

Aleramo's *Una donna* via Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Forum Italicum
2021, Vol. 55(3) 741–757
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DOI: 10.1177/00145858211046538
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Abstract

This article provides a detailed comparison of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and Sibilla Aleramo's novel *Una donna* (1906), focussing specifically on the similar endings of both works where the respective protagonist walks out on her family. It begins by examining the various contexts and collaborative networks that enabled the theatre of Ibsen to travel into late nineteenth-century Italy, namely Luigi Capuana's translation of the play, *Casa di bambola*, and early interpretations of the lead role by Italy's star actress, Eleonora Duse. The article proceeds to offer a close reading of *Casa di bambola* and *Una donna*, elucidating how Aleramo's first-person novel is able to expand on key issues which are only dealt with briefly in Ibsen's play. In so doing, the analysis illustrates what it was about Aleramo's narrative technique which both aligns her with, but also sets her apart from, her predecessor, shedding new light on the connective associations between the two authors.

Keywords

Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, Aleramo, *Una donna*, Capuana, Duse, Translation and Performance

Introduction

In a diary entry of 24 November 1940, Sibilla Aleramo openly acknowledged the impact of Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll's House*], published in 1879, on both her life and writing, stating that “senza quella voce “ottocentesca”, forse non sarei “divenuta quella che sono”” (Aleramo, 1979: 14). In both works, the heroine leaves her husband and young children (three children in Ibsen's play and one child in Aleramo's novel) in order to seek an independent life. Ibsen was allegedly inspired to write *A Doll's House* by his close friend Laura Kieler, who suffered a similar fate as Nora (McFarlane, 2008: viii). Similarly, Aleramo's novel, *Una donna* (1906), is based largely on the course of

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events in her own life. Both texts have their roots, ultimately, in life, but in one case the writer (a man) is drawing on the experiences of someone else (a woman), and in the other, the writer (a woman) draws on her own experiences.

While much has been said about the authors, close comparative analysis of *A Doll's House* and *Una donna* is still missing. Moreover, though Ibsen's reception has been vastly researched (Bollen et al., 2016; D'Amico 2013; Fischer-Lichte et al., 2017; and Fulsås and Rem 2017), no scholar has yet explored how Ibsen's Italian reception might have influenced the development of Aleramo's novel. This article seeks to examine the points of contact between Ibsen and Aleramo. The first part will map the potential trajectory leading Aleramo to Ibsen's work, investigating how the role of Nora initially travelled into Italy through Luigi Capuana's translation of the play as well as Eleonora Duse's early performances, and will proceed to illustrate how *A Doll's House* features in *Una donna*. The analysis will then move on to considering the differences between the techniques of drama and those of the first-person novel, particularly in relation to how both authors portray the ending of their works. To conclude, the final part will show what it was about Aleramo's style of writing which both aligns her with, but also sets her apart from, her predecessor. In so doing, I aim to elucidate a new angle to the connective associations between the two writers.

Ibsen

A Doll's House, has, necessarily, had a complex history. The German actress, Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, who was to première *Nora oder ein Puppenheim* in Flensburg and Berlin in 1880 only a year after Ibsen's play opened in Copenhagen, refused to perform the lead role of Nora unless she remained with her children at the end of the play. In spite of Ibsen's reluctance to rewrite the closing scene, he altered the ending in the absence of any official treaty concerning authors' rights between Norway and Germany, though, after much public protest, the original ending was reintroduced (for more on this altered version, see Janss 2017).

The play did not travel into Italy until the 1890s. The *grande attrice*, Eleonora Duse, performed the role of Nora in 1891. Duse's interpretation appears to have eclipsed former performances of her contemporaries. Andrea Camilleri, in the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (1959), for example, entirely overlooks the fact that Aliprandi Pieri was the first actress in Italy to star in Ibsen's play. In his entry, Camilleri (1959: 459) stated that Duse was the first to perform Nora, 'a lei si dovette[e] la prima rappresentazione di *Casa di bambola*'. In reality, it was Pieri who premièred the role at the Teatro Gerbino in Turin on 15 February 1889 in Pietro Galletti's 1888 *Nora o la casa della bambola*, first identified by Roberto Alonge in his seminal book *Ibsen: l'opera e la fortuna scenica* (1995). This translation was presumably modelled on a pre-existing German version, *Nora oder ein Puppenheim* (see D'Amico 2011: 154), as minority languages, such as Norwegian, tended to be translated indirectly in Italy via mediating 'major' languages, namely French and German.

To some extent, Camilleri's oversight is unsurprising given that Ibsen's initial reception in Italy was generally unsuccessful. *L'Arte drammatica*, on 23 February 1889, asserted that:

Il lavoro si presterebbe alla più lunga ed intricata discussione, tanto che non credo che la sua rappresentazione vorrà essere tentata da altre attrici: certo è che la signora Aliprandi Pieri vi mise tutto il suo ingegno e ottenne un successo: ma puramente d'attrice ed in grazia del quale la commedia si è replicata tre volte (see Urso 2004: 199).

Since early performances were largely praised by critics, it could be argued that what hindered Ibsen's reception were issues related with the translation of the script. This might also go some way in explaining why, by the time Duse included the role of Nora in her repertoire shortly after Pieri's opening performances, the actress insisted that the play should be retranslated. As Simoncini (2005: 10) has claimed: 'Più probabilmente Eleonora Duse volle avvicinarsi alle opere del norvegese senza passare sotto il giogo di una manipolazione compiuta da altri'.

Capuana produced a retranslation of the play as a result of the contact between Ibsen's agent and translator in France, the Polish-Lithuanian count Moritz Prozor, on whose 1889 French translation Capuana based his own version. While Todoros (1994) and Simoncini (2005) have argued that the retranslation was written for the interpretation of Duse, recently D'Amico (2013) has refuted this claim. Whether or not Capuana produced the retranslation for Duse, his reworking of the script certainly caught the attention of Ibsen. Capuana published his translation, originally called *Bambola*, as a serial in the journal *Carro di Tespi* on 24 January 1891, and a few years later, in 1894, as a book, this time entitled *Casa di bambola*. It has been suggested that Capuana's change of title followed Duse's request to make the title more faithful to the original version (Todoros, 1994). Interestingly, as with Niemann-Raabe, Capuana considered changing the ending of his stage translation. He suggested to Ibsen, via Prozor, to add a 'happy ending' to the play where Nora chooses to remain with her children, but, as was the case previously, Ibsen continued to oppose the suggestion. He claimed, optimistically, in a letter to Capuana of 23 January 1891, that the '[t]he Italians will soon understand my intentions!' (Lokrantz, 2002: 72, n.24). Capuana had proposed altering the ending for audiences because '[t]he unravelling of the story is without doubt slightly strange for us Italians' (Lokrantz, 2002: 64), as he wrote in an open letter to the editor of *Carro di Tespi*, the Neapolitan Edoardo Boutet. He almost echoed these thoughts three years later in the preface to his book: 'Per noi, il personaggio di Nora diviene un'eccezione molto strana quando si risolve ad abbandonare marito e figli' (Capuana, 1894: 8). What is noteworthy, however, is that, though Capuana considered Nora 'un'eccezione molto strana', he included the original ending in the serial *Carro di Tespi* and subsequent book, yet expressed the desire to remove it from the actual script. This implies that Capuana felt uneasy about staging Nora's exit for contemporary spectators, but felt that an average reader of the play (as opposed to an average spectator on a night out to the theatre), would, in the words of D'Amico (2011: 154), 'be able to understand and accept the play in its original form'.

While Capuana was hesitant about staging the original ending in the play, Duse was adamant to perform the character just as Ibsen had intended. Indeed, Duse performed a range of what Re (2015: 349) has called ‘daring stage roles’, and, admittedly, the role of Nora was perhaps Duse’s most daring. As reported in a biography by Signorelli (1938: 121), when asked about her performance of the closing scene, Duse would reply: ‘Non so quel che fanno le altre, so soltanto che la mia *Nora* non può non andare’. As with *Nora*, Duse had separated from both her husband and daughter. In 1885 Duse left her husband, Tebaldo Checchi, and led a financially independent life, placing Enrichetta in a boarding school (Molinari, 1985). Later in her career, she performed the role of a further mother who leaves her son in *Cenere*, produced in 1916, the only (silent) film in which she starred (Pagani and Fryer, 2017). Though this does not explain why Duse should want to perform *Nora*’s departure, it is nonetheless intriguing to note the similarities between the actress and her character. In fact, Duse insisted on retaining the original ending in spite of the reservations expressed not just by Capuana, but also by her lover, Arrigo Boito, with whom she was working at the time. In a letter to Duse of 3 June 1890 about Ibsen, Boito remarked (perhaps enviously): ‘Non è possibile che ti piaccia — ora fingono di goderselo a Parigi’ (Radice, 1979: 705–706). Indeed, it could well be argued that, had it not been for Duse, the play might have had a very different history in Italy, with a very different ending.

Duse opened *Casa di bambola* on 9 February 1891 at the Teatro dei Filodrammatici in Milan, a month after the publication of Capuana’s retranslation in *Carro di Tespi*. The inclusion of the celebrity star actress seemed to have led to a full house. The great admirer of Ibsen, Giovanni Pozza, was one of the first critics to offer a detailed account of the opening nights for the *Corriere della sera* on 9–10 February 1891. He stated that ‘il teatro non era affollato, ma affollatissimo’ (Pozza, 1971: 101), and considered the performance a ‘vero trionfo. Non un trionfo d’applausi, ma di intima commozione’ (Pozza, 1971: 100). The triumph to which Pozza alluded was not one which met with much applause. In fact, he later noted that the only time in which the audience ‘applaudì con prolungata insistenza’ was when *Nora* was playing with her children (Pozza, 1971: 99). The ‘triumph’ was one achieved in the theatre. In his view, the purpose of theatre is not to entertain the public but to stimulate thought-provoking ideas, which are meant to touch and move spectators. In this play, audiences are inspired to think about alternative views of what it means to be a wife and a mother, particularly in the concluding scene between *Nora* and her husband, just before her departure. Nineteenth-century spectators were, therefore, sat before a production which introduced new perspectives of married and family life:

La grande scena fra marito e moglie, dove l’autore ha condensato ed esplicitato il concetto del suo lavoro, s’impose al pubblico colla imperiosità delle creazioni inaspettate e potenti. Si udirono tratto tratto mormorii di ribellione, ma l’alto pensiero del poeta dominava, sovrano invincibile, il teatro. Da quanto tempo non si udivano dalla scena parole tanto profonde esprimere pensieri tanto meditati, verità tanto audaci! (Pozza, 1971: 100)

In a further review of 12–13 February 1891 in the *Corriere della sera*, Pozza continued to imply that critics in Catholic Italy would not have understood the modern concepts of the play. As he put it:

Le teorie intorno al matrimonio, alle donne incomprese, alle rivendicazioni dei diritti femminili, enunciate nella commedia dell'Ibsen, non hanno trovato, neppure fra le nostre signore, seguaci ed oppositori eccessivamente appassionati. Fino ad ora ci interessiamo poco a questioni di tale natura, ignari persino della importanza che esse hanno acquistato in Germania, in Inghilterra, in tutti i paesi nordici, ove si teorizza forse troppo, ove si studia tutto (Pozza, 1971: 101).

Pozza here concluded that the reason why the underlying issues of the play were misunderstood was because audiences mainly expected theatre to entertain, not teach. This was a pedagogical role reserved exclusively for books:

Perciò della *Casa di Bambola* il contenuto filosofico non fu quasi avvertito. La critica generale non penetrò oltre la cortecchia scenica del lavoro. Ibsen ha dato al suo studio sociale una forma drammatica, ed il pubblico gli ha detto: 'Non vogliamo da te che la forma. A teatro non vi sono che autori drammatici; pei moralisti, pei riformatori c'è il libro' (Pozza, 1971: 102).

This supports the notion that, in nineteenth-century Italy, the theatre, above all for the bourgeoisie, was considered a main source of entertainment, whereas published material, on the other hand, such as journals and books, was considered a main source of education. Significantly, Pozza's views here link back to Capuana's hesitations, mentioned earlier, about removing Nora's exit from the script of his play but not from *Carro di Tespi* or his book. As a result, it was only inevitable that a play like Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which crosses the fine line between education and entertainment, would have been largely misinterpreted by the audience Pozza describes (see Mitchell 2017 for more on Italian nineteenth-century spectators).

Despite the misinterpretations, what has emerged here is that the networks involved in producing the translation, including Capuana, Duse, and Prozor who helped to facilitate communications with Ibsen, managed to catch the attention of critics in Italy soon after early performances of the same play almost went unnoticed. Despite later dropping the role of Nora from her repertoire, Duse, in particular, became one of the most prominent actresses to enable the role to travel around the world once she included it in her international repertoire, performing the role of Nora in Vienna in 1892, Bucearest the same year, and London's Lyric Theatre in 1893 (see Biggi, 2010). Though it is unclear whether Aleramo saw Duse's performances, the actress nonetheless had a significant impact on the circulation of Ibsen's play in and outside of Italy, a play which was to have an everlasting effect on rising women authors, such as Aleramo who, like the narrator in her *Una donna*, followed closely in Nora's footsteps.

Aleramo

The same year as the curtain fell on Duse's interpretation of Nora in 1906, the curtain rose for a new kind of Nora, who emerged on the literary scene in Italy this time in the form of the novel, *Una donna*. This is the first book that the author signed not with her birth name of Rina Faccio but with her new name, Sibilla Aleramo. Though Aleramo's anonymous heroine follows Nora's lead by leaving her family home, 'this was no Ibsen writing about a fictitious Nora, but a woman writing about her own recent past', as Caesar (1980: 80) has pointed out. In 1902, after having left her husband Ulberico Pierangeli and son Walter in Porto Civitanova in Le Marche, Aleramo moved to Rome to live with her father. Encouraged by the writer and journalist, Giovanni Cena, Aleramo began to write a novel based on her experiences, which she completed in the summer of 1903 whilst living with him. The episodes in Aleramo's own life therefore closely resembled her autobiographical novel, including the part depicting the legal battle seeking custody of her son. Aleramo was represented by Luigi Majno, the husband of Ersilia Majno who was the chair of the Unione Femminile and founder of the residential home for former prostitutes, the Asilio Mariuccia (Buttafuoco, 1985).

Curiously, there was only one episode which did not correspond to the events in Aleramo's life. While at the end of the novel the protagonist leaves her son for no other reason than herself, in Aleramo's own life a man was partially involved, the poet and artist, Felice Damiani. As Aleramo later stated in another of her novels, *Il Passaggio*, published in 1919, 'non era per amore d'un altro uomo ch'io mi liberavo: ma io amavo un un altro' (Aleramo, 1985: 24). Though the reasons why Aleramo should have wanted to censor this aspect in her novel remain unclear, there are nonetheless some explanations for this. Firstly, as Aleramo wrote in a diary entry of November 1939, Cena was partly jealous of the fact that she had been in a relationship with another man and wanted her to remove this part of her story from the novel: 'Cena mi chiedeva quel sacrificio [...] perchè non si sapesse che avevo amato un'altro prima di lui' (Aleramo, 1979: 335). Furthermore, Ersilia Majno, with whom Aleramo was in close correspondence whilst drafting her novel, was also reluctant for her to include this aspect into her novel. In a letter of 30 June 1903, Aleramo first informed Majno of her decision to include the presence of a lover in the concluding chapter of her novel:

Eccoti il manoscritto della mia storia fino a sedici mesi fa. Manca l'ultimo capitolo, di poche pagine, in cui dirò come, arrivata a Roma, mi confermai nella risoluzione di non tornare da miomarito, come ho inutilmente lottato per ottenere mio figlio, e come infine acquistai la certezza di poter vivere utilmente appoggiata all'amore del solo uomo cui tutto il mio essere ha consentito e che mi ha fatta sua per sempre (Zancan, 1995: 105).

Majno, in her response, disagreed with the choice:

Ti rimando il tuo manoscritto e ti chiedo: Hai tu pensato che tuo figlio leggerà un giorno il tuo libro e ti giudicherà? Senza dire di altre persone che lo leggeranno e vi ravviseranno, si ravviseranno in tutti i particolari che esponi intorno a te e alla tua famiglia e potranno pensare

che se un orgoglio sconfinato ha potuto farti credere interessante e ragione di un'opera artistica denudarti così davanti al pubblico, v'è però una misura anche per certe confessioni (Zancan, 1995: 106).

What is noteworthy is how Aleramo's protagonist was being turned into a kind of role model driven by a woman's independence rather than by a man, similar to Ibsen's Nora. Indeed, in the critical essay, 'Apologia dello Spirito Femminile', first published in the journal *Il Marzocco* on 9 April 1911, Aleramo recalled how Nora's monologue at the end of *A Doll's House* represented for her, as well as for others in a similar situation, a model for women's fight for survival:

In quella *Casa di Bambola* [...] io vedo ancora, come quindici anni sono, il preludio simbolico dell'immane sforzo che le donne, le quali vogliono vivere una vita loro, sono e saranno destinate a compiere. Sforzo di ricerca di sé medesime, lungi da tutto ciò ch'esse hanno amato e in cui hanno creduto: tragicamente autonome (Aleramo, 1997: 84).

Ibsen had such a profound effect on Aleramo that she even included a passage based on his play in her novel. Just before the protagonist leaves her family home, she is taken to the theatre to watch *A Doll's House* and here she describes the audience's reaction to the closing scene:

Una sera a teatro la vecchia attrice, nel suo palco, aveva avvertito due lagrime brillarmi negli occhi. Non avevo mai pianto per le finzioni dell'arte. Sulla scena una povera bambola di sangue e di nervi si rendeva ragione della propria inconsistenza, e si proponeva di diventar una creatura umana, partendosi dal marito e dai figli, per cui la sua presenza non era che un gioco e un diletto. Da vent'anni quella simbolica favola era uscita da un possente genio nordico; e ancora il pubblico, ammirando per tre atti, protestava con candido zelo all'ultima scena. La verità semplice e splendente nessuno, nessuno voleva guardarla in faccia! (Aleramo, 1995: 158).

What is striking about this passage is how it re-enacts the early reception of the play discussed above. However, unlike contemporary critics, the narrator acknowledges that nobody was able to face the harsh reality of Nora's actions — a reality which anticipates the narrator's own departure. As Zancan (1995: 130) has indicated, the passage in the novel depicting *A Doll's House* offers the narrator the 'momento giusto' to make her exit. In fact, according to Aleramo in her aforementioned diary entry in 1940, had it not been for Ibsen's Nora, 'quella voce "ottocentesca"' (Aleramo, 1979: 14) she might never have turned into the woman she later became. In addition, it would seem that Aleramo saw *A Doll's House* for a second time much later in 1911, with the actress Irma Gramatica in the lead role, but the reception of the play had changed substantially. As Mariani (1987: 4) has explained: 'Se Sibilla si commuove ancora di fronte a ciò che quello spettacolo rappresenta, il pubblico lo sente "invecchiato": il femminismo è in una diversa fase, il periodo eroico è finito come un'avventura "da adolescenti", con aspetti grotteschi'. This further supports that the time period in question here (from Duse's

first performances of Nora in the 1890s up until the first part of the twentieth-century) really was a turning-point in the history of women in Italy (see Willson, 2010).

Casa di bambola / Una donna

In order to address how Ibsen's play might have influenced Aleramo's novel, above all the ending of her narrative, it would be worth evaluating the Italian translation of *Casa di bambola*. Though it remains uncertain whether Aleramo read Capuana's translation, or even saw Duse's interpretation, Capuana and Duse were major figures in promoting the work of Ibsen in late nineteenth-century Italy. As a result, it is more likely that the reactions Aleramo noted about early renditions of the play coincided with Duse's performances of Nora. Therefore, for the purposes of this examination, close analysis of the concluding scene in Capuana's translation will help identify the points of contact between Ibsen's play and Aleramo's autobiographical fiction.

The crux of the play occurs when Nora's crime is exposed. While her husband Torvald Helmer was sick, she had secretly forged his signature in order to obtain a loan so that she could support him and their three children. When exposed, she expresses her views on women's position in society and compares herself to a doll trapped in a doll's house. Rather than being treated as an equal, Nora feels as if, like a child, she has been forced to mould herself to accept the ideas imposed onto her by her father and later by her husband:

NORA: A casa mia, papà mi esponeva le sue idee ed io le accettavo. Se ero d'un altro parere, sapendo che il sentirsi contraddetto gli faceva dispiacere, non glielo davo a vedere. Mi chiamava la sua bamboletta e giocava con me come io giuocavo con la mia bambola. [...] [D]alle mani di papà son passata fra le tue. [...] Tu eri buono con me: però la nostra casa è stata soltanto una sala di ricreazione. Da bambina ero servita da bambola per papà: da moglie, son servita da bambola per te. E i nostri bambini alla lor volta, sono serviti da bambola per me. Com'essi si divertono quand'io gioco con loro, così io mi diverto quando tu giocavi con me. Ecco quel che è stata la nostra unione, Torvaldo (Capuana, 1894: 108–109).

Angered at the events, Nora informs her husband of her wish for a separation: 'C'è un alto compito a cui devo consacrarmi: l'elevazione di me stessa. Tu non sei l'uomo da rendermelo più facile: dovrò intraprenderlo sola. Per ciò ti lascio' (Capuana, 1894: 110). As Torvald tries to dissuade her, Nora stands her ground:

HELMER: Sei moglie e madre innanzi tutto.

NORA: Non la penso più così. Penso che, prima di tutto, sono una creatura umana, come te; o almeno, voglio tentare di ridurmi tale. La maggioranza degli uomini ti darà ragione, Torvaldo: i libri pure. Ma io non debbo più preoccuparmi di quel che dicono gli uomini o che è

stampato nei libri. Bisogna che intorno a questo soggetto io mi formi delle idee, da me, e tenti di rendermi conto di ogni cosa (Capuana, 1894: 111).

It would seem that the act of fraud has triggered Nora to assess the injustices that women have been made to experience in not having the legal right to protect their families: ‘Come? Una donna non avrà il diritto di risparmiare un’afflizione al vecchio padre morente o di salvare la vita del proprio marito. È un’assurdità’ (Capuana, 1894:112). Nora’s discussion causes Torvald to feel that she is ‘una bambina’ (Capuana, 1894: 112) and ‘malata’, suffering from ‘la febbre’ (Capuana, 1894: 112). She continues, however, to be bold and direct: ‘Ma non so che farci: non t’amo più’ (Capuana, 1894: 112). Nora explains that she had been waiting for what she calls ‘il prodigio’ (Capuana, 1894: 112) to occur in order to witness a positive change in their marriage but, instead, following the disclosure of her crime, her marriage has remained exactly the same:

NORA: Ammettiamolo! Tu però non pensi nè parli come l’uomo con cui potrei vivere. Appena rassicurato, non intorno al mio pericolo, ma al tuo... e tu hai dimenticato ogni cosa. Ed io sono ridivenuta la tua allodolella, la tua bambola da esser portata in braccio come prima, con un po’ più di precauzione, forse, ora che la sai così fragile (Capuana, 1894: 114).

At this moment, Nora makes her departure without wanting to see her children for the last time: ‘Non voglio vedere i bambini; sono in migliori mani delle mie. Ora, così come sono, non potrei essere una madre per loro’ (Capuana, 1894: 115). Refusing Torvald’s offer of financial support, she declares: ‘Ho sentito dire che allorquando una moglie abbandona, come io fo questa notte, il domicilio coniugale, le leggi sciolgono il marito da ogni impegno verso di essa’ (Capuana, 1894: 115), at which point she gives him back her wedding ring: ‘Ed è finita!’ (Capuana, 1894: 116). Nora then leaves her keys behind, informing him that the housemaid will collect her belongings the following day, openly admitting that she will continue to think about her family: ‘A te, ai bambini, alla casa... oh, ci penserò spesso, sta sicuro...’ (Capuana, 1894: 116):

HELMER: (lasciandosi cascare su una seggiola presso l’uscio, coprendosi la faccia con le mani). Nora! Nora!... (Leva la testa a e guarda attorno). È andata via! È andata via! (Con crescente speranza). Il più grande dei prodigi?! (Si sente il rumore della porta di casa che vien chiusa) (Capuana, 1894: 117).

As Allen (1996: 207) has put it, when Nora slams the door shut on her family, the play ‘slams the door on conventional ideas’. However, it could equally well be argued that, in so doing, Nora opens up the door to a ‘new’ kind of woman on the other side — one who

explicitly rejects her traditional representation as a wife and mother (De Francisci, 2018). Another interesting aspect of this scene is that, even though Nora does not have a voice in terms of the law, which explains why she committed forgery, she nonetheless has a strong voice of her own. Her opinions, despite seeming absurd to Torvald, resonate powerfully in the theatre, so ‘loudly’, in fact, that actresses such as Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to articulate them.

As for *Una donna*, whereas in *A Doll's House* Ibsen does not offer the audience a profound understanding of Nora's family history, Aleramo devotes the majority of the narrative to providing the reader with a full and detailed background into the suffering endured by the narrator's mother as a result of her deeply unhappy marriage. Initially, the narrator, aware of her father's affair with another woman, was unsympathetic towards her mother who, following her attempted suicide after a home abortion, is detained in an asylum. However, the narrator later changes her attitude following the discovery of some of her mother's papers. Through this, she learns that her mother had tried to leave her family but decided not to for the sake of her children:

Non avevo mai sospettato che mia madre si fosse trovata un momento in una simile situazione. La mia intelligenza precoce non aveva potuto, a Milano, penetrar nulla. Avessi avuto qualche anno di più, mentre ella era in possesso di tutta la sua ragione, e ancora in lei la vita reclamava i suoi diritti contro la fatale seduzione del sacrificio! Avessi potuto sorprenderla in quella notte, sentire, dalla sua bocca, la domanda: ‘Che devo fare, figlia mia?’ e rispondere anche a nome dei miei fratelli: ‘Va, mamma, va!’ (Aleramo, 1995: 193).

What is noteworthy about this passage, and arguably the entire novel, is Aleramo's narrative technique, particularly her use of the first person which creates the impression that she was writing a monologue — a sort of memoir as she reflects back on her past, or even a confession, which is typical of autobiographical writing (Fanning, 2017). What is more, Aleramo alters the use of her tenses from the present in the opening chapters, highlighting the immediacy of her memory, to the past as the novel progresses, which reinforces the finality of her departure. As well as altering her tenses, Aleramo intertwines the first-person narrative with direct speech. The use of direct speech in the narrative is often employed to imply what the protagonist *would have said* rather than what she actually said, such as the hypothetical conversation between her and her mother cited above. Here emerges another crucial difference between Ibsen and Aleramo. Whereas Ibsen allows the heroine to have her say, giving her the freedom to confront her husband directly and to interact with him spontaneously, Aleramo's heroine is, to some extent, kept silent, possibly to represent her lack of a voice. The protagonist barely speaks to anybody in the novel as she (silently) reflects back on past events. Moreover, her husband is even more silenced, presumably to suggest the impossibility of the situation: no matter what the two protagonists tried to say to each other, the situation always remained the same, with no legal way out of their broken marriage.

Following the above passage, the narrator wonders why mothers feel the need to tolerate broken marriages for the sake of their children: ‘Perché nella maternità adoriamo il sacrificio? Donde è scesa a noi questa inumana idea dell'immolazione materna? Di madre

in figlia, da secoli, si tramanda il servaggio. È una mostruosa catena' (Aleramo, 1995: 193). In fact, the author later explains that what led her to write her novel in the first place were her strong reservations about the kind of sacrifices mothers feel that they ought to endure:

Tutti siamo ingrati verso che ci ha generato. Il ricordo e il rimorso di questa ingratitudine ci colpiscono allorché a nostra volta abbiamo, nella maggiore commozione che sia data all'umanità, generato un nuovo essere: e ne consegue istintivamente uno slancio di dedizione, una sete di sacrificio verso questo figlio, quasi per prevenire la di lui ingratitudine, per assicurarci quel confronto che fu da noi negato a nostra madre e a nostro padre, forse anche l'oscuro desiderio di evitare a lui il presente nostro rimorso (Aleramo, 1978: 184).

Here emerges a further difference between *A Doll's House* and *Una donna*. Unlike the play, the novel is a critique of motherhood — seen through the eyes of a mother who loves her son, abandoning him is portrayed as the ultimate sacrifice. Indeed, while the first part of the narrative is largely written in a daughterly voice, following the birth of her son the narrator's focal lens shifts to that of a mother (Fanning, 2013). Though abandoning her children also inevitably causes Nora much pain, she is rarely seen interacting with her children, unlike Aleramo's narrator who spends much of her time in the novel affectionately nurturing her new-born baby throughout the first five years of his life.

Moreover, the impression which Ibsen conveys in his play is that Nora *wants* to leave her children in order to discover a new life. The option of departing together with her children is never even raised — Nora feels that they would be better off without her and makes a sudden exit. In Aleramo's novel, however, the possibility of leaving with her son *is* discussed, but without having any legal rights over him, the narrator is unable to gain custody. In fact, this is perhaps the crucial difference between the two works: whereas Nora is disappointed by Torvald, who has adored her all through their married life, and fights a battle for the authority of women vis-à-vis the man she is married to, Aleramo's protagonist is physically and mentally abused by her husband, an abuse she endures throughout the majority of the plot for the sake of her child, much like her own mother.

Finally, whereas Nora's departure ends as she slams the door shut, Aleramo extends the narrator's exit. To begin with, Aleramo depicts her long train journey from a town in southern Italy, where she had been living with her husband and son, to Milan, where her father was residing at the time:

Scoccarono le tre. Balzai in piedi. Mi misi il mantello e m'appressai all'uscio. Poi tornai al letticiuolo, svegliai il bimbo: 'Vado' gli dissi piano 'è già l'ora: sii buono, voglimi bene, io sarò sempre la tua mamma...' e lo baciai senza poter versare una lagrima, vacillando; e ascoltai la vocina sonnolenta che diceva: 'Sì, sempre bene... Manda il nonno a prendermi, mamma... Star con te...' Si voltò verso il muro tranquillo. Allora, allora sentii che non sarei tornata, sentii che una forza fuori di me mi reggeva, e che andavo incontro al destino nuovo, e che tutto il dolore che mi attendeva non avrebbe superato quel dolore (Aleramo, 1995: 214–15).

Unlike Nora who confronts her husband about her reasons for leaving him, in this episode the narrator's husband is entirely absent. Also, whereas Nora does not want to see her children one final time before leaving, the narrator here does. Subsequently, Aleramo depicts an affectionate and moving account of their mother-son relationship. Instead of concluding the novel with the heroine's departure as in Ibsen's play, Aleramo develops the narrator's immediate reactions on the train following her departure:

Come avevo potuto? Ora il mio bimbo, mio figlio, riaddormentato sotto il mio bacio, mi avrebbe chiamata, forse mi chiamava già... Pensai che l'avevo ingannato. Non avrei dovuto svegliarlo del tutto, dirgli che non sarei mai più tornata, e che non sapevo s'egli avrebbe potuto raggiungermi presto? Forse mio marito era là, ora, presso il letticiuolo, e mentiva a sua volta dicendogli che sarei tornata fra poco, e il bimbo credeva, o lo interrogava con diffidenza... Che farà domani, e dopo? E tutta la mia vita d'ora innanzi sarebbe forse piena di queste interrogazioni senza risposta? (Aleramo, 1995: 215).

The stream of consciousness offers the readers an intimate insight into the protagonist's thoughts, fears and regrets. As well as developing the narrator's reaction to her departure, Aleramo continues to amplify the ending by adding a sort of 'coda', showing exactly what happened to the narrator a year on from her exit. In the final chapter, the narrator describes how she initially felt at peace — 'I primi giorni mi furono quasi un riposo' (Aleramo, 1995: 216) — but then the legal battle commenced. With the help of her father and lawyer, she tried to gain custody of her son but, because women had no rights over their children, the case was eventually dropped. For a while, the narrator's son wrote to her, sending her letters via the housekeeper but, in time, the housekeeper was replaced and the letters ceased. The narrator also recounts how, whenever she left her father's house, the children on the street reminded her of her son, so much so that she volunteers to work in a children's home in order to be near to the memory of her child. The novel then concludes with the protagonist dedicating her story to her son, whom (unlike in the case of the actual author) she never met again, highlighting how for the narrator the future is unknowable: 'Ed è per questo che scrissi. Le mie parole lo raggiungeranno' (Aleramo, 1995: 220).

So while the protagonists in *A Doll's House* and *Una donna* share a similar tragedy, it is Aleramo's extended ending which effectively fills in the 'gaps' left open in Ibsen's play. Unlike the play, the novel offers a deep psychological perspective into the protagonist's inner conflict. Even though Aleramo's character is 'silent' in comparison with her more openly verbal predecessor, the aftermath in Ibsen's play is silenced: the audience in Ibsen's play is not given an insight into what Nora does next in contrast to the readers of Aleramo's novel who are offered a raw understanding of the narrator's grief. The narrator's departure in Aleramo's novel is portrayed as a sacrificial act 'per riscattare la propria dignità di donna, per salvaguardare la speranza nel figlio di una dignità maschile' (Aleramo, 1982: 6). Consequently, '[n]on è una donna, sono tutte le donne, di madre in figlia, che si sfilano ne romanzo' (Aleramo, 1982: 7). As Maria Macciocchi has concluded:

La Nora di Ibsen abbandonava solo la sua ‘casa di bambola’, la sua fittizia vita di pupattola. *Una donna* di Aleramo consuma invece l’atto, ancor oggi assolutamente indigesto a tutti (anche ai progressisti), della separazione per sempre dal bambino, la rimessa in questione della famiglia — non solo e non tanto per prospettare il divorzio come soluzione alle unioni sbagliate — come cellula schiavistica per donne e bambini, in una società schiavistica. La famiglia come prigioniera da distruggere (Aleramo, 1982: 6–7).

Inevitably, Aleramo’s contemporary critics related her work to Ibsen’s play. Some of the criticism came from her female readership. As Laura Gropallo wrote in *Caffaro* on 20 March 1907:

La Nora di Ibsen ha figliato [...] Ma l’ultima goccia che fa traboccare il vaso agli occhi suoi [di Sibilla] è la malattia che il marito contrae nell’assenza di qualche settimana della moglie [...]. Argomento davvero meschino, perché se tutte le mogli dovessero abbandonare il marito malato per debolezze umane non è chi non veda come molti, troppi focolari dovrebbero rimanere deserti (Conti, 1978: 33).

As with the critics cited earlier who were unable to accept Ibsen’s play, Gropallo also seemed to avoid facing the truth about why Aleramo’s heroine would want to escape her violent marriage, arguing that the character should have stayed with her husband who had contracted a sexually transmitted disease because of what she calls ‘debolezze umane’ (Conti, 1978: 33). Further female backlash is expressed by Virginia Olper Monis who maintained that ‘[l]’unica vittima è il figlio’ (Conti, 1978: 33), and Adelaide Bernardini who was puzzled as to why a woman would abandon her family if it was not for another man (which links back with Majno’s reservations towards Aleramo’s initial choice to include the presence of her lover in her novel):

Tante altre prima di lei hanno commesso la pazzia di abbandonare i figli [...] ma per un amante, travolte dalla passione a cui hanno sacrificato la pace, l’onore, pronte a sacrificarle anche la vita! L’anonima protagonista, invece, commette quella viltà per egoismo; e commette quasi un infanticidio, lasciando il bambino in un ambiente da cui lei, *cosciente e forte*, fugge come da una galera (Conti, 1978: 33).

As for male critics, Ugo Ojetti offered an analysis of Aleramo’s novel in *Il Corriere della sera* on 14 December 1906:

Certo la legge nostra quando regola i diritti e i doveri della donna è tra le più arretrate d’Europa, e perciò si sono costituiti comitati e giornali per metterli in discussione e rammodernarli. Ma il caso narratoci da Sibilla Aleramo è nuovissimo perché discute addirittura i doveri della madre [...] Questo libro è sincero, è crudele, è modernissimo. Solo per la difesa della propria mente e della propria individualità, nessuna donna, in nessun romanzo, vent’anni fa, sarebbe fuggita [...] È curioso constatare in queste pagine quanto l’inebriamento per la letteratura romantica e sentimentale. Questa giustificava tutto con la

passione; quella lo giustifica con la 'nozione dei propri diritti'. La conclusione è la stessa (Conti, 1978: 34).

What Ogetti here admired about Aleramo's novel is how it was 'nuovissimo' and 'modernissimo': not only does the protagonist leave at a time when single mothers had no legal rights over their children, but she leaves to protect her own sanity and individuality.

Moreover, Auturo Graf in *Nuova antologia* on 16 December 1906 places emphasis on the novel's harsh realism:

Mi accorgo di aver parlato di questo libro come dei romanzi non si usa parlare; ma ho già detto che questo non è propriamente un romanzo. È libro di sdegno, di alterezza, di esecrazione, di giustizia e di castigo. Chi non si spaventa di queste cose, lo legga (Conti and Morito, 1981: 43).

Other critics praised Aleramo's honesty. As Massimo Bontempelli claimed in *Il grido del popolo* on 29 December 1907:

Qualunque convinzione taluno possa essersi fatto sulla *indifferenza*, necessaria dell'arte, cade di fronte alla sincerità grande dell'autrice, sincerità che subito si rivela, e diviene tosto un elemento di vitalità estetica e la traduce in espressione viva (Conti and Morito, 1981: 44).

Similarly, Fernande Luchaire-Dauriac in 'Un cas de féminisme pratique', published in *Roman et vie* on 1 June 1908, considered Aleramo a genuine voice of the era, and P Marguerite reviewing the novel in *La Dépêche* on 1 December 1908 stressed that the book is rich in sincerity (Conti and Morito, 1981: 44). Perhaps it was the authenticity in Aleramo's novel which led the critic Piero Gobetti in his article dedicated to the author in *Il lavoro* on 21 July 1924 to conclude much later that *Una donna* is a feminist gospel which essentially offers a more intimate interpretation of the protagonist's plight compared to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*:

Una donna rivela tesori di psicologia che commuovono la fanciullezza di Sibilla, poi i primi motivi di vita riflessiva del figlio hanno trovato una scrittrice, capace di ragionare sul sorgere dei primi dubbi, sui primi atti di pensiero con tenerezza vigile e acuta. Che dolce tono d'idillio nella pittura di malinconie fanciullesche! Questo è il vero motivo del fascino che ha esercitato un libro per virtù di stile ancora approssimativo. Veramente i contemporanei vi trovano anche il vangelo del femminismo e misero in causa Nora, senza accorgersi che Ibsen aveva scritto in *Casa di bambola* una delle sue opere mancate appunto per aver voluto derivare da una bella situazione di psicologie, da un *interno* degno di Hedda Gabler, un caso morale d'eccezione e una specie di vangelo del femminismo. E anche a Sibilla, quando si dedica alla propaganda e alla ricerca di indipendenza, quando costruisce i suoi programmi e la sua missione, vorremmo dire di non mostrarsi troppo esigente colle idee e di limitare al tragico destino di Rina, dolce sventurata, i consigli e le conseguenze

della sua filosofia. In altre parole, la sua arte è più vicina ai brividi d'incertezza della solitaria dolente che ai suoi maschi programmi (Conti and Morito, 1981: 201).

As a result, what has emerged from the majority of the aforementioned critics is that *Una donna* laid a strong foundation for a new kind of woman to emerge in modern literature. The publication of the novel later paved the way for a surge of female characters who continued to challenge social conventions and sexual prejudices in the twentieth century, including those in Anna Banti's *Il coraggio delle donne* in 1940.

Conclusion

This article has sought to bring together the various contexts and collaborative networks that allowed the theatre of Ibsen to travel into late nineteenth-century Italy through translation and performance. In particular, it has focussed on Capuana's retranslation and Duse's early interpretations of that play which helped to transmit and circulate the groundbreaking role of Nora, a role which had a significant impact on the development of Aleramo's life and fiction. Close analysis of both *A Doll's House* and *Una donna* has offered a deeper understanding of the points of contact between Ibsen and Aleramo, and has thrown light on how the narrative genre was able to expand on key issues which are only dealt with briefly on stage. Through the voice of the narrator, readers of Aleramo's novel are provided with an intimate insight into the pain and suffering caused by her exit, an insight which audiences of Ibsen's play can only assume after Nora closes the door shut. While recent scholarship has tended to pair Ibsen and Aleramo, this article has gone some way in moving the discussions forward by elucidating the various trajectories and synergies that set Aleramo in (but also away from) Ibsen's direction.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Shirley Vinnall and Ursula Fanning for helping me to develop this article in the early drafting stages.

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