. For over a century now the majority of Ibsen's readers and viewers, those whose native language is English, have been denied a part of the craft and genius of Ibsen's shaping of characters through their names. Translators' guidelines, however laudatory in purpose, have often been unduly inflexible. What flexibility has been shown has been infrequent and arbitrary. By being a little more willing to bend and adapt, translators can assist Ibsen's foreign audiences tremendously by exposing the meaning behind his characters' names.

Notes

1. Hermans (1988) estimates that in English and German translations of Ernest Claes' *De Witte*, a Dutch novel, the German translator usually transcribes or assimilates names, while the English translator does so only half as often, the rest of the time copying the names more or less exactly, sometimes adding a postscript to explain the meaning.

2. Hermans quotes Jesperson (1924, 70-71).

3. Loan translations, or "calques," are features of most languages. An example is Latin *omnipotens*, which was translated as a calque into Old English as *almihtig*, or what we write today as "allmighty." Not until the Renaissance did the English word "omnipotence" enter the language as a synonym alongside "allmighty." The Norwegian first name *Øyvind* could enter English in loan-translation form as 'Islandwind' or 'Islewind', or, if this phenomenon had occurred several centuries ago, as Eywind (parallel to the name *Ramsøy* 'Ramsey', in Scotland).

4. William Archer was the first to translate Ibsen's plays into English. With payment of royalties long since expired, modern drama instructors assigning texts are often attracted to the low price of Archer translations, and publishers make an especially strong profit off them, even with their low cover price. As a consequence, Archer translations are abundant in college bookstores, an unfortunate occurrence since their quality is so poor. Of Archer, Akerholt (1980) says, "In his strict obedience to the original he brought an artificiality to the English language as if he translated word for word from Norwegian. The text becomes rhetorical and lacks the easy-flowing colloquial tone and simple lucidity of Ibsen's prose" (116).

5. Throughout this article, translations of Ibsen's dialogues are my own, unless otherwise noted.

6. Ibsen may be following a old Germanic tradition here, in which names in a family alliterate.

7. A strong case has been made that the noun "were" may actually stem from the Old English word for man. However, a case has likewise been made for a root in Old Norse meaning "wolf." For the purpose of illustrating Eyolf's reaction and train of thought, I choose the latter.

8. Simpson (1993) remarks on the way in which significant names in theatrical productions differ from those in fiction. Characters' names have particular impact on directors and actors as they read the names in a script.

9. Akerholt (1980) is especially critical of Ibsen's English translators:

> "The quality of Ibsen translations need [*sic*] to be improved. They generally fail to convey a sense of the finer nuances, as the translators seem to lack the intimate knowledge of the language which is necessary to bring out the ambiguity of a sentence, the subtle use of imagery or the different meanings a word or an expression can have in certain circumstances. Direct mistranslations causing misrepresentations are unnecessary and should be possible to eliminate. In many cases *too little attention is paid to the interrelation between language, theme and imagery, resulting in diminished impact as well as loss of important points of interpretation.* Ibsen's way of using language, blending style, dialogue and action with devices like repetition, ambiguity and irony to make a united whole is weakened in English translations." (120) (Emphasis added).

10. Rolf Fjelde, a well-known Norwegian-American translator of Ibsen, writes:

> "It is the translator's job to convey, to the best of his ability, the text, the

whole text and nothing but the text. Occasionally he is forced to make small changes that give him an inward wrench, but this is merely facing the fact that it is sometimes preferable to reach for, hopefully, an inspired equivalent drawn from the background of his own culture than to render an expression or allusion verbatim out of misguided scholarship" (Ibsen 1965, xxxiv).

11. During its 1987 season, the Canadian Stratford Festival produced Ingmar Bergman's updated version of *A Doll's House*, titled *Nora*. The play retains the five main characters and the names Ibsen gave them, including *Rank*. In performance, the cast took care to pronounce the doctor's name with [a] rather than [æ]. In so doing, the cast effectively prevented the audience from misinterpreting the name and character as "rank" in its English sense. However, this practice still neglected to inform the audience of the meaning of *rank* in its Norwegian sense, something a Scandinavian audience is privy to naturally.

12. Hollander (1954) suggests partial translations of some names, particularly place names of significance. *Myvætn*, for instance, might be translated as 'Myvætn Lake',creating a redundancy, or 'My Lake' (fraught with its own problems of misinterpretation), rather than the full 'Gnat Lake'.

13. At a 1993 symposium on translation held at the University of Minnesota's Center for Nordic Studies and sponsored by the Royal Swedish Embassy, American poet Robert Bly said that adding footnotes makes a text look too academic. Panel members, Bly included, generally agreed that appendices are acceptable; however, many authors protest them because such notes often shift attention to themselves and away from the main text. Bly reported that in a conversation he had had with T.S. Eliot some years before, Eliot told him that the notes to *The Wasteland* were the result of a publisher's suggestion for filling up space. Eliot was not keen on the idea and said to Bly that the notes are now more famous than the poem is.

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