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Ibsen Transcreations in Iran and India

In 2006, the centennial anniversary of Henrik Ibsen's death has stimulated a spate of Ibsen performances throughout the world as well as scholarly attention to every imaginable aspect of his production. But this profusion of activity does not represent an Ibsen renaissance per se, since interest in Ibsen has never lapsed. Though controversial, even outrageous, in the eyes of his contemporaries, Ibsen is today universally regarded as a portal figure in the history of modern drama. Since the end of World War II, he has been, after Shakespeare, the most performed playwright in the world.

Ibsen's scripts retain their relevance for a variety of reasons. Though the setting can be identified as nineteenth-century Norway in the entire cycle of prose plays that begins with *Pillars of Society* and concludes with *When We Dead Awaken*, neither the subject matter nor the psychology of the characters is specific to that time and place. Ibsen's early realistic dramas were ground-breaking in part because they demonstrated that theater could be a powerful instrument of social change; present-day audiences recognize the broader issues addressed even when the specific circumstances no longer apply. In all the mature dramas, central characters seem as psychologically complex as those in the novels of Flaubert and

Henry James, but reveal themselves without the intervention of narrative exposition. As Ibsen biographer and translator Michael Meyer points out, in Ibsen's "double-density" dialogue, the overt semantic content may disguise or be at variance with underlying meaning or motivation. Actors in an Ibsen production – assuming Ibsen's intentions are followed reasonably closely – must speak the text while playing the subtext, a challenge for actors and audiences alike.¹

Since the 1960s, European directors in particular have become increasingly innovative in their approaches to Ibsen, adapting his scripts to suit their own particular agendas. One famous example is the 1971 West Berlin Schaubühne production of *Peer Gynt*, directed by Peter Stein, that called attention to Peer's lack of an integrated self by casting six different actors in the title role, while also offering a Marxist critique of capitalism and colonialism by highlighting rather than cutting much of Act IV.² In a more recent Schaubühne adaptation, Thomas Ostermeier's 2002 updating of *A Doll House*, Nora does not leave her husband; instead she shoots him, thus shifting the focus from self-realization to revenge.³ In a gender-bender production of *Hedda Gabler* directed by Peter Langdal at Copenhagen's Betty Nansen Theater in spring 2006, Hedda is bisexual, her partner Tesman is a career woman, Mrs. Elvsted is a man, Aunt Julie is an uncle, and Løvborg is a Swede.

Whether or not a radical reinterpretation is the goal, screen adaptations can avoid or overcome some of the limitation of staged

¹ Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography*, 1971, pp. 812-813. Meyer notes that "double-density" dialogue is one of Ibsen's primary contributions to the development of modern drama.

² For more information on this production and other stagings of *Peer Gynt*, see Appendix I of Fjelde's English translation, especially pp. 264-266.

³ Templeton analyzes the Ostermeier production and three other innovative directorial approaches to the play in 'Updating *A Doll House*', 2005, pp. 183-92.

theater. In a filmed version, the setting may be opened up beyond the confines of the customary Ibsen parlor, or changed entirely. Past events may be incorporated into the main narrative or revealed through flashback. Camera angle, cross-cutting, the judicious use of close-up, and other specifically cinematic techniques direct the gaze of the spectator and visually reinforce a particular interpretation. Perhaps because the medium itself offers such flexibility, a number of films based on Ibsen dramas may properly be regarded as transcreations rather than adaptations. In a 2004 essay entitled "Reading Ibsen's Signs," Inga-Stina Ewbank defines transcreation as "a translation where a work in one language and from one culture acquires new cultural/ historical/ political specificity in another,"⁴ in other words, a cultural mediation. Though the term itself, which is borrowed from post-colonial studies, is not media specific, in this article I focus particularly on two cinematic Ibsen transcreations, the 1993 Iranian film *Sara*, directed by Dariush Mehrju'i and based on *A Doll House*, and the Indian director Satyajit Ray's 1989 version of *An Enemy of the People*, *Ganashatru*.⁵

A Doll House (*Et dukkehjem*, 1879), the most frequently performed Ibsen drama both within and outside Scandinavia and a perennial audience favorite, has been filmed thirteen times, not counting television productions. Two English-language films appeared in the same year, 1973, one directed by Joseph Losey and designed as a vehicle for Jane Fonda, the other, directed by Patrick Garland, featuring the Nora of Claire Bloom. The Losey-Fonda version in particular takes certain liberties with Ibsen's text, open-

⁴ Ewbank, 'Reading Ibsen's Signs', 2004, p. 10. Ewbank cites Ray's *Ganashatru* as an example of transcreation, p. 11.

⁵ Since I have no first-hand familiarity with Iran or India and no knowledge of Persian (Farsi) or Bengali, my perspective on these films by definition is that of an outsider; my understanding of the verbal content is filtered by subtitles. No doubt there are culturally specific aspects of both films that I misinterpret or miss entirely.

ing with a picturesque outdoor winter scene where young Nora and her friend Kristine Linde, on ice skates, discuss their aspirations for the future, but neither these nor most other film adaptations make radical changes in the geographic setting or historical period. Except for an Argentine film from 1943, these remain, to my knowledge, Norway in the late nineteenth century.⁶

In *Sara*,⁷ the director and scriptwriter Mehrju'i brings a trans-creative approach to *A Doll House* by transposing the story to contemporary Tehran. Retaining the essential features of the plot as well as the explicitly feminist message of Ibsen's text, Mehrju'i adjusts salient details to conform to the particulars of Iranian society and the situation of Iranian women more than a century later.⁸

Approximately the first 10 minutes of the film provide the back story; set three years before the main action, these scenes have no direct correspondent in Ibsen's play. In the film's opening shot, a pregnant Sara (played by Niki Karimi) stands looking pensively out the window, clad in the traditional long black garb of Muslim women and wearing a head covering, but holding a cigarette in her hand. This image captures her liminal position in Iranian culture:

⁶ The filmography at <http://www.ibsen.net> is more complete than the Internet Movie Data Base, <http://www.imdb.com/>, but the latter also includes television productions. I have seen the English-language films based on *A Doll House*.

⁷ Ingmar Bergman's 1989 adaptation of *A Doll House* is called *Nora*, the title commonly used in Germany. Though Mehrju'i likewise assigns the protagonist's given name as the title, the Western sobriquet Nora would be inappropriate in an Iranian context. Sara, which means "genuine" or "pure" in Old Persian, is a relatively common name in Iran.

⁸ Mehrju'i does not know Norwegian, but according to Ibsensenteret in Oslo, by 1993 *A Doll House* had been translated into Persian (Farsi) at least three times; an additional four translations have been published since that date. The director may also have consulted one or more of the many English translations. See <http://www.nb.no/baser/ibsen/> for further information, though all extant translations have not yet been entered into the database.

she appears trapped within the home, shrouded in concealing garments, yet she smokes, in this context not only a sign of nervous tension but an emblem of modernity. The Westernized aspects of the city outside become apparent as Sara, leaving the house, rushes across heavily trafficked streets and then down the sterile and seemingly endless corridors of the hospital where her husband Hessam (Amin Tarokh) is a patient. Though Hessam is in considerable pain, he is preoccupied by work matters, and Sara overhears him loudly accuse a fellow bank employee, Goshtasb (Khosro Shakibai), of shady business dealings with foreigners. In private consultation with the doctor, Sara learns that Hessam suffers from a rare form of cancer that will require expensive treatment abroad. Aware of Hessam's predicament, Goshtasb takes Sara aside and offers to help.

These scenes establish that Hessam is indeed desperately ill – the play, in contrast, provides no independent corroboration of Nora's narrated version of past events – and suggest that Sara has no choice but to accept Goshtasb's assistance. Though the particulars of the financial arrangement are not immediately evident in the film, Sara's ability to act independently in such matters would be severely constrained; since she does not earn a salary, she could not take out a loan or even open a bank account on her own. With financial institutions closed to her, Sara, like Nora, must turn to a private source. Ibsen's text, however, provides no information on how Nora established contact with Krogstad, and by identifying the lender from the start, the film also eliminates one element of the play's dramatic tension.

When the film narrative resumes, Sara is having her eyes checked by an optometrist, who comments that her vision has weakened dramatically in the last six months. Sara then returns home, bringing presents to her small daughter. Though there is, understandably, no mention of Christmas, or for that matter of macaroons, a bone of contention for Ibsen's couple, the ensuing

scene follows the beginning of the play relatively closely, with Sara excitedly telling her husband she wants to splurge to celebrate his promotion and Hessam pointing out that the household cannot live on credit – what if something were to happen to him? As in the Ibsen text, the heroine protests that in the face of such a disaster, debt would be a trivial concern, and the husband eventually promises her a sum to spend on herself. Later that night, Sara surreptitiously steals downstairs. Wearing thick glasses, she sits for hours in a basement sewing room embroidering beads onto elaborate, elegant gowns, thus revealing how she has ruined her eyesight.

The central portion of the film, corresponding with the arrival of Mrs. Linde in Act I of *A Doll House* through Torvald Helmer's accusatory speech in Act III, is also modeled reasonably closely on the play. In the cinematic version, Sara unexpectedly meets her friend Sima (Yasmin Malek-Nasr) on the street one day. Sima, a widow, has just returned from five years in Germany, where she was a computer specialist working for an international bank. She is now looking for a job back home and hopes Hessam can help. As in *A Doll House*, the two women are contrasted with each other in terms of work and life experience, but in the film they are further differentiated visually by their degree of Westernization: whereas Sara wears a *chador*, Sima is clad in trousers and a tailored coat, though her head is also covered, as required by law in post-revolutionary Iran. In this scene and others, Sara and Sima, their differences notwithstanding, display a comfortable camaraderie, a friendship of equals, to a greater degree than do Nora and Mrs. Linde. In contrast to Nora's coyness about revealing her secret, Sara tells hers to Sima relatively quickly, disclosing that she alone has borrowed the money needed for Hessam's medical treatment and labored to repay it. She intends to tell her husband some day and anticipates that he will praise her initiative. There is no mention, as in the play, of withholding the information until her looks have faded, but when Sara shows Sima her sewing room, she

comments, like Nora, that working gives her satisfaction because it is almost like being a man.

When Sara accompanies Sima to the bank for a job interview, they encounter Goshtasb, with whom Sima was once romantically involved, just as Mrs. Linde and Krogstad were in the play. In private conversation with Sara, Goshtasb asks her to intervene to save his job, explaining that he was falsely accused of embezzlement. Now he intends to defend his position, if necessary by telling her husband everything. Sara is upset and angry but does not give in to his threat, retorting that instead she will urge Hessam to dismiss him immediately. At home, however, she does no such thing. Hessam, aware that she has spoken with Goshtasb, deduces his co-worker's purpose and asks Sara why she involves herself in such matters. He explains that because Goshtasb once forged a signature, no one trusts him now; the subject is closed. Later that night, Sara pricks her finger while sewing. The drop of blood that stains the white silk dress functions as a visual representation of her inner suffering and distress and may also allude to the sacrifices she has made to repay her debt.

One obvious difference between the play and the film is the absence of a figure corresponding to Dr. Rank, Nora's close friend and confidant, since a respectable married woman in Iran would never establish and pursue such a relationship, with or without her husband's blessing. Whereas Nora considers asking Dr. Rank for a loan in the silk stockings scene but then, after his declaration of love, realizes she cannot, Sara actually receives financial assistance, but from an entirely different source. Desperate to pay off the entire balance, Sara tries to sell a family heirloom, her great grandmother's bridal veil, when she delivers the dresses she has embroidered. Her employer points out that though the handiwork is lovely, the shawl is too damaged to be resold, but gives her a cash advance nevertheless, noting that Sara can be relied on to work off what she owes.

The symbolism connected with the veil is complex. An emblem of continuity and tradition specifically associated with matrilineal descent, it is simultaneously valued for its beauty but worthless in a contemporary monetary context, admired but ultimately rejected. In other ways, too, this scene offers a fascinating juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. The bazaar near the dress shop features expensive, presumably imported jewelry as well as local handicrafts, including Persian rugs that provide a colorful visual backdrop. The shop itself sells traditional formal wear, drawing on the time-honored female skills of dressmaking and embroidery. Sara's boss, however, is a woman, and the shop appears to be an entirely female-based economic venture. Most importantly, the woman employer's spontaneous gesture of solidarity and Sara's willingness to accept her help suggest the existence of an underground support network among women, centered on mutual respect and trust, that contrasts with and at least partially countermands the male-dominated official economy represented by the bank.

The money does not resolve Sara's dilemma, however, since Goshtasb rejects it, now confronting her directly about her own previous deception. This scene reveals that Sara, like Ibsen's Nora, has forged her deceased father's signature as guarantor for the loan. (It appears, however, that the signature was not a legal requirement, but rather a condition imposed by Goshtasb.) In a significant departure from the source text, Goshtasb also divulges that the money he lent her came from an account to which Hessam had access. If her action comes to light, Hessam will be suspected as well. Goshtasb angrily ends the conversation with the menacing declaration that if he goes down, he will take both of them with him.

Despite further pleading from Sara, Hessam's decision to dismiss Goshtasb remains firm, motivated solely by the desire to maintain high ethical standards at the bank rather than Torvald's petty concern about his subordinate's over-familiarity. In response, Goshtasb informs Sara the next day that although he will not make

the matter public, he has written to Hessam disclosing Sara's financial dealings with him and demanding to be reinstated and promoted. The threat of blackmail prompts Sara to go to Sima and reveal both the identity of her creditor and the truth about the forgery. The women together attempt to intercept the letter at the bank – a further sign of female solidarity – but Sima also appeals directly to Goshtasb. As in the equivalent scene between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, she explains that since she was responsible for the welfare of others, she could not afford to wait for him and adds sadly that she finds life empty without someone to work for. Also like Mrs. Linde, she now tells her former sweetheart that she has changed her mind and no longer wants him to request that the letter be returned.

The tarantella and the off-stage masquerade party of Ibsen's play are absent from the Iranian film, no doubt because such a public display on the part of a woman would be unthinkable in that culture. Instead Sara herself is the hostess at festivities celebrating Hessam's promotion, with tension mounting before his arrival because she is apprehensive about his response to Goshtasb's letter. Whereas Nora's main occupation within the household was to perform for Torvald and play with her children, the film draws attention to Sara's domestic accomplishments by having female guests comment admiringly that she has prepared all the food herself. When Hessam returns home in a cheerful mood, Sara is at first relieved but soon realizes he has not checked his mail after all.

The next day, as Sara cleans up after the party – a long, drawn-out scene that not only builds suspense but once again emphasizes her household responsibilities – she waits for word from Hessam at work. Finally, after nightfall, she phones his office. Sitting at his desk, Hessam shouts that he is never coming home, in response to which Sara goes to the bank to fetch him. The initial accusatory altercation between husband and wife, which corresponds quite closely to the play, takes place mostly out of doors, on dark and

empty streets that visually reinforce Sara's sense of isolation and emotional abandonment. Like Torvald, Hessam is primarily concerned about his own reputation and fails to see that Sara acted on his behalf. Livid that he finds himself at the mercy of an unscrupulous extortionist because of her foolishness, he declares Sara unfit to bring up their daughter. Though Sara initially seems subdued, she becomes increasingly infuriated by Hessam's response, in particular when, in a departure from the source text, he implies that Goshtasb may have lent her the money only in return for sexual favors.

Then, however, in a significant divergence from the sudden reversal at the end of Ibsen's Act III, the shell-shocked Hessam takes to his bed, refusing to get up in the morning. Once again, Sara waits, and once again, tension mounts. Suddenly Sima and Goshtasb appear. Goshtasb, having experienced a change of heart now that they are reunited, withdraws his threats in a second letter to Hessam, just as Krogstad does in the source text. Apologizing for his behavior, Goshtasb returns Sara's document and accepts final payment on the loan.

Alone again with her husband, Sara initiates the confrontation that is analogous to Nora's final showdown with Torvald. Like Nora, Sara had hoped for a miracle, believing that Hessam would step in and nobly assume blame for her actions, but unlike Ibsen's heroine, whose decision to leave her marriage is triggered by shock, Sara has had time to reflect on her husband's reaction and her own situation. Disillusioned both by his behavior the day before and by his assumption that their lives will return to normal now that the crisis is over, she realizes that the two of them have never had a serious conversation and that her husband, like her father before him, has expected her merely to be an obedient child. At Hessam's query, she announces that she does not love him any more; phoning for a taxi, she packs a bag, seizes her child, and departs. In this scene Hessam for the first time sees Sara wearing her glasses, a

revelation that loosely corresponds to Nora's change from the tarantella outfit into traveling clothes; though he reacts with surprise, he does not ask what has caused her nearsightedness. The film ends with the distraught Hessam standing in the street watching the cab drive away while Sara stares calmly into the distance through the car window.

With regard to the financial transactions, the film modifies the play by making Sara less naïve than Nora about the possible ramifications of her forgery and by showing Hessam's fear of repercussions for himself to be entirely plausible, a fact that in turn motivates his overwrought reaction to the disclosure of Sara's transgression. Overall, Hessam is less patronizing and more sympathetic than Torvald. Like Torvald, however, he is unable to empathize with his wife's emotional distress, and it is this failure above all that causes Sara to leave.

The fact that Sara takes her child with her seems at first to undercut the radical nature of Nora's solo departure in the play, her sudden realization that her first responsibility is to herself rather than to others. For a Western woman, abandoning one's children carries almost as great a stigma today as it did in Ibsen's time. In Iran and other Muslim countries, however, where men exercise complete legal control over their offspring, the expected outcome would be for Hessam to exert his rights and demand that the child remain with him. Sara's virtual kidnapping of her daughter is in fact at least as radical an act as Nora's, since it is a direct challenge to patriarchal authority. That Hessam does not protest demonstrates that he has, in fact, relinquished that traditional role. By reducing the number of children from three to one and making the single child female, the film suggests that Sara's flight into the world beyond her home is paradigmatic, perhaps providing a model for future generations.

The film alludes to female children in other unobtrusive contexts as well. At the bank, Sara asks a female employee why she left

her daughter in the country with her former in-laws when she came to work in the city, a conversation that is analogous to Nora's questioning of her nursemaid Anne-Marie. In another minor variation from the play, the siblings for whom Sima was responsible were sisters rather than brothers, as was the case with Mrs. Linde.

With regard to adult females, the film shows a society in transition. Domestic scenes and those at the bazaar contrast sharply with exterior city shots and the sterile interiors of the hospital and the bank, emblems of an impersonal modernity. Sara appears repeatedly in both contexts and is shown working both for pay (though within the confines of her home)⁹ and at unsalaried domestic tasks. The circumstances of a well-off married woman in Tehran in the 1990s evince some parallels to those of a middle-class Norwegian housewife in 1879, but in contemporary Iran, a university education and a qualified job are real possibilities, as Sima and the female bank employee illustrate. Networks among women help compensate for various legal and societal constraints, as exemplified by Sara's relationship with her female employer. The film's emphasis on female solidarity is another sign of optimism, in contrast to Nora's solitary transformation. Though the film does not directly address political matters, the Iranian audience would be aware that women also had the vote and served in Parliament. In this context, Sara's departure offers more hope that change is possible than does Nora's in the play.

Dariush Mehrju'i (b. 1939), whose first feature film premiered in 1969, is among the most prominent and prolific Iranian directors of his generation. His films often encompass social commentary and implicit criticism of the status quo. Having lived and studied

⁹ Sara's work for pay alludes ironically to Torvald's discussion of the merits of embroidery versus knitting in *A Doll House*. One wonders how, in actuality, the basement workshop could have remained a secret from Hessam for three years, but his unawareness and lack of curiosity suggest that he does not (con)descend to involve himself in the domestic sphere.

abroad – he holds a B.A. in philosophy and film making from UCLA – Mehrju'i had personally observed the discrepancy between the relatively egalitarian status of women in the United States and Western Europe and their comparatively restricted position in Muslim countries. By updating Ibsen to contemporary Tehran, Mehrju'i draws attention to societal and interpersonal dynamics that limit women's options. At the same time, like Ibsen, Mehrju'i focuses on one individual woman; his film makes no attempt to reflect all the complexities and apparent contradictions of Iranian society, where (among other factors) class distinctions and disparities between urban and rural environments make generalizations problematic. In keeping with this emphasis on the personal, *Sara* is the first in a trilogy of films, all with female names as their titles, in which Mehrju'i highlights the dilemma of particular Iranian women caught between tradition and modernity. In *Pari* (1995), loosely based on J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, the protagonist is a university student struggling with issues of identity and spirituality. *Leila* (1996), an original script, concerns a young woman whose loving, happy marriage is jeopardized both by overbearing in-laws and by internal psychological pressures after she learns she is barren.

In the late nineteenth century, Ibsen's *A Doll House* set in motion an intense debate, in literature as well as beyond it, about women's roles in Western society, a debate that brought tangible results. The social impact of Mehrju'i's *Sara* is difficult to determine, but the film, and collectively, the trilogy, reflects the prominence of the female subject and openly feminist subject matter in Iranian art cinema after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, an orientation that in itself challenges Western prejudices and prompts a more nuanced examination of cultural difference.¹⁰

¹⁰ Iranian cinema has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. See, for instance, Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*,

An Enemy of the People (*En folkefiende*, 1882), the fourth and final of Ibsen's so-called social problem plays, ranks third among all the works with regard to frequency of performance, after *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*. Compared to these and other works of Ibsen's maturity, *An Enemy of the People*, albeit fast-paced and engaging, is neither complex nor profound. Whereas many Ibsen dramas are structured around the progressive unveiling and reinterpretation of the past, the action of *An Enemy of the People* unfolds before our eyes. The explicit parallel between the poisoned water of the spa and the corrupt political cronyism of the town is readily apparent, and the satire of crass, self-serving, hypocritical politicians, journalists, and businessmen is anything but subtle. The play addresses a number of thought-provoking ethical and philosophical issues, but there is little actual character development. Particularly with regard to Dr. Stockmann, however, the characterization is more nuanced and multifaceted than first appears.

Most troubling to contemporary audiences is Dr. Stockmann's long Act IV harangue when, out-manuevered from delivering a public lecture about the contaminated water supply, he instead addresses the crowd on broader social issues. Disputing the myth of democratic infallibility, the doctor asserts that the majority is always wrong; since truth is constantly evolving, it is the minority, those who are in the vanguard, who by definition are right. The masses, he goes on, must be educated, shaped into a people, but a natural aristocracy will always rise to the top. In typical fashion, the doctor

2001, and Tapper, ed., *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, 2002. The latter collection contains several essays of interest, in particular Lahiji, 'Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979', pp. 215-226, but none discusses Mehrju'i's *Sara* in any detail. Explicitly feminist Iranian films that I myself have seen include Ebrahim Mokhtari's *Zinat* (1994), Samira Makmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998); Tahmineh Milani's *Two Women* (1999), and Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000). The last three were directed and scripted by women.

gets carried away by his own rhetoric, claiming that everyone who feeds on old truths--that is, lies--should be eliminated. At face value, such rash assertions establish him as a dangerous fanatic, but his flamboyant, excitable manner of expression makes it relatively easy to dismiss them as hyperbole rather than a serious political program, and consequently Dr. Stockmann remains, for the most part, a comic figure. The utterly despicable behavior of the opposition further guarantees that the audience will sympathize with him, at least until the curtain goes down.

It is nevertheless apparent that the doctor has over-generalized from the specific circumstances, the pollution threatening the spa, and become obsessed with the idea of himself as a solitary martyr to a cause. This perception is reinforced by the Act V curtain, when the doctor announces his final discovery, that the strongest man of all is the one who stands alone. Ironically, he makes this pronouncement flanked by two women, his wife Catherine, who takes care of all his practical needs, and his daughter Petra, his most fervent intellectual supporter all along.¹¹

The version of Ibsen's play most familiar to American audiences is the Arthur Miller adaptation from 1950. Apparently believing Dr. Stockmann's opinions to correspond exactly with Ibsen's own (or perhaps fearing that audiences would assume so), Miller declares in the published preface that his goal is to rescue Ibsen from the charge of fascism.¹² Accordingly most of his emendations are in Act IV, where the doctor's more provocative statements have been toned down or removed, and Act V, which concludes with a rousing speech to his family that transforms the individual isolationist stance of Ibsen's protagonist into a collective position: "But re-

¹¹ Cf. Templeton, *Ibsen's Women*, 1997, p. 166.

¹² Miller, Preface to *Arthur Miller's Adaptation of 'An Enemy of the People' by Henrik Ibsen*, 1951; see especially pp. 8-11. Miller's version of the play premiered on December 28, 1950.

member now, everybody. You are fighting for the truth, and that's why you're alone. And that makes you strong. We're the strongest people in the world... and the strong must learn to be lonely."¹³ While Miller's emphasis on solidarity and freedom of expression may be a commendable response to the anti-democratic threat of McCarthyism, his adaptation flattens the play by excising most of the humor and transforming the hot-headed, colorful, but somewhat muddled doctor into an earnest, irreproachable moralist.

An Enemy of the People has not been filmed as frequently as *A Doll House*, but productions of the Miller adaptation were broadcast on American television in 1968 and 1990; the more recent of these is available on video. Miller's script is also the basis for a feature film from 1978, directed by George Schaefer and starring Steve McQueen, virtually unrecognizable in Viking hair and beard and wire-rimmed glasses. McQueen's doctor wears a shell-shocked expression verging on catatonia, but the scriptwriter Alexander Jacobs had the good sense to restore one or two amusing Ibsen lines that Miller cut. A 2004 Norwegian film directed by Erik Skjoldbjærg takes a different approach by updating the story to the present and making Dr. Stockmann, played by Jørgen Langhelle, an investigative television reporter bearing some resemblance to Michael Moore.

Despite some similarities, I have no evidence that the noted Indian director Satyajit Ray referred either to Miller or to the Schaefer-McQueen film when scripting his version of the Ibsen drama.¹⁴ Though several secondary characters have been eliminated and the

¹³ Miller, *Arthur Miller's Adaptation*, 1951, pp. 124-125.

¹⁴ According to Bannerjee, *Satyajit Ray*, 1996, p. 115, the film had a long gestation. The director had read *An Enemy of the People* many years earlier, in 1946 or 1947, and began considering a cinematic adaptation some 10 or 15 years after that. Ray's specific textual source is not identified, but many English translations of the play were available and the database at Ibsensenteret includes a 1966 translation into Bengali, the language of the film.

setting has been changed to contemporary India, specifically the West Bengali town of Chandipur, the plot of the film follows the general outlines of Ibsen's play through the first three acts. In Ibsen's text, however, the doctor's impatient inquiries about the mail and hints about a coming revelation build suspense, whereas the Ray film opens with doctor Ashoke Gupta's (Soumitra Chatterjee) phone call to the local newspaper warning about the risk of infectious disease. There is no uncertainty whatsoever about his motives: while Dr. Stockmann may subconsciously be spoiling for a fight, Dr. Gupta simply wants to notify the public so an epidemic can be avoided.

As in the source text, the film establishes a contrast and conflict, initially latent, between the doctor and his brother. Like Mayor Peter Stockmann, the municipality chairman Nichit Gupta (Dhritiman Chatterjee) is associated with the social and economic power elite, here signaled by his elegantly tailored suits and imported *cigarillos*. Also like Ibsen's mayor, he is used to getting his own way and does not hesitate to manipulate others to uphold the status quo and remain in control. Dr. Gupta, on the other hand, bears little resemblance to Ibsen's firebrand; instead the character has been reconceived largely in the spirit of the Miller adaptation. Unlike Ibsen's naïve, ebullient Dr. Stockmann, who persuades himself that his brother will welcome the revelation that the spa water is polluted and wants to rush his report into print, urging the typesetter to add more exclamation points, Ray's doctor is low-key and sensible. He recognizes the possible negative repercussions of publicizing health risks prematurely and will provide full details to the press only if his brother refuses to respond to the problem. Sibling rivalry in the Ray film is entirely one-sided; the municipality chairman becomes resentful if his authority is bypassed or challenged, while the doctor repeatedly downplays his role as guardian of public health, stating that he is simply doing his duty. Both the film and the play include mention of the doctor's previously proposed plan for laying

the water pipes, which would have prevented the current infiltration of bacteria, but Dr. Gupta, unlike Dr. Stockmann, does not gloat when proven right. Because Ray inverts Ibsen by making Dr. Gupta the older brother, his forbearance and magnanimity and Nichit Gupta's apparent need to assert himself seem psychologically plausible.

The film's most significant divergence from the source text is specific to the Indian cultural context, since the contamination affects not a spa but the holy water of a Hindu temple where pilgrims come to worship. Consequently the political, ideological, and philosophical clash between the brothers incorporates a religious component entirely absent from Ibsen's drama. The municipality chairman, who not coincidentally serves as director of the temple, asserts as a devout Hindu that holy water by definition cannot be tainted, while the doctor insists that laboratory reports do not lie. Though the film narrative leaves open the possibility that the municipal chairman does not believe his own claim and merely uses religion to bolster his position of power, it sides unequivocally with the doctor's rational, scientific stance.

Initially the religion vs. science debate takes place behind closed doors, intensifying when the municipality chairman brings the temple's founder and sponsor, Bhargava (Rajaram Yagnik), to the doctor's office. The founder, for whom there is no analogue in Ibsen, demonstratively places a small bottle of temple water on the doctor's desk, asserting forcefully that it is free from germs because, in accordance with Hindu tradition, it has been purified by the tulsi leaf. The doctor can make whatever claims he wishes about the water supply elsewhere, but Bhargava tells him in no uncertain terms to leave the temple out of it.

Like Ibsen's Hovstad, Billing, and Aslaksen, the editor Haridas, staff writer Biresh, and publisher Adhir of the local progressive newspaper initially back the doctor but soon bow to pressure and withdraw support. Again as in the source text, the doctor arranges

a public meeting to present his case, only to be hindered from speaking freely. In place of Dr. Stockmann's inflammatory Act IV speech, however, in *Ganashatru* the brothers share the podium, each attempting to win over the public to his point of view. Dr. Gupta, previously seen in rumpled suits, now wears a traditional Indian garment, the *kurta*, as an indication that he wants to fit in with the crowd, to be seen as one of them. Nichit, in turn, has exchanged his expensive suit for a more casual sweater and trousers, presumably also to reduce the distance between himself and the audience.¹⁵

Some remnants of Ibsen's dialogue have been retained in this scene – the municipality chairman accuses the doctor of opposing religion and the temple, just as Mayor Stockmann claims his brother is out to ruin the spa – but the focus remains squarely on the issue of pollution and the relative merits of scientific inquiry vs. religious faith. Though Dr. Gupta admits that he has never worshipped at the temple and does not adhere to all the practices of Hinduism, he does not reject religious observance or belief. He stresses that as a scientist, he merely wants to present his evidence so people can make up their own minds. His judicious reasoning appeals to the younger, progressive segment of the crowd, already identified as friends of the doctor's culturally enlightened future son-in-law Ronen,¹⁶ but supporters of the temple shout the doctor down. The meeting ends in chaos when an explosion rocks the building and everyone is forced to flee.

After the public meeting, the doctor undergoes several reversals that follow the source text: the windows of his house are shattered by rocks, he is evicted by the landlord, and his daughter Ranu is fired from her teaching position. However, since the film includes

¹⁵ I am grateful to my colleague Rajeshwari Panderipande for an explanation of the implicit dress code of the film.

¹⁶ This character corresponds loosely to Ibsen's Captain Horster, but unlike the apolitical captain, Ronen is specifically associated with progressive movements. Ray makes explicit a romantic interest only implied in the play.

no character corresponding to Mårten Kiil – though the insistence of temple advocates that holy water must be pure does recall Kiil’s refusal to believe in the existence of microscopic organisms – the inheritance of Dr. Gupta’s wife is not at stake and no one insinuates that the doctor has misrepresented the condition of the water in order to gain economic control of the temple enterprise. The sheer depravity of Hovstad and Aslaksen, who presume Dr. Stockmann has acted in this manner but let him know they will switch sides once again if he cuts them in on the deal, is thus unmatched by the editor and publisher in *Ganashatru*, though earlier scenes establish Haridas as self-serving and suspect, not least because, like Hovstad in the source text, he expresses unwelcome romantic interest in the doctor’s daughter. There is, moreover, no final confrontation between Dr. Gupta and his brother, merely a brief phone call in which the doctor learns he will lose his job unless he recants.

Ray again alters Ibsen substantially in the film’s final scene. Whereas Miller shifts the focus from the individual to the collective and ends on an uplifting note, Ray provides an unequivocal (and in my opinion unconvincing) happy ending. At his moment of deepest despair, Dr. Gupta’s fortunes change abruptly for the better when a series of positive occurrences reverses the previous setbacks. Dismayed by the shameful way the doctor was treated at the public meeting, the reporter Biresh announces that he has severed ties with the local daily and now offers to publicize the case in the Calcutta papers. Ronen reveals that the doctor’s article about the polluted water supply will be printed as a pamphlet and distributed door to door; simultaneously an off-screen group of students materializes outside the house, chanting “Long live Dr. Gupta!” Instead of Dr. Stockmann’s declaration of strength in isolation, Dr. Gupta proudly and happily proclaims that he is not alone: though he may be an enemy of the people, he has many friends.

If Miller’s adaptation flattens the play, Ray’s *Ganashatru* virtually

obliterates Ibsen's spirit and intention. Not only does the film eliminate both the amusing social satire and the provocative ideological speculation of the source text, it substitutes a reductive didacticism that is utterly alien to the original. The film's transcreative qualities, most apparent in the central debate between religion and science, anchor the story in an Indian context, but the conflict seems enacted rather than embodied by the characters. In refuting superstition and espousing a rational, scientific outlook, *Ganashatru* demonstrates thematic parallels to earlier Ray films such as *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960) and *Kavurush-O-Mahapurush* (*The Coward and the Holy Man*, 1964),¹⁷ but since Dr. Gupta functions throughout as Ray's unmitigated mouthpiece, the film becomes tendentious and does not fully engage an audience not intrinsically caught up in the conflict.

That *Ganashatru* is Ray's first and only adaptation from non-Indian source material may account for some of the film's limitations, but not its structural and technical awkwardness. Ibsen's five-act configuration is clearly discernible, to the detriment of narrative continuity. With the exception of two very brief shots showing pilgrims washing their hands at the Hindu temple, all scenes in the film are interiors, just as they are in the Ibsen play. In general, Ray takes little advantage of the possibilities of the cinematic medium. Lengthy conversations between the doctor and one or more other characters are filmed very conventionally, usually by cross-cutting between speakers, less frequently in medium long shot placing all speakers within the same frame. Only occasionally does the positioning of the characters suggest or comment on their relationship to each other. The static "staging" of the film may have been motivated by Ray's precarious health (which necessitated a medical crew

¹⁷ Bannerjee, *Satyajit Ray*, 1996, p. 117. See Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, 2001, in particular pp. 3-15, for information on Ray's cultural roots and intellectual orientation.

on the set) rather than an intentional fidelity to Ibsen, but *Ganashatru* often has the appearance of a filmed stage performance rather than a fully conceptualized cinematic recreation.

A comparison between these two cinematic Ibsen transcreations, the Iranian *Sara* and the Indian *Ganashatru*, demonstrates that similar approaches can produce notably divergent results. The Iranian film succeeds in translating the central concerns of *A Doll House* to another cultural framework. Though familiarity with the source text enriches one's appreciation of the film, *Sara* is convincing on its own terms as a portrayal of one woman's growth toward autonomy and a society in transition. *Ganashatru*, I would argue, falls short not because it strays from the subject matter of *An Enemy of the People*, but because the religion vs. science debate is simultaneously too personalized, as a conflict between siblings, and overly abstract and hypothetical. Ray adapts Ibsen's plot to offer a critique of the status quo in contemporary India, but the full economic, political, and social implications of the conflict are unclear and Ibsen's biting satire is noticeably absent. By making Dr. Gupta a straightforward, well-meaning, but rather dull paragon of virtue, Ray (like Miller) removes the ambiguity that makes Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann a fascinating dramatic creation.¹⁸

Taken together, however, the two films also illustrate Ibsen's ongoing relevance across national borders and the barriers of language and culture. No doubt his dramas will inspire transcreative theater and film productions in the next hundred years and beyond, just as they have in the past.

¹⁸ Most critics regard *Ganashatru* as a falling-off from Ray's previous work, lacking his usual psychological acuity and attention to detail, and it receives scant consideration in the secondary literature.

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