

# Fighting for the Cause of Ibsen: William Archer and the translation of *The Wild Duck*

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## 1. *William Archer as an Ibsen translator*

WILLIAM Archer (1856-1924) is considered the person who did the most for the introduction and circulation of Henrik Ibsen's works in England. With his efforts as a theatre critic (a role which he played from the late 1870s to the early 1920s) as well as his other role as the leading translator of Ibsen's plays, Archer contributed to most of what pertained to Henrik Ibsen in England between the two centuries.

His campaign in favour of Ibsen was deeply related to a battle for a renewal of English drama, which he started fighting in the mid-1870s. Archer disregarded the farces, melodramas and sentimental comedies that dominated the Victorian theatre and supported a new English drama; he was convinced that Ibsen was the playwright who could bring a radical change to it. Such proposals took shape in one of his first important essays, *English Dramatists of To-Day*. As Thomas Postlewait puts it, Archer pointed out that the British audience

was being fed sedatives in the theatre. What they needed, instead, was the stimulant of great and serious drama ... It is imperative, he argued, for a "coming dramatist" to lead the way. Internationally, of course, Ibsen was the dramatist ... In order for this change to occur much sooner, however, the new dramatist would need a critic as advocate, a "coming critic" ... Can anything be more a self-portrait than this?<sup>1</sup>

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1 T. Postlewait, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen campaign* (London, 1986), 33-34.

Archer, then, saw himself as a 'prophet' of both Ibsen and the new drama. In his fifty years of commitment to the cause of Ibsen, Archer 'grabbed every opportunity to preach the new gospel',<sup>2</sup> and his activism took different forms. He gave lectures, published essays and books on Ibsen, and wrote reviews of the performances of his plays, as well as providing translations of Ibsen's texts and assistance to theatrical companies which were going to stage them.

Archer combined this urgency with a quite reserved character, which often made him deny his merits and leave them to other people involved in the campaign for Ibsen.<sup>3</sup> Postlewait suggests that partly because of his personality, Archer chose and preferred the role of translator, which enabled him not to expose himself too directly: he was 'everywhere present but nowhere fully visible'.<sup>4</sup> It is my view that William Archer's achievements in the Ibsen campaign sprung from his eclecticism, from his ability to use different strategies to pursue his goals. Far from denying his other roles, in this paper I will focus on him as a translator and look at one of his translations, that of *The Wild Duck* published in 1890.

Archer was a Scotsman, born in Perth in 1856. Family circumstances kept him in close relationship with Norway right from his early childhood, his grandfather having moved years before to the village of Larvik, on the south coast. Archer spent his youth partly in Perth and partly in Larvik, where he developed an expertise in Norwegian that made him almost bilingual. Archer met the works of Ibsen in the early seventies, when during a visit to Norway he discovered *Kærlighedens komedie*, but published his first Ibsen translation only in 1888, in the volume *Pillars of Society and other Plays* issued by publisher Walter Scott. Shortly afterwards he was asked to provide a translation for the first noteworthy Ibsen production (*A Doll's House* at the Novelty Theatre in London in 1889), which had tremendous success and triggered a violent debate pro and contra Ibsen, which lasted until at least the mid-1890s. Archer went on with his Ibsen campaign. Right after *A Doll's House* he started translating plays, together with his brother and his wife, for the collection *Ibsen's Prose Dramas*, which was issued by Walter Scott between 1890 and 1891. In addition, he started providing

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2 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

3 Postlewait makes this character derive from Archer's religious upbringing, see *ibid.*, pp. xviii, 21.

4 *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

manuscripts for several Ibsen productions, which he continued throughout the nineties. Among the premiers for which Archer provided texts, one should remember *Rosmersholm* and *Ghosts* (1891), *Hedda Gabler* (1892), *The Master Builder* and *An Enemy of the People* (1893), *The Wild Duck* (1894), *Little Eyolf* (1896) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1897). Such texts were also regularly sold in book form, and by the middle of the 1890s Ibsen had gained a considerable diffusion in England – a matter which I will touch upon later in my paper.

After the initial criticisms, the English theatre had gradually come to accept the novelty of Ibsen's plays, and the campaign moved towards a victorious conclusion. By the end of the century, Archer had been fully repaid for his efforts, and he had found several allies. Since the late 1880s, in fact, he had been a prominent figure in a group of intellectuals, called 'the Ibsenites' by their opponents, who supported the introduction and the diffusion of Ibsen in England. Such people, among whom were George Bernard Shaw, Eleanor Marx and her 'common law-husband' Edward Aveling, fought vehemently together with Archer against the detractors of the Norwegian playwright and of the renewal he was bringing to the English theatre. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, Archer went on writing and revising his translations for both the stage and the book market, as well as continuing to write essays on Ibsen. The intensity of the battle, however, was gradually lowered, as the fight had mainly been won. Archer's last major effort as a translator was *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, published by Heinemann between 1906 and 1908, for which he translated most of the plays, as well as writing revisions and introductions. He died in 1924.

## 2. *Frances E. and William Archer's translation of The Wild Duck (1890)*

*THE Wild Duck* was first translated into English by Archer's wife, Frances, revised by Archer himself, and published in 1890 in the collection *Ibsen's Prose Dramas*. One observes in it the same characteristics generally to be found in William Archer's translations, as he had a primary role in shaping the final draft, and this enables us to look at the text with the same perspective one uses for the plays translated by him. Moreover, it is a very representative example of Archer's translation strategies, and applies very well to the aim of this paper.

I approached the Archers' *Wild Duck* while I was working on a dissertation on the early reception and translations of Ibsen in England and Italy. My aim was to compare two different theatrical and cultural milieux which accepted Ibsen in about the same period, pointing out how they produced radically different translations. In doing so, I developed an approach which arose from translation and reception studies, textual criticism and the history of the book. In studying the role of Archer as a translator, I have been inspired by those essays on translation pointing out that 'translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, ... [but] a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process in which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator'.<sup>5</sup> I have been interested in finding out how the specific aims and purposes of the translators, as agents of cultural change,<sup>6</sup> influenced the shape of the text. Lastly, I have tried to understand which audience – which interpretive community, to quote Stanley Fish<sup>7</sup> – Archer was translating his texts for, and which strategies he adopted in relating to his readers. In a word, my aim is to point out how Archer translated, and why he did as he did, bearing in mind what D. F. McKenzie argues in his *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*:

Any history of the book which excluded study of the social, economic, and political motivations of publishing, the reasons why texts were written as they were [...] will never rise to a readable history.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.1 Faithfulness and literalness

IT was only in the second half of the twentieth century that a new generation of translators took up Ibsen's plays. They heavily criticised Archer's work, pointing out the literalness of his translations, which often turned out stiff solutions and improbable English expressions. Michael Meyer, who was to translate *The Wild Duck* in 1961, considered Archer's style 'painstakingly

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5 S. Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London and New York, 2002), 6.

6 See L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: a history of translation* (London and New York, 1995).

7 See S. Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class?* (London and Cambridge MA, 1980).

8 D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge, 1999), 13.

literal', showing 'a mistaken spirit of reverence'.<sup>9</sup> Rolf Fjelde, translator of *Henrik Ibsen: Four Major Plays* in 1965, added:

There are no verb contractions in the Dano-Norwegian of the original, a native characteristic of the language; brought over literally into English, this trait results in such constructions as "I had not better return with you to the craft, then, Nils, had I?" – a kind of artificial patois, a stage-Norwegian dialect distinctive enough to merit being dubbed "Old High Ibsenese".<sup>10</sup>

There is general agreement that Archer's translations were literal, sometimes to the extreme. It is my view, however, that it would be unfair to stop at such criticisms, labelling translations as overly faithful and failing to acknowledge the reasons why those texts turned so literal. Postlewait argues that

the battle for realism was being waged in these translations by means of the necessary tactic of using explicit literalness to confront Victorian fastidiousness. This was not a time to take liberties with Ibsen's language ... [In] the nineteenth-century theatre everyone felt quite at liberty to reword any writer's play ... Part of Archer's mission – and achievement – with the Ibsen translations was to serve the integrity of the text – as best as such integrity could be preserved ... He knew well what he was doing and why.<sup>11</sup>

What needs to be underlined here is how Archer broke with the current trend in translating theatre texts. Producing faithful and totally devoted texts was his answer to the overflow of adaptations of foreign dramas which were usually represented on the English stage. He was serving something radically new to an audience which was used to a total disregard of the foreign text: conveying a 'real' Ibsen was one of the main purposes and main efforts in Archer's campaign. It also needs to be mentioned that Archer was no short-sighted Ibsen fanatic, as he paid close attention to the problems

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9 M. Meyer, 'Ibsen Re-Translated', *The Times* (24 June 1959), 13.

10 R. Fjelde, foreword, *Ibsen: four major plays* (New York, 1970), p. xxxiv.

11 Postlewait, *op.cit.*, 15.

involved in transferring the Norwegian plays into a new, English context. He claimed in an introduction:

Henrik Ibsen's prose plays are in one sense very easy to translate, in another very difficult. His meaning is almost always as clear as daylight; the difficulty lies in reproducing the nervous conciseness, the vernacular simplicity, and, at the same time, something of the subtle rhythm of his phrases. How is one to escape still literalness on the one hand, lax paraphrase on the other? I cannot hope that I have always steered clear of the former danger; the latter I have done my best to avoid.<sup>12</sup>

Archer, in other words, was fully aware of the complexities of translating Ibsen into English, and *negotiated* with the original texts by making a clear choice – that of faithfulness to his source. Moreover, he never felt completely satisfied with his own translations, as he continuously kept on revising and modifying them for later issues or for staging.<sup>13</sup>

I will now consider a few examples from *The Wild Duck*, in order to explain the points made above.<sup>14</sup> Syntax and vocabulary are the fields in which the Archers sometimes produced faithful yet rather questionable translations. Let us consider these examples:

GREGERS (*med et hånsk halvsmil*). Har du endnu ikke kunnet fordøje den tort, at du regnet galt da du trode, du skulde få formue med hende? (p. 113)

GREGERS (*with a scornful half-smile*). Haven't you yet digested your resentment at your own miscalculation as to the fortune she would bring you? (Archer, p. 323)

In this excerpt the translators left the Norwegian construction untouched. One can argue that the sentence was quite heavy in the original text as well,

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12 W. Archer, 'Prefactory Introduction', *Ibsen's Prose Dramas II* (London, 1904), p. x.

13 See for example the excerpts from *John Gabriel Borkman* in Postlewait, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

14 All Norwegian excerpts are taken from H. Ibsen, *Vildanden* (Copenhagen, 1884), while the English ones come from H. Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* (F. E. Archer, trans.), in *Ibsen's Prose Dramas II* (London, 1890).

yet the Archers could have found lighter renderings. If one considers that Ibsen used a subordinate clause ('that you miscalculated ...'), a better English solution was available.

In the second act Old Ekdal is unveiling the wild duck to Gregers:

EKDAL. [...] Ser De ikke der en kurv med strå i?

GREGERS. Jo. Og jeg ser, der ligger en fugl i kurven. (p. 82)

EKDAL. [...] Don't you see a basket with straw in?

GREGERS. Yes. And I see there's a fowl in the basket. (Archer, p. 288)

*Fugl* in Norwegian means 'bird', with no other connotations. Here the Archers' choice, 'fowl', etymologically related to the Norwegian word, may sound somewhat stiff and *recherché*.

Such cases, however, are not widespread in the text and generally the Archers' language is vivid, their solutions faithful and successful. Let us consider the following example:

WERLE (*til Hjalmar, henne ved et bord*). Hvad er det, De står og studerer på, Ekdal? (p. 53)

WERLE (*to HIALMAR, who is standing beside a table*). What are you studying there, Ekdal? (Archer, p. 252)

What counted here was to solve one of the common yet puzzling problems in translating from Norwegian, i.e. the verbs *å stå* ('to stand') and *å sitte* ('to sit'), often coupled to another verb. While in English one would say 'he is reading' and one does not know whether the person is sitting or standing, in Norwegian one has to add the stative verb: *han sitter og leser* ('he is sitting and reading') or *han står og leser* ('he is standing and reading'). One notices how the Archers, with an extreme attention to small details, turned the Norwegian expression into an appropriate English equivalent without reference to Hjalmar's position, and inserted this piece of information in the stage direction, which does not report this indication in the original.

When one comes to key concepts in the play, it was imperative for the Archers to maintain the subtle nuances of Ibsen's language. They were especially careful with regard to central issues, as the following one:

WERLE. Går du! Ut af huset?

GREGERS. Ja. For nu øjner jeg endelig én gang en opgave at leve for. (p. 65)

WERLE. You're going! Out of the house?

GREGERS. Yes, for at last I see my mission in life. (Archer, p. 265)

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HJALMAR. [...] Å nej, det er livsopgaven, som står for mig nat og dag.

GREGERS. Hvilken livsopgave da?

[...]

GREGERS. Det er altså din livsopgave.

HJALMAR. Ja. Jeg vil redde den skibbrudne mand. [...] (p. 103)

HJALMAR. [...] Oh no, it's my life's mission that stands before me night and day.

GREGERS. What is your life's mission?

[...]

GREGERS. Then that's your life's mission?

HJALMAR. Yes. I want to save the shipwrecked man. (Archer, pp. 311-312)

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GREGERS. Vær bare rolig; jeg skal nok se at få dig op igen. For jeg har også fåt en livsopgave nu, ser du; jeg fik den igår. (p. 106)

GREGERS. Don't be afraid; I will try to help you up again. I too have a mission in life now; I found it yesterday. (Archer, p. 315)

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WERLE. Men hvad vil du da slå ind på?

GREGERS. Bare løse min livsopgave; ikke noget andet. (p. 114)

WERLE. But what are you going to do?

GREGERS. Only to fulfil my mission, nothing more. (Archer, p. 324)



*Livsopgaven* or *opgaven at leve for* ('mission in life') is a crucial concept in *Vildanden*. We see in the examples above how it is repeated in different parts of the play by the two main characters, Hjalmar and Gregers. Both of them have (or think they have) a mission in life, Hjalmar's being to save the honour of his father and Gregers's being to free Hjalmar from his burden. Meaning literally 'task', the Archers rendered *opgave* with 'mission', thus 'life's mission', and stuck to it throughout the play. It is a functional choice which, if not comparable to the conciseness of the original expression (*livsopgaven* has become a commonplace in Norwegian), is indeed in keeping with the style of the translation.

A similar choice is to be found with regard to another key issue, i.e. *livsløgnen*, 'the life-lie':

GREGERS. Og hvad kur bruger De så for Hjalmar?

RELLING. Min sædvanlige. Jeg sørger for at holde livsløgnen oppe i ham.

GREGERS. Livs-løgnen? Jeg hørte ikke rigtig - ?

RELLING. Jo, jeg sa' livsløgnen. For livsløgnen er det stimulerende princip, det, ser De. (p. 144)

GREGERS. And what remedy are you applying in Hjalmar's case?

RELLING. My usual one. I'm fostering the life-illusion in him.

GREGERS. Life-illusion? Is that what you said?

RELLING. Yes, I said illusion. For illusion, you know, is the stimulating principle. (Archer, pp. 360-361)

Here the Archers did not choose strict literalness, preferring the word 'illusion' to 'lie'. Although 'illusion' tends to expand and explain the concept to the reader, I would not consider it a bad rendering, rather an attempt to render the awkward Norwegian compound into acceptable English. In the last line, in fact, the translators dropped the compound 'life-illusion' and translated *livsløgnen* simply as 'illusion'. Yet, well aware of the possible loss of nuances, William Archer did not renounce his reverential attitude to Ibsen's text and inserted a footnote in which he explained his choice and reported the literal translation: "'Livsløgnen", literally "the life-lie". The context sufficiently explains the difference between Relling's "life-illusion" and Schopenhauer's'.

The translators showed the same accuracy in reproducing the symbolism of the play. Let us consider the following examples:

GREGERS. Og så har hun været på havsens bund.

HEDVIG (*ser flygtig hen på ham, undertrykker et smil og spør*).

Hvorfor siger De havsens bund?

GREGERS. Hvad skulle jeg ellers sige?

HEDVIG. De kunde sige havets bund – eller havbunden. (pp. 98-99)

GREGERS. And she has been down in the depths of the sea.

HEDVIG (*with a quick glance at him, represses a smile and asks*). Why do you say “the depths of the sea”?

GREGERS. What else should I say?

HEDVIG. You could say “the bottom of the sea”. (Archer, p. 306)

Gregers is starting a series of symbols, linking Hjalmar to the wild duck. In a footnote on the same page William Archer explained that ‘Gregers uses the poetical, or at any rate old-fashioned, expression “havsens bund”, while Hedvig asks him rather to use the more commonplace “havets bund” or “havbunden”’. One can see how the Archers were quite faithful to the original and their renderings ‘the depths of the sea’ vs. ‘the bottom of the sea’ are adequate. They probably avoided ‘sea-bottom’ in the last line, as the original text would have required, due to its quite uncomfortable second meaning.

## 2.2 Literariness

ANOTHER trait which is often seen as constitutive of Archer’s style is its literariness. Such a tendency to use literary language is often pointed out as affecting the quality of his translations, but my opinion is that, once again, further reflection on why and how this happened is necessary. As Sara Jan puts it,<sup>15</sup> Archer claimed that his aim as an Ibsen translator was to bring the acted drama to the status of the literary novel, and in the epilogue of *The Theatrical World of 1894*, he wrote: ‘Literature in the theatre – great inventions greatly realised, beautiful words beautifully spoken ... has been the

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15 See S. Jan, ‘William Archer’s Translations of Ibsen, 1889-1908’, *Scandinavica* (1995).

yearning of my whole conscious life'.<sup>16</sup> His primary activity, though, was to produce texts that should serve a community of readers which approached the English Ibsen in book form rather than in the theatre. This view is fostered by a book history-oriented analysis of the circumstances in which those translations appeared. In his article 'Ibsen as Book: another British Ibsen', Tore Rem points out that the number of readers Ibsen reached in book form far exceeded those who saw Ibsen in the theatre.<sup>17</sup> In an article dated 1893, Archer himself counted the various editions of Ibsen's plays which were published up to that date, and asserted:

About four years ago *The Pillars of Society*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People* were published in a shilling volume, one of the Camelot Classic Series. Of that volume, up to the end of 1892, Mr. Walter Scott had sold 14, 367 copies. In 1890 and 1891 the same publisher issued an authorised uniform edition of Ibsen's prose dramas in five volumes ... Of these volumes, up to the end of 1892, 16, 834 copies had been sold. Thus, Mr. Walter Scott alone has issued (in round numbers) thirty-one thousand volumes ... But these figures in reality understate the case. The "volume" is an artificial unit; the natural, the real unit, is the play; and each volume contains three plays. Thus we find that one publisher alone has placed in circulation ninety-three thousand plays by Ibsen. Other publishers have issued single-volume editions of *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*, some of which must have had a very considerable sale. Thus, I think, we are well within the mark in estimating that one hundred thousand prose dramas by Ibsen have been bought by the English-speaking public in the course of the past four years.<sup>18</sup>

If one looks at the list of Ibsen performances in the appendix of Postlewait's book, one counts 21 stagings from 1889 to the end of 1893 (revivals included),<sup>19</sup> which could not possibly reach one hundred thousand

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16 W. Archer, *Theatrical 'World' of 1894*, 369-370.

17 See T. Rem, 'Ibsen as Book: another British Ibsen', *International Ibsen Conference Proceedings* 9 (2000) (Bergen, 2001), 413-422.

18 W. Archer, 'The Mausoleum of Ibsen', *Fortnightly Review* (July 1893), 88.

19 See Postlewait, *op. cit.*, 141-146.

theatre-goers. So, Ibsen's playwriting was definitely a bigger phenomenon in the practice of reading than in the theatre. As Sara Jan continues, Archer elaborated a style in keeping with 'his beliefs about the kind of language appropriate for use in literary works',<sup>20</sup> his texts serving primarily the printed page and later, after revision, the stage.<sup>21</sup>

If one brings together the urgency for a new English drama, the diffusion Ibsen had in book form and the claim to 'literature in the theatre', it seems that Archer had the intuition that using a more refined style – that of the novel, i.e. of books – would be instrumental to the introduction of Ibsen and to a wind of change in the English theatre. With the book as his medium and an appropriate, literary style as his standard, Ibsen's playwriting (and its novelty) could reach a rather considerable audience. This strategy was indeed successful if one considers not only the hundred thousand readers Ibsen had reached by 1893, but also the importance his printed plays had in the context of the English book market at that time. Rem argues further, in fact, that

Ibsen was instrumental in the reintroduction of the printed play into Britain ... Whereas the commercial theatres could offer very lucrative fees, the printed play had long since gone out of fashion and provided no source of income. Ibsen provided an example that the reading of plays could be as interesting as the reading of novels. He also, more importantly, at least from the publisher's point of view, demonstrated that the printing of plays could bring profits.<sup>22</sup>

Such a tendency to use literary language is homogeneously diffused in the Archers' *The Wild Duck*, with no disturbing peaks of literariness or flamboyant exaggerations. The tone of their prose, although sometimes higher and more refined than the original, is coherent throughout the play. A couple of excerpts can serve as examples:

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20 Jan, *op. cit.*, 16.

21 In fact Archer, in spite of his ideal of a literary language in the theatre, had often to compromise with the actors and to modify his texts for their exigencies. On this issue see *ibid.*, 9, 16.

22 Rem, *op. cit.*, 413-415.

HJALMAR. [...] Min bolig er trist, Gregers, [...]. (p. 57)

HJALMAR. [...] Mine is a melancholy dwelling, Gregers; [...].  
(Archer, p. 256)

Here Hjalmar is trying to keep Gregers away from his house and one can see how the Archers, as Hjalmar's speech gets pompous, raised the tone of the line by using the rather formal 'dwelling' for the common noun *bolig* ('house') and 'melancholy' for *trist* ('sad'). Notice also the stress put on the adjective 'mine' at the beginning of the sentence, which adds even more emphasis. A similar case is to be found in the second act, the Archers emphasizing Hjalmar's speech:

HJALMAR. [...] Lad det kun være trangt og tarvelig under vort tag, Gina. Det er dog hjemmet. Og det siger jeg: her er godt at være. (p. 76)

HJALMAR. [...] Our roof may be poor and humble, Gina; but it is home. And with all my heart I say: here dwells my happiness.  
(Archer, p. 280)

Notice the passage 'with all my heart I say', which does not appear in the original text, and the verb 'dwells', presumably related to 'dwelling' in the previous example. It is a link created by the translators and not evident in the original, where Hjalmar only says *her er godt at være* ('it is nice to stay here'). It is relevant that these excerpts pertain to Hjalmar, whose speech in the original Norwegian is characterized by vaporous and pompous expressions. Although such a high register of speech was not present in the Norwegian lines reported above, it is in my opinion not an overly emphasized choice by the Archers. It is evident that they wanted to make their Hjalmar speak with a tone which should resemble that of the original, and distributed such emphasis homogeneously in the whole text. Giving a single line a more pompous tone than the original is indeed not a faulty exaggeration in the wider perspective of constructing an English Hjalmar with his adequate, pompous speech, and also matches the translators' stylistic principles.

Similar, high-toned passages return in the speeches of other characters, as in this example:

HEDVIG. Og så kan han ikke sidde hele formiddagen der nede på den fæle madam Eriksen restauration.

GINA. Det også, ja. (p. 68)

HEDVIG. And he won't be able to sit the whole forenoon down at that horrid Madam Eriksen's.

GINA. No more he will. (*Short silence.*) (Archer, p. 270)

Here the tone of the conversation is plain, rather banal, yet Archer used the rather emphatic 'no more he will' to render Gina's line *det også, ja* (literally 'that also, yes'). In this case it is more difficult to trace a translation strategy focused on Gina's speech, which does not share Hjalmar's vaporous trait. The choice of the more refined 'no more he will' appears then in keeping with the Archers' general preference for literary language.

In his comprehensive study of English translations of Ibsen, Kjell Amble raises an interesting issue on the following stage directions, which belong to the very end of the play:

*Hjalmar, Gina og Gregers slæber Hedvig ind i atelieret; i den nedhængede højre hånd holder hun pistolen fastklemmt mellem fingrene.*  
(p. 158)

*HJALMAR, GINA and GREGERS carry HEDVIG into the studio; in her dangling right hand she holds the pistol fast clasped in her fingers.*  
(Archer, p. 378)

A few lines later, when Hedvig is taken off the scene, we read:

*Hjalmar og Gina bærer liget ud gennem køkkendøren. Relling lukker efter dem. Molvik sniger sig ud på gangen.* (p. 160)

*HJALMAR and GINA carry the corpse out through the kitchen door. RELING shuts it after them. MOLVIK slinks out into the passage.*  
(Archer, p. 380)

Amble points out the verb *slæber* ('pull') in the first stage direction, arguing that one does not normally 'pull' dead people in a room, rather one 'carries'

them (as written in the second stage direction: *bærer*).<sup>23</sup> 'Pulling' little Hedvig on stage (from the loft, presumably offstage) adds a grim and grotesque tone to the line, a tone about which I agree with Amble: the interesting thing is that the Archers completely ignored this difference in their translation. Given their usual accuracy, suspicion is raised against the possibility that they failed to notice the verb in the original text, suspicion which is fostered by looking at the striking fidelity with which they translated the other words in the two passages. The substitution of 'pull' with 'carry' in the first stage direction is the only case in which the texts differ from a totally literal translation – my view is that the translators recognized the grotesque choice of verbs but deliberately decided to ignore it, in order to avoid the disturbing effect that *slæbe* would have caused to the reader and the clash with the style they were pursuing. Their priority was to give the text a homogeneous tone, and so they did also with the scene directions.

### 2.3 Varieties of speech

SUCH reflections on the Archers' literary style serve also to explain their choices with regard to another central issue: the transposition of original speeches, idiolects and sociolects into an English vernacular. Ibsen's texts are indeed rich in different levels of speech as well as language varieties. Lower-class people speak differently from upper-class characters, both in terms of choice of vocabulary and grammatical correctness; in addition Ibsen constructed idiolects for some characters. Modern principles of translation would suggest maintaining such anomalies in the text, searching for adequate correspondents in the target language. But Archer, as we have seen, had other purposes in mind. Instead of maintaining most malapropisms, he dimmed many of them, preferring a more homogeneous tone. In his translation of *Ghosts*, for example, he ignored almost completely Engstrand's speech, heavily marked by dialect and lower-class expressions, and reproduced a high-level speech in line with the other characters' sober literary style. Alongside the literalness of other passages, this decision has generated plenty of criticism of Archer. Again, I believe that such a solution was no simple mistake, but naturally followed from his idea of literary language. He wrote on this issue in a preface:

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23 K. Amble, *The Spirit of Ibsen: problems of English translation in three of his plays* (Evanston IL, 1964), 179.

I have found it exceedingly hard to draw the line between admissible colloquialisms and inadmissible vulgarisms or slang. Even when vulgarisms and slang occur in the original, I have been very chary of reproducing them in terms of similar status ... It would be manifestly absurd ... to make Ibsen's lower-class townfolk talk Cockney ... When the speakers are educated people, I have sometimes rejected phrases which, though not exactly slangy, seemed to me *too* vernacular.<sup>24</sup>

This passage outlines a conscious and pondered translation strategy, in keeping with the general idea of a style which should maintain a certain literary tone and that should not contain excessively vulgar or colloquial expressions.

*The Wild Duck* has plenty of examples of different speeches and malapropisms, and it would be impossible to treat them satisfactorily here. I will, instead, concentrate on a particularly interesting case, that of Gina Ekdal. In an 1891 letter to a French translator, Ibsen argued:

[*The Wild Duck*] presents quite special difficulties in that one must be very closely familiar with the Norwegian language in order to be able to understand how thoroughly each separate character in the play has his or her own individual and idiosyncratic mode of expression, by which one can also recognize his or her level of education. When, for example, Gina speaks, one must at once be able to tell that she has never learned any grammar, and that she comes from the lower classes.<sup>25</sup>

The Archers maintained several of Gina's malapropisms (for example *pigstol* for *pistol* and *dividere* for *divertere*), but let us look at what happened in the following cases:

GINA. [...] Ak ja; Relling havde ret, han. Så går det, når der kommer galne folk og pressenterer den intrikate fordringen. (p. 139)

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24 W. Archer in *Ibsen's Prose Dramas I*, p. xi.

25 Quoted in a footnote in I.-S. Ewbank, 'Translating Ibsen for the English Stage', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* (1998), 61 [translation by Ewbank].



GINA. [...] Ah yes; Relling was right, he was. That's what happens when crazy people go about presenting the claims of the what-do-you-call-it. (Archer, p. 355)

This example of Gina's speech contains two mispronunciations, i.e. *pressenterer* for *presenterer* ('present') and *den intrikate fordringen* for *den ideale fordringen* (literally 'the claim of the intricate' instead of 'the ideal'). We can see how the Archers ignored the first malapropism and rejected a correspondent for the second, substituted by 'what-do-you-call-it'. One can argue that the verb 'go about' is more colloquial than *kommer*, yet I would not argue that the malapropism is adequately rendered. Moreover, one can notice how Gina fails to spell the plural form of the Norwegian adjective *gal*, correctly spelled as *gale* and here instead as *galne*, possibly an expression taken over from dialect or colloquial speech.<sup>26</sup> Also here the Archers rejected the idea of finding an adequate English correspondent. My feeling is that Ibsen was stretching the colloquial tone to a level which the Archers did not consider in keeping with the style they had in mind. Therefore, instead of finding correspondent mispronunciations for *galne*, *pressenterer* and *intrikat*, they preferred a more acceptable, colloquial English 'what-do-you-call-it'.

GINA. Nej der er, ved gud, ikke i den stand at – (p. 111)

GINA. No, your room is not in a fit state to – (Archer, p. 322)

In this case Gina uses the locative adverb *der* instead of the pronoun *det* ('it', here indicating Gregers's room). Literally translated, the sentence would therefore be 'No, *there* is, God knows, not in the state to –', instead of 'No, *it* is, God knows, not in the state to –'. Kjell Amble comments on this line arguing that

the shades of imperfect grammar in Gina's speech are so fine and so widely dispersed that a reader of the original is very likely going to overlook them. Very little is lost if the reader of a translation is made to do the same. Anything seems preferable to

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26 The Norwegian-English dictionary reports similar forms in nynorsk. See for example nynorsk *galnehus* ('madhouse') vs. bokmål *galehus*. E. Haugen, *Norwegian-English Dictionary* (Oslo, 1965), 150.

the distortions a translator is likely to produce if he is to tamper with Gina's grammar in English.<sup>27</sup>

Although I do not agree with Amble's sufficiency in treating such anomalies in Gina's speech, he is probably right regarding the possibility of a Norwegian reader failing to notice the mistake: the spelling of *der* is so close to the one of *det* that the difference is hardly noticeable. The Archers adopted Amble's strategy and rejected the idea of finding an English correspondent to this anomaly, even inserting the phrase *your room*, which substitutes the (incorrect) pronoun. They felt, probably, that no solution would render the subtle incorrectness of the original and would turn into something disturbing to the reader.<sup>28</sup>

Finally we can look at how the translators rendered the passages in which Gina curses:

GINA. Ja, ja; kan nok tænke mig det. Men jøss' da, - hvorledes er det, du ser ud! (p. 147)

GINA. Yes yes, I suppose so. But, Lord help us! What a sight you are! (Archer, p. 365)

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GINA. Jøss', hvor har du da været henne med de to ranglefanterne? (p. 148)

GINA. Lord help us! Where have you been to with those two ne'er-do-wells? (Archer, p. 366)

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GINA (*løber mod døren*). Jøss', hvad er det! (p. 157)

GINA (*runs to the door*). Good God, what's that! (Archer, p. 377)

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<sup>27</sup> Amble, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to notice that Amble analyses a later edition of the translation and praises the solution 'Good heavens, there is not in the order that ...'. In fact, the Archers modified the passage at a later stage and found a corresponding English expression.

In the original text Gina uses the swearword *Jøss'*, (derived from 'Jesus'), which is lighter than *fanden* ('Devil') but still quite vulgar. In the English text the translators substituted it with the milder 'Lord help us' or 'Good God'; one can wonder if the Archers, already dissatisfied with vulgarism in itself, felt that it was too much to make Gina swear too hard. Let us look at other relevant examples:

GINA. Nej kors; hvor kan De da tro det?

[...]

GREGERS. [...] Men når en har det kors på sig, at hede Gregers -  
(p. 86)

GINA. Oh no! How can you think so?

[...]

GREGERS. [...] But when one has the misfortune to be called Gregers! (Archer, p. 292)

\*\* \*\* \*

GINA. [...] Den velsignede vildanden, ja. Den gøres der da krusifikser nok for. (p. 101)

GINA. [...] That blessed wild duck! What a lot of fuss you make over her. (Archer, p. 310)

Gina's speech contains a few references to *kors*, 'crucifix', sometimes used as a light cursing and sometimes more metaphorically. In the first case it serves as a mere exclamation, while in the second one Gregers echoes Gina with the expression *å ha det kors på sig*, literally 'to have that crucifix upon oneself', i.e. 'to carry a burden'. In the second example she uses the colloquial expression *å gjøre krusifikser for noe*, meaning 'to make a lot of fuss about something'. One also notices that Gina uses *der* instead of *det* again; it is, however, no grammatical mistake, as its use as a dummy subject is less frequent but not incorrect. The Archers' task was not an easy one in translating these lines, yet one can see how the English text is deprived of any reference to the 'crucifix' and also the substitution of *det* with *der* is ignored. Once more, my impression is that letting Gina curse in the same way she did in the original would have clashed with the Archers' principles.

The solution, then, was to dim such passages and let them sound more in keeping with the standard tone of the translation.

The strong influence of the translators' purposes upon the shape of the text appears clearly from a study of the translation of *The Wild Duck* by William and Frances E. Archer. Investigating such purposes in a deeper way provides elements to contrast the view, shared by several translators, that William Archer's translations were barely literal and pompous and therefore to be regarded as wanting and useless. They were, instead, the product of a refined activist that saw precisely in those translations a sharp weapon with which to fight his battle for Ibsen and for the rise of a new English drama. As far as translation was concerned, this battle involved rejecting the usual practices of adaptation and elevating the language of the theatre. One is tempted to draw a parallel with the early introduction of Ibsen in Italy, which occurred in about the same years as in England. In Italy, most plays by Ibsen were translated by Enrico Polese Santarnecchi, a man of the theatre as Archer was. The texts, however, were domesticated and softened, serving an audience of consumers that used to go to the theatre only for their amusement. This caused a huge handicap for the Italian public in understanding and appropriating the complexities of Ibsen's playwriting, which resulted in a less relevant debate about him and in a twenty-year delay in major critical essays on his plays. The Italian and English theatrical situations of the 1890s were, in their essence, not radically dissimilar from each other – and yet the reception of Ibsen was.<sup>29</sup> What made the difference was an Ibsen advocate, whose name was William Archer.

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29 For a basic survey on the first reception and translations of Ibsen in Italy, see R. Alonge, *Ibsen: l'opera e la fortuna scenica* (Firenze, 1995), 77-116; R. Alonge, "'Spettri', Zacconi e un agente tuttofare: traduttore, adattatore (e anche un poco drammaturgo)", *Il Castello di Elsinore* 1 (1988), 69-94; G. D'Amico, 'Il Signor Erminio Ekdal and the First Translation of "The Wild Duck": domesticating Henrik Ibsen for late nineteenth-century Italy', *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 1.1 (2006). 7 September 2006. [<http://nome.unak.it/nome2/issues/current/damico.html>]; F. Simoncini, 'Strategie di Scena di Fine Ottocento: le prime traduzioni italiane di Ibsen: *L'anitra selvatica e Spettri*', *Il Castello di Elsinore* 16 (1993), 123-42.