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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Jan., 1989), pp. 28-40

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462329>

Accessed: 28-01-2016 23:13 UTC

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## The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen

*A Doll House*<sup>1</sup> is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings, or *Ghosts* about syphilis. . . . Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person.

(M. Meyer 457)

**I**BSEN HAS BEEN resoundingly saved from feminism, or, as it was called in his day, "the woman question." His rescuers customarily cite a statement the dramatist made on 26 May 1898 at a seventieth-birthday banquet given in his honor by the Norwegian Women's Rights League:

I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. . . . True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (Ibsen, *Letters* 337)

Ibsen's champions like to take this disavowal as a precise reference to his purpose in writing *A Doll House* twenty years earlier, his "original intention," according to Maurice Valency (151). Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer urges all reviewers of *Doll House* revivals to learn Ibsen's speech by heart (774), and James McFarlane, editor of *The Oxford Ibsen*, includes it in his explanatory material on *A Doll House*, under "Some Pronouncements of the Author," as though Ibsen had been speaking of the play (456). Whatever propaganda feminists may have made of *A Doll House*, Ibsen, it is argued, never meant to write a play about the highly topical subject of women's rights; Nora's conflict represents something other than, or something more than, woman's. In an article commemorating the half century of Ibsen's death, R. M. Adams explains, "*A Doll House* represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes" (416). Over twenty years later, after feminism had resurfaced as an international movement, Einar Haugen, the doyen of American Scandinavian studies, insisted that "Ibsen's Nora is not just a woman arguing for female liberation; she is much

more. She embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life" (vii). In the Modern Language Association's *Approaches to Teaching A Doll House*, the editor speaks disparagingly of "reductionist views of [*A Doll House*] as a feminist drama." Summarizing a "major theme" in the volume as "the need for a broad view of the play and a condemnation of a static approach," she warns that discussions of the play's "connection with feminism" have value only if they are monitored, "properly channeled and kept firmly linked to Ibsen's text" (Shafer, Introduction 32).

Removing the woman question from *A Doll House* is presented as part of a corrective effort to free Ibsen from his erroneous reputation as a writer of thesis plays, a wrongheaded notion usually blamed on Shaw, who, it is claimed, mistakenly saw Ibsen as the nineteenth century's greatest iconoclast and offered that misreading to the public as *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. Ibsen, it is now de rigueur to explain, did not stoop to "issues." He was a poet of the truth of the human soul. That Nora's exit from her dollhouse has long been the principal international symbol for women's issues, including many that far exceed the confines of her small world,<sup>2</sup> is irrelevant to the essential meaning of *A Doll House*, a play, in Richard Gilman's phrase, "pitched beyond sexual difference" (65). Ibsen, explains Robert Brustein, "was completely indifferent to [the woman question] except as a metaphor for individual freedom" (105). Discussing the relation of *A Doll House* to feminism, Halvdan Koht, author of the definitive Norwegian Ibsen life, says in summary, "Little by little the topical controversy died away; what remained was the work of art, with its demand for truth in every human relation" (323).

Thus, it turns out, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the women's rights movement is not really about women at all. "Fiddle-faddle," pronounced R. M. Adams, dismissing feminist claims for the play (416). Like angels, Nora has no sex. Ibsen meant her to be Everyman.<sup>3</sup>

### The Demon in the House

[Nora is] a daughter of Eve. . . . [A]n irresistibly bewitching piece of femininity. . . . [Her] charge that in

all the years of their marriage they have never exchanged one serious word about serious things is incorrect: she has quite forgotten how seriously Torvald lectured her on the subjects of forgery and lying less than three days ago. (Weigand 27, 64–65)

The a priori dismissal of women's rights as the subject of *A Doll House* is a gentlemanly backlash, a refusal to acknowledge the existence of a tiresome reality, "the hoary problem of women's rights," as Michael Meyer has it (457); the issue is decidedly *vieux jeu*, and its importance has been greatly exaggerated. In Ibsen's timeless world of *Everyman*, questions of gender can only be tedious intrusions.

But for over a hundred years, Nora has been under direct siege as exhibiting the most perfidious characteristics of her sex; the original outcry of the 1880s is swollen now to a mighty chorus of blame. She is denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an "abnormal" woman, a "hysteric"; a vain, unloving egoist who abandons her family in a paroxysm of selfishness. The proponents of the last view would seem to think Ibsen had in mind a housewife Medea, whose cruelty to husband and children he tailored down to fit the framed, domestic world of realist drama.

The first attacks were launched against Nora on moral grounds and against Ibsen, ostensibly, on "literary" ones. The outraged reviewers of the premiere claimed that *A Doll House* did not have to be taken as a serious statement about women's rights because the heroine of act 3 is an incomprehensible transformation of the heroine of acts 1 and 2. This reasoning provided an ideal way to dismiss Nora altogether; nothing she said needed to be taken seriously, and her door slamming could be written off as silly theatrics (Marker and Marker 85–87).

The argument for the two Noras, which still remains popular,<sup>4</sup> has had its most determined defender in the Norwegian scholar Else Høst, who argues that Ibsen's carefree, charming "lark" could never have become the "newly fledged feminist." In any case it is the "childish, expectant, ecstatic, broken-hearted Nora" who makes *A Doll House* immortal (28; my trans.); the other one, the unfeeling woman of act 3 who coldly analyzes the flaws in her marriage, is psychologically unconvincing and wholly unsympathetic.

The most unrelenting attempt on record to trivialize Ibsen's protagonist, and a favorite source for Nora's later detractors, is Hermann Weigand's.<sup>5</sup>

In a classic 1925 study, Weigand labors through forty-nine pages to demonstrate that Ibsen conceived of Nora as a silly, lovable female. At the beginning, Weigand confesses, he was, like all men, momentarily shaken by the play: "Having had the misfortune to be born of the male sex, we slink away in shame, vowing to mend our ways." The chastened critic's remorse is short-lived, however, as a "clear male voice, irreverently breaking the silence," stuns with its critical acumen: "'The meaning of the final scene,' the voice says, 'is epitomized by Nora's remark: "Yes, Torvald. Now I have changed my dress."'" With this epiphany as guide, Weigand spends the night poring over the "little volume." Dawn arrives, bringing with it the return of "masculine self-respect" (26–27). For there is only one explanation for the revolt of "this winsome little woman" (52) and her childish door slamming: Ibsen meant *A Doll House* as comedy. Nora's erratic behavior at the curtain's fall leaves us laughing heartily, for there is no doubt that she will return home to "revert, imperceptibly, to her role of songbird and charmer" (68). After all, since Nora is

an irresistibly bewitching piece of femininity, an extravagant poet and romancer, utterly lacking in sense of fact, and endowed with a natural gift for play-acting which makes her instinctively dramatize her experiences: how can the settlement fail of a fundamentally comic appeal? (64)

The most popular way to render Nora inconsequential has been to attack her morality; whatever the vocabulary used, the arguments have remained much the same for over a century. Oswald Crawford, writing in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1891, scolded that while Nora may be "charming as doll-women may be charming," she is "unprincipled" (732). A half century later, after Freudianism had produced a widely accepted "clinical" language of disapproval, Nora could be called "abnormal." Mary McCarthy lists Nora as one of the "neurotic" women whom Ibsen, she curiously claims, was the first playwright to put on stage (80). For Maurice Valency, Nora is a case study of female hysteria, a willful, unwomanly woman: "Nora is a carefully studied example of what we have come to know as the hysterical personality—bright, unstable, impulsive, romantic, quite immune from feelings of guilt, and, at bottom, not especially feminine" (151–52).

More recent assaults on Nora have argued that her forgery to obtain the money to save her hus-

band's life proves her irresponsibility and egotism. Brian Johnston condemns Nora's love as "unintelligent" and her crime as "a trivial act which nevertheless turns to evil because it refused to take the universal ethical realm into consideration at all" (97); Ibsen uses Torvald's famous pet names for Nora—lark, squirrel—to give her a "strong 'animal' identity" and to underscore her inability to understand the ethical issues faced by human beings (97). Evert Sprinchorn argues that Nora had only to ask her husband's kindly friends (entirely missing from the play) for the necessary money: ". . . any other woman would have done so. But Nora knew that if she turned to one of Torvald's friends for help, she would have had to share her role of savior with someone else" (124).

Even Nora's sweet tooth is evidence of her unworthiness, as we see her "surreptitiously devouring the forbidden [by her husband] macaroons," even "brazenly offer[ing] macaroons to Doctor Rank, and finally lying in her denial that the macaroons are hers"; eating macaroons in secret suggests that "Nora is deceitful and manipulative from the start" and that her exit thus "reflects only a petulant woman's irresponsibility" (Schlueter 64–65). As she eats the cookies, Nora adds insult to injury by declaring her hidden wish to say "death and damnation" in front of her husband, thus revealing, according to Brian Downs, of Christ's College, Cambridge, "something a trifle febrile and morbid" in her nature (Downs 130).

Much has been made of Nora's relationship with Doctor Rank, the surest proof, it is argued, of her dishonesty. Nora is revealed as *la belle dame sans merci* when she "suggestively queries Rank whether a pair of silk stockings will fit her" (Schlueter 65); she "flirts cruelly with [him] and toys with his affection for her, drawing him on to find out how strong her hold over him actually is" (Sprinchorn 124).

Nora's detractors have often been, from the first, her husband's defenders. In an argument that claims to rescue Nora and Torvald from "the campaign for the liberation of women" so that they "become vivid and disturbingly real," Evert Sprinchorn pleads that Torvald "has given Nora all the material things and all the sexual attention that any young wife could reasonably desire. He loves beautiful things, and not least his pretty wife" (121). Nora is incapable of appreciating her husband because she "is not a normal woman. She is compulsive, highly imaginative, and very much inclined to

go to extremes." Since it is she who has acquired the money to save his life, Torvald, and not Nora, is really the "wife in the family," although he "has regarded himself as the breadwinner . . . the main support of his wife and children, as any decent husband would like to regard himself" (122). In another defense, John Chamberlain argues that Torvald deserves our sympathy because he is no "mere common or garden chauvinist." If Nora were less the actress Weigand has proved her to be, "the woman in her might observe what the embarrassingly naive feminist overlooks or ignores, namely, the indications that Torvald, for all his faults, is taking her at least as seriously as he can—and perhaps even as seriously as she deserves" (85).

All female, or no woman at all, Nora loses either way. Frivolous, deceitful, or unwomanly, she qualifies neither as a heroine nor as a spokeswoman for feminism. Her famous exit embodies only "the latest and shallowest notion of emancipated womanhood, abandoning her family to go out into the world in search of 'her true identity'" (Freedman 4). And in any case, it is only naive Nora who believes she might make a life for herself; "the audience," argues an essayist in *College English*, "can see most clearly how Nora is exchanging a practical doll's role for an impractical one" (Pearce 343). We are back to the high condescension of the Victorians and Edward Dowden:

Inquiries should be set on foot to ascertain whether a manuscript may not lurk in some house in Christiania [Oslo] entitled *Nora Helmer's Reflections in Solitude*; it would be a document of singular interest, and probably would conclude with the words, "Tomorrow I return to Torvald; have been exactly one week away; shall insist on a free woman's right to unlimited macaroons as test of his reform." (248)

In the first heady days of *A Doll House* Nora was rendered powerless by substituted denouements and sequels that sent her home to her husband. Now Nora's critics take the high-handed position that all the fuss was unnecessary, since Nora is not a feminist heroine. And yet in the twentieth-century case against her, whether Nora is judged childish, "neurotic," or unprincipled and whether her accuser's tone is one of witty derision, clinical sobriety, or moral earnestness, the purpose behind the verdict remains that of Nora's frightened contemporaries: to destroy her credibility and power as a representative of women. The demon in the house, the mod-

ern “half-woman,” as Strindberg called her in the preface to *Miss Julie*, who, “now that she has been discovered has begun to make a noise” (65), must be silenced, her heretical forces destroyed, so that *A Doll House* can emerge a safe classic, rescued from feminism, and Ibsen can assume his place in the pantheon of true artists, unsullied by the “woman question” and the topical taint of history.

The High Claims of Art and Tautology:  
“Beyond Feminism” to Men

Nora: I don't believe in that anymore. (193)

Nora: Det tror jeg ikke lenger på. (111)

The universalist critics of *A Doll House* make the familiar claim that the work can be no more about women than men because the interests of both are the same “human” ones; sex is irrelevant, and thus gender nonexistent, in the literary search for the self, which transcends and obliterates mere biological and social determinations. Faced with a text in which the protagonist rejects the nonself she describes as a doll, the plaything of her father and husband, we must take care not to let feminism, the proper concern of pamphlets or, perhaps, thesis plays, get in the way of art: “Ibsen's case is stronger, not weaker, if we don't let the tragedy disappear in polemics about women's rights” (Reinert 62). Nora's drama can be poetry only if it goes “beyond” feminism.

The first point to make here is that the argument in itself is a fine example of “begging the question”: the overwhelmingly deductive reasoning, while never laid out, is that since true art cannot be about feminism and since *A Doll House* is true art, then *A Doll House* cannot be about feminism. The conclusion rests on the assumption that “women's rights” (along with, one must suppose, all other struggles for human rights in which biological or social identity figures prominently) is too limited to be the stuff of literature. The “state” of being a feminist is viewed as an uninteresting given, something a woman is, not something she becomes, a condition suitable to flat characters in flat-heeled shoes and outside the realm of art, which treats universal questions of human life, whose nature is complex and evolutionary. Restricted to works as predictable as propaganda, “feminist” heroines must spring from their creators' heads fully armed with pamphlets.

Second, implicit in the argument that would rescue *A Doll House* from feminist “ideology” is an emphatic gender-determined ideology whose base is startlingly tautological. Women's rights, it is claimed, is not a fit subject for tragedy or poetry, because it is insufficiently representative to be generally and thus literarily human. Now, if this is so, the explanation can only be that men, who already possess the rights women seek, are excluded from the female struggle, which is, precisely, a struggle for equality with them. In other words, because the sexes do not share inequality, woman's desire to be equal cannot be representative. The nonsense of the tautology is doubled when this reasoning is applied to the literary text; for if the life of a female protagonist is worthy of our critical and moral attention only insofar as it is unrelated to women's inferior status, and if the text itself is art only to the extent that what the heroine is seeking transcends her sexual identity, then what happens to her is significant only to the extent that it can happen to a man as well. Whatever is universal is male. This means that Nora Helmer and such other famous nineteenth-century heroines as Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Hester Prynne, and Dorothea Brooke could just as well be men—except for their sex, of course. And, as Dorothy Sayers reminds us in her essay “The Human-Not-Quite-Human,” women are, after all, “more like men than anything else in the world” (142). But to say that Nora Helmer stands for the individual in search of his or her self, besides being a singularly unhelpful and platitudinous generalization, is wrong, if not absurd. For it means that Nora's conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a nineteenth-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman. Yet both Nora and *A Doll House* are unimaginable otherwise.

If this point needs illustrating, let us examine the popular argument by analogy that *A Doll House* is “no more about women's rights than *Ghosts* [is] about syphilis” (besides M. Meyer 457, see Adams 415–16 and Le Gallienne xxiv). We will remove from *Ghosts* the dated disease that penicillin has made merely topical (at least in the medical sense) and assign Captain Alving and his son, Oswald, another fatal malady—say, tuberculosis. Both the horror and the marvelous aptness of the venereal disease, one of Ibsen's grim jokes, are lost (Helene Alving fled the man she loved to return to “love” the one she loathed, and the diseased Oswald is the consequence), but the end is the same: the child inherits

the father's doom. Now let us remove the "woman problem" from *A Doll House*; let us give Nora Helmer the same rights as Torvald Helmer, and let him consider her his equal. What is left of the play? The only honest response is nothing, for if we emancipate Nora, free her from the dollhouse, there is no play; or, rather, there is the resolution of the play, the confrontation between husband and wife and the exit that follows, the only crisis and denouement that could properly conclude the action. As Ibsen explained, "I might honestly say that it was for the sake of the last scene that the whole play was written" (*Letters* 300).

And to read the scene is to meet with a compendium of everything that early modern feminism denounced about woman's state. When Nora accuses her father and husband of having committed a great sin against her by treating her as if she were a playmate, she provides a textbook illustration of Wollstonecraft's major charge in the *Vindication*, that women are brought up to be "pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue" as if they were "gentle, domestic brutes" (Goulianos 142). When she describes herself as a doll wife who has lived "by doing tricks" (191; "å gjøre kunster" 110), she is a flawless example of Margaret Fuller's charge that man "wants no woman, but only a girl to play ball with" (Rossi 167). When she realizes that she is unfit to do anything in life and announces her remedy—"I have to try to educate myself" (192; "Jeg må se å oppdra meg selv" 111)—she expresses nineteenth-century feminism's universally agreed-upon base for women's emancipation; in telling Torvald she does not know how to be his wife, she might be paraphrasing Harriet Martineau in "On Female Education," which argues the necessity of rearing women to be "companions to men instead of playthings or servants" (Rossi 186). And finally, when Nora discovers that she has duties higher than those of a "wife and mother" (193; "hustru og mor" 111), obligations she names as "duties to myself" (193; "pliktene imot meg selv" 111), she is voicing the most basic of feminist principles: that women no less than men possess a moral and intellectual nature and have not only a right but a duty to develop it: "the grand end of their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties" (Wollstonecraft; qtd. in Goulianos 149).

Ibsen's contemporaries, the sophisticated as well as the crude, recognized *A Doll House* as the clearest and most substantial expression of the "woman question" that had yet appeared. In Eu-

rope and America, from the 1880s on, the articles poured forth: "Der Noratypus," "Ibsen und die Frauenfragen," "Ibsen et la femme," "La représentation féministe et sociale d'Ibsen," "A Prophet of the New Womanhood," "Ibsen as a Pioneer of the Woman Movement." These are a small sampling of titles from scholars and journalists who agreed with their more famous contemporaries Lou Andréas Salomé, Alla Nazimova, Georg Brandes, and August Strindberg, along with every other writer on Ibsen, whether in the important dailies and weeklies or in the highbrow and lowbrow reviews, that the theme of *A Doll House* was the subjection of women by men.<sup>6</sup>

Havelock Ellis, filled with a young man's dreams and inspired by Nora, proclaimed that she held out nothing less than "the promise of a new social order." In 1890, eleven years after Betty Hennings as Nora first slammed the shakey backdrop door in Copenhagen's Royal Theatre, he summarized what *A Doll House* meant to the progressives of Ibsen's time:

The great wave of emancipation which is now sweeping across the civilized world means nominally nothing more than that women should have the right to education, freedom to work, and political enfranchisement—nothing in short but the bare ordinary rights of an adult human creature in a civilized state. (9)

Profoundly disturbing in its day, *A Doll House* remains so still because, in James Huneker's succinct analysis, it is "the plea for woman as a human being, neither more nor less than man, which the dramatist made" (275).

#### Wishful Reading: The Critic, the Heroine, and Her Master's Voice

*Torvald*: You stay right here and give me a reckoning. You understand what you've done? Answer! You understand? (*A Doll House* 187)

*Torvald*: Her blir du og står meg til regnskap. Forstår du hva du har gjort? Svar meg! Forstår du det? (*Et Dukkehjem* 108)

It is easy to answer Nora's zealous critics, who seem almost willfully wrong; being silly or "frivolous" is, after all, essential to the role of addle-brained doll that Nora plays in the marriage. And how frivolous was it to save Torvald's life? Nora's critics conveniently forget the bottom line of Nora's

“crime”: Torvald would have died if Nora had not forged. Phobic about borrowing, the gravely ill husband refuses to take out a loan and so must be saved in spite of himself. That Nora’s lifesaving deed was a crime is the very foundation of Ibsen’s conflict between law and love; a good case could be made for Nora as a bourgeois Antigone in her stalwart defiance of the world: “A wife hasn’t a right to save her husband’s life? I don’t know much about laws. . . . I did it out of love” (149; “Skulle ikke en hustru ha rett til å redde sin manns liv? Jeg kjenner ikke lovene så nøye. . . . Jeg gjorde det jo av kjærlighet” 84). The argument that Nora is not sufficiently appreciative of her husband’s fond attentions is perhaps best countered by quoting Veblen; noting the common complaint against the new woman, that she “is petted by her husband . . . [and] surrounded by the most numerous and delicate attentions [yet] she is not satisfied,” he points out that the “things which typically are cited as advantages” are precisely those that make up woman’s grievance (357–58). As for the secret macaroon eating, it hardly seems a moral issue, and in any case this household convention dramatizes the *modus vivendi* of the Helmer marriage, in which Nora is expected to practice cookie-jar trickeries in the game between the strong, wise, put-upon husband and the weak, childlike wife. The argument that Ibsen blackens Nora in the famous silk-stocking scene with Doctor Rank, which so dismayed Eva Le Gallienne that she simply omitted it from her translation, seems both prudish and resolutely determined to ignore Ibsen’s purposes. Nora, without reflecting on the significance of her feeling, quite naturally prefers the company of the understanding and amusing doctor to that of her husband: “Yes, you see,” Nora blithely tosses off, as she and Rank speak of their ease together, “There are some people that one loves most and other people that one would almost prefer being with” (166; “Ja, ser De, der er jo noen mennesker som man holder mest av, og andre mennesker som man nesten helst vil være sammen med” 95). It is Rank who will be her real audience at the dancing of the tarantella: “you can imagine then that I’m dancing only for you—yes, and of course for Torvald, too—that’s understood” (164; “og da skal De forestille Dem at jeg gjør det bare for Deres skyld,—ja, og så naturligvis for Torvalds; —det forstår seg” 93). It is not surprising that Rank provides a perfect piano accompaniment for Nora’s famous practice session and that Torvald is perturbed: “Rank, stop! This is pure madness!”

(174; “Rank, hold opp; dette er jo den rene galskap” 99). It would not be too speculative, I think, to guess that Rank, unlike Torvald, would not need to fantasize that Nora is a virgin before making love to her. Through the silk-stocking scene, Ibsen shows the sexual side of the Helmer *mésalliance*, a side Nora scarcely sees herself. And its ending proves, indisputably, not her dishonesty, but her essential honorableness. When Rank confronts her with his moving confession of love as she is about to ask him for the money she desperately needs, she refuses to make use of his feelings and categorically rejects his help: “After that? . . . You can’t know anything now” (166; “Efter dette? . . . Ingenting kan De få vite nu” 94).

The claim that Nora cannot be a feminist heroine because she is flawed is an example of question begging similar to the universalists’ argument that *A Doll House* is not a feminist play because feminism is ipso facto an unworthy subject of art. Nora falls short according to unnamed, “self-evident” criteria for a feminist heroine, among which would seem to be one, some, or all of the following: an ever-present serious-mindedness; a calm, unexcitable temperament; an unshakable obedience to the letter of the law, even if it means the death of a husband; perfect sincerity and honesty; and a thoroughgoing selflessness. For *A Doll House* to be feminist, it would, apparently, have to be a kind of fourth-wall morality play with a saintly Everyfeminist as heroine, not this ignorant, excitable, confused, and desperate—in short, human—Nora Helmer.

But while Nora is too flawed to represent women, the argument stops short and the case is curiously altered in the claim that she represents human beings. Nora’s humanity keeps her from representing women but not, magically, from representing people—namely men, and women to the extent that what happens to them can happen to men as well—surely as fabulous an example of critical reasoning as we can imagine, and yet one that is found everywhere.

This strange and illogical stance has its parallel for nonsense in a knotty critical conundrum: if Nora is a frivolous and superficial woman who leaves her husband on a whim, then *A Doll House* qualifies as a piece of rather shoddy *boulevardisme*; if Nora is abnormal, a case study, then *A Doll House* is an example of reductive laboratory naturalism; if Nora is a self-serving egoist whose unbridled thirst for power destroys her marriage,

then *A Doll House* is melodrama, with Nora as villain and Torvald as victim, and act 3 is either an incomprehensible bore or the most ponderously unsuccessful instance of dramatic irony in the history of the theater. But Nora's critics have not claimed that *A Doll House* belongs to any inferior subgenre. Applauding it as a fine drama, they engage in side attacks on its protagonist, sniping at Nora to discredit her arguments and ignoring the implications of their own.

The incompleteness of this attack, while never acknowledged, is easily explained. To destroy Nora's identity as wife and woman her critics would have to "deconstruct" the play; in the words of Jonathan Culler's useful definition, they would have to show how the text "undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies" (86). They would have to examine what Nora says in act 3 about her husband, her marriage, and her life and demonstrate that her unequivocal statements are contested by the text. Since the text in question is a play, deconstructing Nora would mean arguing the significance—the interest, worth, and importance—of the part of the dialogue Ibsen gives Nora's foil, that is, her husband. It is not a matter of absolving Torvald of villainy, as some of his defenders seem to think it is; Ibsen was not interested in the conflict of melodrama, and in any case poor Torvald is obviously not "evil." It is a matter of showing that his assertions seriously call into question, delegitimize, the statements of his wife. Not surprisingly, no one has yet risen to this challenge, for while Torvald Helmer has had his sympathizers, as we have seen, none of them has suggested that Ibsen was of Torvald's party without knowing it or that Torvald could be Ibsen's, or anyone else's, *raisonneur* in any modestly enlightened universe of the Western world. It would be an intrepid critic indeed who could seriously uphold the position of a man who says to his wife, "Your father's official career was hardly above reproach. But mine is" (160; "Din far var ingen uangripelig embedsmann. Men det er jeg" 90) or "For a man there's something indescribably sweet and satisfying in knowing he's forgiven his wife. . . . [I]n a sense, he's given her fresh into the world again, and she's become his wife and his child as well" (190; "Det er for en mann noe så ubeskrivelig søtt og tilfredsstillende i dette å vite med seg selv at han har tilgitt sin hustru. . . . han har liksom satt henne inn i verden på ny; hun er på en måte blitt både hans hustru og hans barn tillike" 109–10). In fact, a

charge frequently leveled against *A Doll House* is that the husband seems too vain to be true, "an egoist of such dimensions," in Halvdan Koht's phrase, "that we can hardly take him seriously" (319). And yet the accusations against Nora restate her husband's; the charges range from frivolousness, made when Torvald is annoyed at what he thinks are her spendthrift habits ("What are those little birds called that always fly through their fortunes?" [127; "Hva er det de fugle kalles som alltid setter penge over styr?" 70]), to deceitfulness, when he learns of her secret loan to save his life (" . . . a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal" [187; " . . . en hyklerske, en løgnerske,—verre, verre,—en forbryterske!" 108]), to selfishness and thus unwomanliness, when he hears her decision to leave him ("Abandon your home, your husband, your children. . . . Before all else you're a wife and mother" [192–93; "Forlate ditt hjem, din mann og dine barn! . . . Du er først og fremst hustru og mor" 111]). Amused or angry, the husband's accusing voice is so authoritative that in spite of Torvald's unworthiness as moral spokesman, Nora's critics, in a thoroughgoing and, one supposes, unconscious identification, parrot his judgments and thus read her through his eyes. Their Nora is Torvald's Nora, a critical perspective that resembles taking Othello's word on Desdemona.

#### Wishful Intention: Or, What Ibsen Is Supposed to Have Meant

*Bernick*: People shouldn't always be thinking of themselves first, especially women. (*Pillars of Society* 57)

*Bernick*: Menneskene bør da ikke i første rekke tenke på seg selv, og aller minst kvinnene.

(*Samfundets Støtten* 32)

Anyone who claims that Ibsen thought of Nora as a silly, hysterical, or selfish woman is either ignoring or misrepresenting the plain truth, present from the earliest to the most recent biographies, that Ibsen admired, even adored, Nora Helmer. Among all his characters, she was the one he liked best and found most real. While working on *A Doll House*, he announced to Suzannah Ibsen, his wife, "I've just seen Nora. She came right over to me and put her hand on my shoulder." The quick-witted Suzannah replied at once, "What was she wearing?" In a perfectly serious tone, Ibsen answered, "A simple blue woolen dress" (Koht 318).

After *A Doll House* had made him famous, Ibsen was fond of explaining that his heroine's "real" name was "Eleanora" but that she had been called "Nora" from childhood. Bergliot Bjornson Ibsen, the playwright's daughter-in-law, tells the story of how she and her husband, Sigurd, on one of the last occasions on which they saw Ibsen out of bed in the year he died, asked permission to name their newborn daughter "Eleanora." Ibsen was greatly moved. "God bless you, Bergliot," he said to her (157). He had, in fact, christened his own Nora with a precious gift, for both "Nora" and "Eleanora" were names given to the sister of Ole Schulerud, one of the few close friends of Ibsen's life, who in the early years of grinding poverty believed in Ibsen's genius and tirelessly hawked his first play to bookseller after bookseller, finally spending his small inheritance to pay for its publication.

Ibsen was inspired to write *A Doll House* by the terrible events in the life of his protégé Laura Petersen Kieler, a Norwegian journalist of whom he was extremely fond. Married to a man with a phobia about debt, she had secretly borrowed money to finance an Italian journey necessary for her husband's recovery from tuberculosis. She worked frantically to reimburse the loan, exhausting herself in turning out hackwork, and when her earnings proved insufficient, in desperation she forged a check. On discovering the crime, her husband demanded a legal separation on the grounds that she was an unfit mother and had her placed in an asylum, where she was put in the insane ward. Throughout the affair, Ibsen, her confidant and adviser, was greatly disturbed; he brooded on the wife, "forced to spill her heart's blood," as he wrote in a letter to her (Kinck 507; my trans.), and on the oblivious husband, allowing his wife to slave away on unworthy jobs, concerned neither about her physical welfare nor her work. Having done all for love, Laura Kieler was treated monstrously for her efforts by a husband obsessed with his standing in the eyes of the world. In Ibsen's working notes for *A Doll House* we find:

She has committed forgery, and is proud of it; for she has done it out of love for her husband, to save his life. But this husband of hers takes his standpoint, conventionally honorable, on the side of the law, and sees the situation with male eyes. (M. Meyer 446)

The conflict between love and law, between heart and head, between feminine and masculine, is the

moral center of *A Doll House*. But Ibsen would sharpen life's blurred edges to meet art's demand for plausibility. The heroine would be a housewife, not a writer, and the hackwork not bad novels but copying; her antagonist, the husband, would not be a cruel brute but a kind guardian: rather than put her into an asylum, he would merely denounce her as an unfit wife and mother, permitting her to receive bed and board, and then, once his reputation was safe, would offer to forgive her and take her back on the spot. The Helmers, in other words, would be "normal." And this normality would transform a sensational *fait divers* into a devastating picture of the ordinary relations between wife and husband and allow Ibsen to treat what he called, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, "the problems of married life" (McFarlane 454). Moreover, he would reverse the ending: the original Nora, the career journalist, had begged to be taken back; his housewife would sadly, emphatically refuse to stay.<sup>7</sup>

A year after *A Doll House* appeared, when Ibsen was living in Rome, a Scandinavian woman arrived there, who had left her husband and small daughter to run away with her lover. The Norwegian exile community considered her behavior unnatural and asked Ibsen what he thought. "It is not unnatural, only it is unusual" was Ibsen's opinion. The woman made it a point to speak with Ibsen, but to her surprise he treated her offhandedly. "Well, I did the same thing your Nora did," she said, offended. Ibsen replied quietly, "My Nora went alone" (Zucker 182).

A favorite piece of evidence in the argument that Ibsen was not interested in women's rights is his aversion to John Stuart Mill (see, e.g., Chamberlain 96–98). It is popular to quote Ibsen's remark to Georg Brandes about Mill's declaration that he owed the best things in his writing to his wife, Harriet Taylor: "'Fancy!' [Ibsen] said smiling, 'if you had to read Hegel or Krause with the thought that you did not know for certain whether it was Mr. or Mrs. Hegel, Mr. or Mrs. Krause you had before you!'" (Brandes 77). But in fact, Brandes, one of Ibsen's closest associates and probably the critic who understood him best, reports this mot in a discussion of Ibsen's wholehearted support of the women's movement. He notes that Mill's assertion "seemed especially ridiculous to Ibsen, with his marked individualism" (76), and explains that although Ibsen had at first little sympathy for feminism—perhaps, Brandes guesses, because of

“irritation at some of the ridiculous forms the movement assumed” —this initial response gave way “to a sympathy all the more enthusiastic” when he saw that it was “one of the great rallying points in the battle of progress” (77).

A well-known, perhaps embarrassing fact about Ibsen, never brought up in discussions disclaiming his interest in women’s rights, is that when he made the banquet speech denying that he had consciously worked for the movement, he was primarily interested in young women and annoyed by the elderly feminists who surrounded him. During the seventieth-birthday celebrations, Ibsen constantly exhibited his marked and, as Michael Meyer has it, “rather pathetic longing for young girls” (773). He had already had several romantic friendships, including one that had caused a family scandal and threatened to wreck his marriage. In the light of this fully documented biographical information about the aging playwright, is his intention in *A Doll House* more likely to be revealed by what he said in irritation at a banquet or by what he wrote twenty years earlier in sketching out his play?

A woman cannot be herself in the society of today, which is exclusively a masculine society, with laws written by men, and with accusers and judges who judge feminine conduct from the masculine standpoint. (Archer 4)

*A Doll House* is not about Everybody’s struggle to find him- or herself but, according to its author, about Everywoman’s struggle against Everyman.

*A Doll House* is a natural development of the play Ibsen had just written, the unabashedly feminist *Pillars of Society*;<sup>8</sup> both plays reflect Ibsen’s extremely privileged feminist education, which he shared with few other nineteenth-century male authors and which he owed to a trio of extraordinary women: Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen, his wife; Magdalen Thoresen, his colleague at the Norwegian National Theatre in Bergen, who was Suzannah’s stepmother and former governess; and Camilla Wergeland Collett, Ibsen’s literary colleague, valued friend, and the founder of Norwegian feminism.

Magdalen Thoresen wrote novels and plays and translated the French plays Ibsen put on as a young stage manager at the Bergen theater. She was probably the first “New Woman” he had ever met. She pitied the insolvent young writer, took him under her wing, and brought him home. She had passed her strong feminist principles on to her charge, the outspoken and irrepressible Suzannah, who adored

her strong-minded stepmother and whose favorite author was George Sand. The second time Ibsen met Suzannah he asked her to marry him. Hjordis, the fierce shield-maiden of *The Vikings at Helsingland*, the play of their engagement, and Svanhild, the strong-willed heroine of *Love’s Comedy*, the play that followed, owe much to Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen. Later, Nora’s way of speaking would remind people of Suzannah’s.

The third and perhaps most important feminist in Ibsen’s life was his friend Camilla Collett, one of the most active feminists in nineteenth-century Europe and founder of the modern Norwegian novel. Fifteen years before Mill’s *Subjection of Women*, Collett wrote *Amtmandens Døtre* (*The Governor’s Daughters*). Faced with the choice of a masculine nom de plume or no name at all on the title page, Collett brought out her novel anonymously in two parts in 1854 and 1855, but she nonetheless became widely known as the author. Its main argument, based on the general feminist claim that women’s feelings matter, is that women should have the right to educate themselves and to marry whom they please. In the world of the governor’s daughters, it is masculine success that matters. Brought up to be ornaments and mothers, women marry suitable men and devote their lives to their husbands’ careers and to their children. The novel, a cause célèbre, made Collett famous overnight.

Collett regularly visited the Ibsens in their years of exile in Germany, and she and Suzannah took every occasion to urge Ibsen to take up the feminist cause. They had long, lively discussions in the years preceding *A Doll House*, when feminism had become a strong movement and the topic of the day in Scandinavia. Collett was in Munich in 1877, when Ibsen was hard at work on *Pillars of Society*, and Ibsen’s biographer Koht speculates that Ibsen may have deliberately prodded her to talk about the women’s movement in order to get material for his dialogue (313). In any case, the play undoubtedly owes much to the conversations in the Ibsen household, as well as to the Norwegian suffragette Aasta Hansteen, the most notorious woman in the country. Deliberately provocative, Hansteen took to the platform wearing men’s boots and carrying a whip to protect herself against the oppressor. A popular news item during the Ibsens’ visit to Norway in 1874, Hansteen became the model for Lona Hessel, the shocking *raisonneuse* of *Pillars of Society*.

The play opens with a striking image of woman’s place in the world: eight ladies participating in what

has been, since antiquity, the most quintessentially female activity in literature—they are “busy sewing” (15)—as they listen to the town schoolmaster read aloud from *Woman as the Servant of Society*. Lona Hessel bursts in, and when the ladies ask her how she can aid their “Society for the Morally Disabled,” she suggests, “I can air it out” (39; “Jeg vil luften ut” 22). Returning from America, where she is rumored to have sung in saloons (even for money!), lectured, and written a book, Lona is the New Woman with a vengeance who teaches the others the truth. Lona had loved Bernick, but she packed her bags when he rejected her to marry for money. Bernick turns out not to have been much of a loss, however; he has reduced his wife, Betty, to an obedient cipher and made a personal servant of his sister, Martha, a paradigm of the nineteenth-century spinster who devotes her life to a male relative. Martha’s story may have had its source in *The Governor’s Daughters*. Like Collett’s Margarethe, Martha had once loved a young man but, too modest to declare her feelings, suffered in silence. She now lives for her brother, who is insufferable when he speaks of her; she is a “nonentity” (“ganske ubetydelig”), he explains, “who’ll take on whatever comes along” (57; “som man kan sette til hva der forefaller” 32). It is in explaining Martha’s exemplary function in life that Bernick speaks the line, “People shouldn’t always be thinking of themselves first, especially women” (57; “Menneskene bør da ikke i første rekke tenke på seg selv, og aller minst kvinnene” 32). Dina Dorf, Bernick’s ward, disregards this happy maxim, and though she agrees to marry, she tells her husband-to-be, “But first I want to work, become something the way you have. I don’t want to be a thing that’s just taken along” (98; “Men først vil jeg arbeide, bli noe selv, således som De er det. Jeg vil ikke være en ting som tas” 55). Dina knows beforehand what Nora learns after eight years of marriage: “I have to try to educate myself. . . . I’ve got to do it alone” (192; “Jeg må se å oppdra meg selv. . . . Det må jeg være alene om” 111).

*Pillars of Society*, little known and played outside Scandinavia and Germany, is one of the most radically feminist works of nineteenth-century literature. Ibsen took the old maid, the butt of society’s ridicule, a figure of pity and contempt, and made her a heroine. Rejected as unfit to be a wife, Lona Hessel refuses to sacrifice herself to a surrogate family and escapes to the New World, where she leads an independent, authentic life. As *raison-*

*neuse*, she summarizes his point of view for Bernick and the rest: “This society of yours is a bachelors’ club. You don’t see women” (117; “Jert samfunn er et samfunn av peppersvenn-sjele; I ser ikke kvinnen” 65).

It is simply not true, then, that Ibsen was not interested in feminism. It is also not true that “there is no indication that Ibsen was thinking of writing a feminist play when he first began to work seriously on *A Doll House* in the summer of 1879” (Valency 150). In the spring of that year, while Ibsen was planning his play, a scandalous incident, easily available in the biographies, took place that proves not only Ibsen’s interest in women’s rights but his passionate support for the movement. Ibsen had made two proposals to the Scandinavian Club in Rome, where he was living: that the post of librarian be opened to women candidates and that women be allowed to vote in club meetings. In the debate on the proposal, he made a long, occasionally eloquent speech, part of which follows:

Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture, or intelligence, or knowledge, or artistic talent? I don’t think many men would dare suggest that. Then what is it men fear? I hear there is a tradition here that women are cunning intriguers, and that therefore we don’t want them. Well, I have encountered a good deal of male intrigue in my time. . . .  
(M. Meyer 449)

Ibsen’s first proposal was accepted, the second not, failing by one vote. He left the club in a cold rage. A few days later, he astonished his compatriots by appearing at a gala evening. People thought he was penitent. But he was planning a surprise: facing the ballroom and its dancing couples, he interrupted the music to make a terrible scene, haranguing the celebrants with a furious tirade. He had tried to bring them progress, he shouted, but their cowardly resistance had refused it. The women were especially contemptible, for it was for them he had tried to fight. A Danish countess fainted and had to be removed, but Ibsen continued, growing more and more violent. Gunnar Heiberg, who was present, later gave this account of the event:

As his voice thundered it was as though he were clarifying his own thoughts, as his tongue chastised it was as though his spirit were scouring the darkness in search of his present spiritual goal—his poem [*A Doll House*]—as though he were personally bringing out his theories, incarnating his characters. And when he was done, he

went out into the hall, took his overcoat and walked home.  
(M. Meyer 450)

In 1884, five years after *A Doll House* had made Ibsen a recognized champion of the feminist cause, he joined with H. E. Berner, president of the Norwegian Women's Rights League, and with his fellow Norwegian writers Bjornson, Lie, and Kielland, in signing a petition to the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, urging the passage of a bill establishing separate property rights for married women. When he returned the petition to Bjornson, Ibsen wryly commented that the Storting should not be interested in men's opinions: "To consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for the sheep" (*Letters* 228). He also spoke of his fears that the current campaign for universal suffrage would come to nothing. The solution, which he despaired of seeing, would be the formation of a "strong, resolute progressive party" that would include in its goals "the statutory improvement of the position of woman" (229).

It is foolish to apply the formalist notion that art is never sullied by argument to Ibsen's middle-period plays, written at a time when he was an outspoken and direct fighter in what he called the "mortal combat between two epochs" (*Letters* 123).

Ibsen was fiercely his own man, refusing all his life to be claimed by organizations or campaigns of many sorts, including the Women's Rights League and the movement to remove the mark of Sweden from the Norwegian flag. And he had a deeply conservative streak where manners were concerned (except when he lost his temper), for he was acutely suspicious of show. Temperamentally, Ibsen was a loner. But he was also, as Georg Brandes declared, "a born polemist" (47). While it is true that Ibsen never reduced life to "ideas," it is equally true that he was passionately interested in the events and ideas of his day. He was as deeply anchored in his time as any writer has been before or since. Writing to his German translator a year after the publication of *A Doll House*, Ibsen offered one of the truest self-appraisals a writer has ever made:

Everything that I have written is intimately connected with what I have lived through, even if I have not lived it myself. Every new work has served me as emancipation and catharsis; for none of us can escape the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which we belong.

(*Hundreårsutgave* 402; my trans.)<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rolf Fjelde, America's foremost translator of Ibsen, is right; *Et Dukkehjem* is *A Doll House* and not *A Doll's House*: "There is certainly no sound justification for perpetrating the awkward and blindly traditional misnomer of *A Doll's House*; the house is not Nora's, as the possessive implies; the familiar children's toy is called a doll house" (xxv). I use Fjelde's translation of the title throughout; references in English to *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll House* are to Fjelde's *Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays* (15–118; 125–96). References to the original texts are to *Ib-sens Samlede Verker* (9–65; 70–114).

<sup>2</sup> One example is the title of a Carnegie Commission report on the status of women in American graduate education: *Escape from the Doll House*, by Saul D. Feldman.

<sup>3</sup> The notion that Ibsen's objective in *A Doll House* was non-feminist has become so widespread that even feminist critics honor it. Elaine Hoffman Baruch can term the drama "the feminist play *par excellence*" and yet refer to "the speech in which [Ibsen] denied being a feminist in *A Doll House*" (387), accepting the idea that Nora's meaning for feminism is essentially different from Ibsen's intention. Miriam Schneir anthologizes the last scene of the play in *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* but explains its inclusion as justified "whatever [Ibsen's] intention" and in spite of his speech (179).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert Brustein (49) and Marvin Rosen-

berg, whose article is a rehash of Høst's points, although Rosenberg seems unacquainted with her well-known essay.

<sup>5</sup> For a thoroughgoing defense of Weigand by a much later critic who understands that "*A Doll House* is not a feminist play," see R. F. Dietrich.

<sup>6</sup> For the studies mentioned in this paragraph see the entries in Works Cited for Marholm, Woerner, Key, Canudo, A. Meyer, and Bennett, as well as those for Salomé, Nazimova, Brandes, and Strindberg.

<sup>7</sup> In the *succès de scandale* of *A Doll House*, it was generally known that Laura Kieler was the model for Nora. She became deeply angry with Ibsen for having made use of her private life, responding so violently that she even took Torvald's derogatory comments on Nora's father as references to her own father. More than ten years later, Georg Brandes wrote an article claiming, inexplicably and rather nastily, that Nora's original had borrowed the money not to save her husband's life but to decorate her house. Widely circulated in the press, the article caused Laura Kieler great distress; she begged a friend of Ibsen's to ask the dramatist to publish a denial of Brandes's assertion. Ibsen refused absolutely, replying that he did not understand why he should be brought in to deny what the Kieler could deny themselves; he agreed to see Laura Kieler, however, and she later described a four-hour interview in Ibsen's apartment during which he was

so moved that he wept, although he still refused to set Brandes straight (Kinck 529–31). Claiming that Ibsen could have easily written a letter to a newspaper refuting Brandes's charges, Michael Meyer considers Ibsen's refusal "cowardly and hypocritical" (635); at the same time, he suspects that the story of the tearful interview may be "the confused and colored fantasy of an old lady whose life had been a protracted tragedy" (680).

While Laura Kieler did suffer greatly in her personal life, being forced, in order to get her children back, to live with a man who had had her locked up in an asylum, she enjoyed a long and productive career as a journalist; her books were issued in many editions and translated into foreign languages, and she was especially honored in Denmark for her writing on the Schleswig-Holstein question. I would not describe her life as a "protracted tragedy." In any case, there is no reason to doubt that she gave a true account of her emotional interview with Ibsen. The fact is that Ibsen was very attached to his "skylark," as he called her, and uncommonly affectionate with her; he had been greatly distressed by her husband's treatment of her, had written to her warmly to tell her so and to give her advice, and, when he heard of her incarceration, had written to his publisher asking for news of her (Kinck 506–08). It seems probable that Ibsen would be upset by Laura Kieler's tears and entreaties. His relations with younger women, moreover, were marked by passionately felt sentiment; his meeting with his protégé is not the only occasion on which he is reported to have shed tears.

As for his supposed cowardice, it is certainly true that Ibsen was braver in print than in life. But it is also true that one of the abiding principles of his life was a systematic, scrupulously hon-

ored refusal to comment publicly on his works. At the end of their talk, when Laura Kieler saw he was not yielding, she begged him to let her come again the next day; he replied, "Oh, Laura, Laura, I don't think I can let you go, but you mustn't come tomorrow. No, no, it can't be done. I can't do it. It's impossible!" (Kinck 531; my trans.). Yes, Ibsen could have written to a newspaper to say that Nora Helmer's original had acted honorably, and perhaps he should have, but he could not bring himself to do so, not even for Laura Kieler.

<sup>8</sup> Nora appears in embryo as Selma Brattsberg in *The League of Youth*, written in 1869, ten years before *A Doll House*. When Selma responds to her husband's announcement of his financial ruin, both her argument and her metaphor are Nora's: "How I've longed for even a little share in your worries! But when I asked, all you did was laugh it off with a joke. You dressed me up like a doll. You played with me as you might play with a child. Oh, how joyfully I could have helped to bear the burdens!" (93) Brandes suggested in his review of the play that Selma deserved a work all to herself; later he liked taking credit for giving Ibsen the idea for *A Doll House*.

<sup>9</sup> I presented a longer version of the first two sections of this essay on 15 February 1987 at the eleventh annual Themes in Drama conference, entitled Women in Drama, at the University of California, Riverside. I would like to express my thanks to Bill Harris, Dana Sue McDermott, and the other congress organizers, and to my audience, whose appreciation and support were greatly encouraging, especially to Karen Bassi (Syracuse Univ.), Lynda Hart (Xavier Univ.), and K. Kendall (Smith Coll.).

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