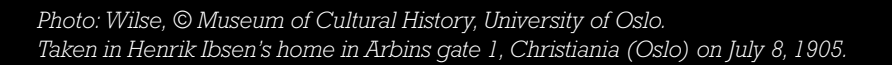
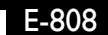
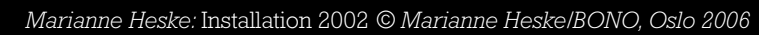


nora's sisters

Original manuscript for "A Dolls' House" in Ibsen's own handwriting



1907 Women are given a limited right, depending on income, to vote in the general elections for the national assembly (the Norwegian Storting).	1936 The Worker Protection Act gives the mother a right of work leave 6 weeks prior to delivery and 6 weeks after birth, and stipulates that she could demand to return to her job after taking this leave.	1959 An Act is passed allowing separate income tax assessment of husband and wife on certain conditions.	1974 The Act relating to Allodial Tenure is amended. Sons and daughters are equally placed with regard to the order of inheritance of allodial property.	take the spouse's name as family name, or retain his and her own name. In the same way, parents may choose the children's family name. If the National Register is not informed within six months of birth, the child automatically takes the mother's name.	1984 The Storting approves of making gender equality a principle for the Armed Forces, valid at all levels.	most senior official in a university, at the University of Oslo.	1999 Berit Ovesen is the first woman Colonel in the Armed Forces.
1910 Women obtain the right to vote in municipal elections.	1937 An act is adopted introducing a mandatory maintenance allowed to the spouse in cases of divorce.		1975 The Kindergarten Act. The municipalities are required to prepare a programme for the establishment and development of kindergartens.		1985 New rules are added in the Seamen's Act, e.g. the same minimum age of service for girls and boys.	1993 "Fathers quota" – four weeks of parental leave – is exclusively earmarked the father, and is forfeited if the father does not utilise this right.	2001 Afshan Rafiq is the first ethnic minority woman to be elected into the Parliament.
1911 Anna Rogstad takes her seat as first woman member of the Storting. (She was originally deputy member.)			1977 The Working Environment Act gives extended rights to maternity leave. The National Insurance Act is amended to give 18 weeks paid leave (previously 12 weeks). A Family and Equal Status Department is established at the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and Government Administration. The Research Council of Norway establishes the Secretariat for Research on Women. Women are allowed to attend officers' training school.			A new "Time account scheme" enables parents to take portions of their paid parental leave in combination with part time resumption of work.	2002 An updated and revised version of the Gender Equality Act is accepted by the Parliament. The act now also includes protection against sexual harassment, as well as requiring public organisations and private companies to develop policy plans on gender equality.
1912 All new laws gives women right of access to the most public offices, but not to Cabinet Ministerial appointments.	1938 Women are given general access to public offices, but appointment to the clergy has to be approved by the Church Council.	1961 Trade Unions and Norwegians Federation of Employers conclude a framework agreement for the implementation of the principle of equal wages. The first woman vicar, Ingrid Bjerkås, is ordained.				51 percent of graduate students with higher degrees from university are women.	The Government imposes measures to hinder domestic violence, for instance by introducing alarm protection for women exposed to violence.
1913 All women obtain the right to vote in the general elections.	1939 The High Court decides that marriage does not constitute grounds for dismissal. (Married women's right to paid employment was criticised strongly during the interwar period of mass unemployment.)	1964 A new Personal Names' Act. Women are allowed to retain their maiden names upon marriage. The child takes the father's family name.				The first women bishop, Rosemarie Køhn is ordained.	The Storting ratifies an extended restriction order as a measure towards the prevention and elimination of violence against women.
1915 The Castberg Act is launched. The act protects children's rights, irrespective of whether its parents are married or not.	1945 Kirsten Hansteen becomes the first woman member of the cabinet. She was consultative member for care of prisoners and refugees, in the coalition government.	1965 Aase Lionæs becomes the first woman President in the Storting as vice-president in the Lagting.				Kirsti Kolle Grøndahl is chosen as the first woman to be President of the Storting (the second highest position in the Norwegian Constitution, next to the King).	
1920 The phrase stating that "a woman must obey her husband" is removed from the Marriage Service.			1978 The Act concerning Termination of Pregnancy allows women to make the final decision concerning the termination of pregnancy.			1988 The Equal Status Act § 21 is strengthened. There must be at least 40 per cent representation of each sex in all public committees.	
1921 Karen Platou becomes the first woman elected into the Storting.				Eva Kolstad becomes the first gender equality ombudsman in the world.		1990 The constitutional Law is changed so that women can become heirs to the Norwegian Throne on the same terms as men (in force for those born after 1990).	
1922 Women are allowed to serve as Cabinet ministers.	1948 Aslaug Aasland is made Minister of Health and Social Affairs, and is the first woman to become head of a ministry.	1966 The National Insurance Act. Better rights for unmarried mothers.					1994 Sexual- and other forms of harassment are forbidden under the Working Environment Act.
1924 The first Health Centre for mothers is established in Oslo by Katti Anker Møller.			1971 Temporary Act concerning divorced/separated couples. (These provisions lasted for 10 years until they were integrated into the National Insurance Act.) The national curriculum for schools establishes that active efforts shall be made to promote equality between the sexes.				
1925 Åsa Helgesen becomes the first woman Mayor, in Utsira. The Municipal Board consist of 11 women (elected from a special list of women) and 1 man.	1950 A new Citizenship Act. Women retain their Norwegian citizenship on marrying foreigners. But children of a Norwegian mother and a foreign father are given the father's nationality.	1968 Lilly Helena Bølviken becomes the first woman Supreme Court judge.					
	1952 The clergy becomes fully open to women.						
	1956 The Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs is established. The special Act concerning women's access to public office is repealed.						
1927 A new marriage Act, in principle, gives equal economic and legal rights to husband and wife.		1972 The Equal Status Council is established.					
			1980 Amendment to the Personal Names Act enters into force. When marrying, a person can choose to				

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Nora's sisters

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Photo: © Ryan Pyle, 2006

Zhou Ya Jun plays the part of Hedda in the play Hedda Gabler performed in Hangzhou, China.

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Foreword

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was constantly experimenting and pushing boundaries in his writing.

Ibsen provoked his contemporary audience. His plays were controversial as they unveiled many of the truths and conflicts that society preferred to keep hidden. He raised issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, the unequal status of women in both the public and the private sphere, social stigma, fraud, betrayal and financial insecurity. Ibsen highlighted how individuals are often guided by hidden motives in their relationships with others and how social norms can be at odds with the real needs of people. Ibsen demonstrated the way women in particular were suppressed by the rigid gender roles defined by the conventions of marriage and society at large. The opportunities open to Norwegian women at the time were extremely limited. They did not have

the right to vote, to own property in their own name, to open a bank account or to retain custody of their children in the event of divorce. They were, in fact, minors. Ibsen believed in women's freedom to make their own choices – whether good or bad – and in their right to define their values and the way they want to live.

As this publication shows, there are many contrasting views on Ibsen, on the effect of his plays and on the issue of gender and equality itself. Ibsen continues to provoke, and his plays still generate heated debates, especially on women's rights and gender equality.

Ibsen raised fundamental questions about human relationships, social conditions and the dilemmas facing women. But he did not provide the answers; he did not show women (or men) how they should lead their lives. He proposed neither changes

to government policy nor specific measures. As a result, each new generation of women in every country, whether developed or developing, can consider the questions Ibsen raises in their own context.

Since Ibsen's plays were published, women in many countries have gained a great deal of freedom to determine their own role both in the family and in society. However, women all over the world still meet barriers that prevent them from participating fully in all arenas.

Norway's foreign policy and development cooperation focus on promoting gender equality. We believe that Ibsen's plays can play an important part in these efforts through the issues they raise.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonas Gahr Støre'.

Jonas Gahr Støre

Minister of Foreign Affairs

In 2006, we are marking the centennial of Ibsen's death. This is an opportunity to pay homage to our great playwright and the role he has played as society's conscience.

Ibsen touches our lives individually and collectively in various ways. The idea behind these seminars is to present Ibsen as a dramatist who can inspire and challenge us today. His plays bring new perspectives to the issue of gender equality, and present contrasting views. We hope that these seminars will provide an opportunity to discuss gender issues, share experiences and raise public awareness. Our aim is to promote better understanding of the past and to identify new directions for the future.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erik Solheim'.

Erik Solheim

Minister of International Development



Photo: Arnt E. Folvik/All Over Press

The Norwegian ski jumper Anette Sagen has been a pioneer in female professional ski jumping.

Who's afraid of Nora Helmer?

We have to keep wrestling with Ibsen and his women if they are to stay alive and kicking.

"Ibsen's themes are still quite threatening today. His plays are censored in several parts of the world. For it is the big questions he writes about: personal freedom, gender equality, abuse of political power, corruption, abuse of children, idealism."

This was Bentein Baardson's response to the timely question posed at the beginning of Ibsen Year 2006, "Is Ibsen still relevant today?" It is a question that asks us readers to take a fresh look at the originality of these texts and the way they can broaden our horizons, to rewrite, reinterpret and criticise Ibsen's eternal dramas. Radical interpretations of Ibsen have become

everyday fare. But they will be nothing more than paper tigers as long as we use the easiest strategy for relating his works to the present day, relying on the appeal of values we already agree on. Each time a superficial, canonised interpretation of Ibsen is churned out by well-meaning actors and producers, another nail is hammered into his literary coffin.

For what can an audience gain from a theatre production that sets out to confirm established values only a dictator, a racist or a sexist bigot would be offended by? It is true that equality, democracy and freedom of the press are contentious issues in many countries outside Scandinavia, as Baardson indicates. Using Ibsen as a trade name for democracy towards countries that need stirring up in this way can only be seen as



Nick Waplington: from Living room, 1991 © Nick Waplington

positive. But the fact that Ibsen is politically explosive in other countries does not justify the continual reiteration of the same politically correct interpretations here in Norway. Not only do these performances overshadow other interesting elements in the plays, in the worst cases they express a kind of complacent imperialism, where Ibsen's critical voice is channelled towards those who are not part of our own cultural circle.

If we regard Ibsen first and foremost as a tool for making real improvements to society, the following uncomfortable question begs to be asked: Is Ibsen really the best tool we have for promoting democracy, justice and women's rights throughout the world? Or would it be better to leave this job to the human rights organisations, the UN and Médecins Sans Frontières? It may seem a silly question, but it illustrates how problematic it is to legitimatise Ibsen in terms of political correctness. As Harold Bloom pointed out, it is a sign of literary decline when you are considered eccentric if you claim that literature does not depend on philosophy and that aesthetics cannot be reduced to ideology or metaphysics.

The dilemmas that arise in relating Ibsen to the present day are well illustrated in the area of women's rights. Are we, for example, to interpret his female leading parts as important mouthpieces for feminist slogans, or are Ibsen and his audience better served by readings that look at people's rights not just women's rights, as Ibsen himself put it?

"I am interested in the Nora of our time – the ski jumper Anette Sagen. Daring to fly off a ski jump, to soar through the air and feel completely free..." says film director Aslaug Holm, referring to Ibsen's best known female character. "I am Nora," says Nobel Literature Laureate Elfride Jelinek, with reference to being the "woman who leaves". We know what they mean; they are strong, courageous, gifted women who refuse to accept limitations, and are striving to reach targets on the other side of traditional gender barriers.

But is Nora really a relevant role model for women in 2006, as is suggested here? Elfride Jelinek and Aslaug Holm are identifying with an established interpretation of Nora as a heroine living out her own life, untouched by all the other startling and ambiguous elements that can be

found in the play. But this interpretation has a stronger basis in the accepted feminist truths of our time than in an unbiased reading of the original text. Today's established Nora, with her sound common sense, is the woman Nora would have to be to represent the modern values we want to export through Henrik Ibsen.

It is this that threatens Ibsen's survival. The story of the liberated woman is (fortunately) fairly well established in our day, and we don't need Ibsen to help us understand her. Indeed there may well be ways of putting the message of liberation across far more effectively.

If *A Doll's House* is to remain relevant in countries such as ours, where divorce is readily available and women participate freely in the labour market, we need readings that show us something new. A good example is the interpretation of Nora by Arnhild Skre in the literary periodical *Vinduet* last year as a pathetic, melodramatic figure, "The woman who was so capable when her husband needed help, walks out of the door with no idea of how to help herself... Nora would have to take better care of herself if she was going to impress, inspire or have a liberating effect on me."

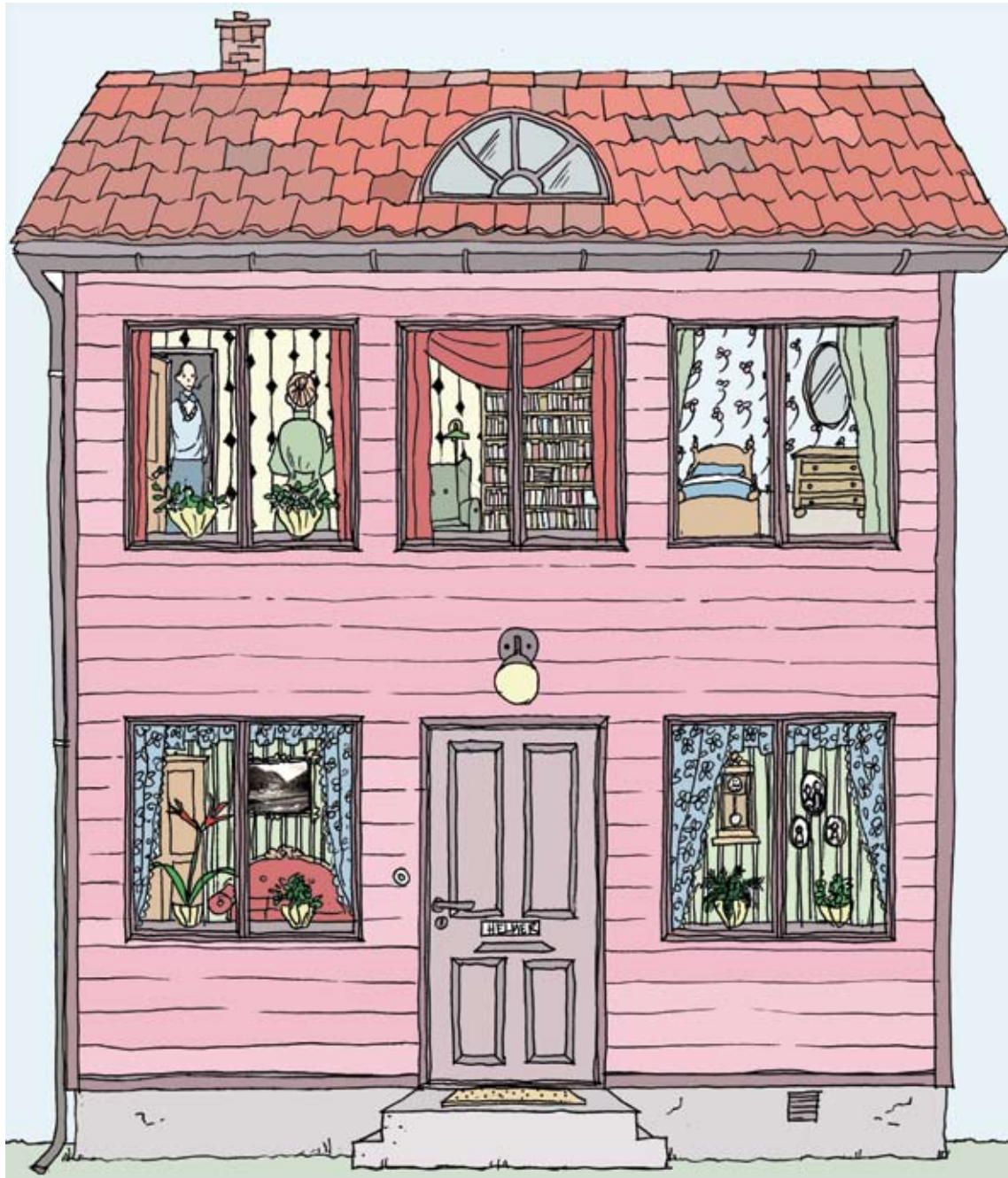
Rather than consolidating the safe, established interpretation, which ultimately could make the character of Nora superfluous, Arnhild Skre, armed with her own experience as a modern woman, tackles Nora from an original angle. But she stays within the confines of the text. Some would say that Nora's one-sided experience as a housewife makes her a poor model for most modern Norwegian women. It is of course possible to transpose Nora's simple wish for an education and a full-time job to a modern Norwegian woman with higher education, a full-time job and several young children, who is feeling the pressure of time and is getting divorced because she wants to find a new direction in life. But the connection is not as obvious as the heroic version of Nora would suggest. She could just as well be portrayed as a white trash mum who gets the idea of taking a correspondence course in book-keeping. But sadly I have yet to see an overweight, chain-smoking Nora in a dirty track suit drinking Diet Coke in front of the Oprah Winfrey Show.

When represented one-sidedly as an early champion of women's liberation, Henrik Ibsen fills no greater role than our valuable, but replaceable, ambassadors overseas. But if we go

for the jugular, both Ibsen's and his women's, we are giving them the chance of immortality. Being innovative is always easier said than done, but we should at least refrain from consolidating an Ibsenian feminism which left the original play long ago, and is now living its own politically correct life in a stereotyped information brochure.

This article was first published in the magazine "Ny Tid", March 3 2006.

Hanne Andrea Kraugerud (b. 1980). Norwegian writer and philosopher. Graduate student in philosophy, University of Oslo. Author of the books: "Give me your heart" (Kagge, 2005) and "Three essays on Ibsen" (Gyldendal, 2006)



Lene Ask: Helmer's House, 2006 © Lene Ask

Another Ending

Thoughts on how the conflict in Ibsen's *Doll's House* could have ended. The new ending was presented at the TVIVL Conference "Ibsen's doubts and our own", Copenhagen May 5-7 2006.

HELMER. [Sadly.] I see it, I see it; an abyss has opened between us.— But, Nora, can it never be filled up?

NORA. As I now am, I am no wife for you.

HELMER. I have strength to become another man.

NORA. Perhaps— when your doll is taken away from you.

HELMER. To part— to part from you! No, Nora, no; I can't grasp the thought.

NORA. [Going into room on the right.] The more reason for the thing to happen. [She comes back with out-door things and a

The original lines (translated by William Archer) are in italics. Willoch's version is in the right hand column shown with gray background.

HELMER. [Sadly.] I see it, I see it; an abyss has opened between us.— But, Nora, can it never be filled up?

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NORA. Perhaps — when your doll is taken away from you.

HELMER. To part — to part from you! No, Nora, no; I can't grasp the thought.

NORA. You're thinking along the wrong track. I am not talking about divorce in the legal sense, of

small travelling-bag, which she places on a chair.

HELMER. *Nora, Nora, not now! Wait till to-morrow.*

NORA. *[Putting on cloak.] I can't spend the night in a strange man's house.*

HELMER. *But can we not live here, as brother and sister-?*

NORA. *[Fastening her hat.] You know very well that wouldn't last long. [Puts on the shawl.] Good-bye, Torvald. No. I won't go to the children. I know they are in better hands than mine. As I now am, I can be nothing to them.*

HELMER. *But some time, Nora- some time?*

NORA. *How can I tell? I have no idea what will become of me.*

HELMER. *But you are my wife, now and always!*

NORA. *Listen, Torvald- when a wife leaves her husband's house, as I am doing, I have*

abandoning the outward aspects of our life together. You ought to understand, as any mother knows from the instant she holds her first born in her arms, that she will never, never abandon her children. If necessary, she will eat at the same table and live under the same roof as a man she no longer respects in order to give her children what they need most of all, the security of a mother and father. But the miracle of miracles in our relationship, Helmer, the devotion between a woman and a man who love each other, that disappeared the moment I realised that to you I was never more than a toy, an adornment, a doll.

HELMER. *But can we not live here, as brother and sister-?*

NORA. But Helmer, that's precisely what I'm saying! Because in your soul you let me down at the most critical moment, because you were unwilling to sacrifice anything of importance to your self-respect for the sake of your wife, I can never again be anything to you but a fellow human being living in your house, to whom you must keep a distance as if she were your sister. Everything else has come to an end! But for the sake of our children, for the sake of their

heard that in the eyes of the law he is free from all duties towards her. At any rate, I release you from all duties. You must not feel yourself bound, any more than I shall.

There must be perfect freedom on both sides. There, I give you back your ring. Give me mine.

HELMER. That too?

NORA. That too.

HELMER. Here it is.

NORA. Very well. Now it is all over. I lay the keys here. The servants know about everything in the house- better than I do.

To-morrow, when I have started, Christina will come to pack up the things I brought with me from home. I will have them sent after me.

HELMER. All over! all over! Nora, will you never think of me again?

NORA. Oh, I shall often think of you, and the children, and this house.

HELMER. May I write to you, Nora?

NORA. No- never. You must not.

HELMER. But I must send you-

NORA. Nothing, nothing.

HELMER. I must help you if you need it.

NORA. No, I say. I take nothing from strangers.

HELMER. Nora - can I never be more than a stranger to you?

security, we must both sacrifice any other form of self-realisation. So let's join forces in this venture, which is, after all, a responsible person's prime obligation, my dear brother!

HELMER. Nora - can I never be more than a stranger to you?

NORA. [Taking her travelling-bag.] Oh, Torvald, then the miracle of miracles would have to happen-

HELMER. What is the miracle of miracles?

NORA. Both of us would have to change so that- Oh, Torvald, I no longer believe in miracles.

HELMER. But I will believe. Tell me! We must so change that-?

NORA. That communion between us shall be a marriage. Good-bye. [She goes out by the hall door.]

HELMER. [Sinks into a chair by the door with his face in his hands.] Nora! Nora! [He looks round and rises.] Empty. She is gone. [A hope springs up in him.] Ah! The miracle of miracles-?! [From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing.]

THE END

NORA. [Taking her travelling-bag.] Oh, Torvald, then the miracle of miracles would have to happen-

HELMER. What is the miracle of miracles?

NORA. You would have to change in such a way that I could see that you and your honour were no longer your main concern. I would have to see that you were willing to renounce what men so strongly desire in order to keep your children and give them everything they need, together with a woman who would no longer be yours but in the legal sense.

HELMER. Yes, Nora, that is my wish, for the renunciation you mention is well deserved, and the task you set before me is, after all, the greatest task of all!

NORA. Then duty will take the place of joy in our lives. But perhaps we will wake up to see that it is precisely duty that gives us deeper joy.

Kåre Willoch (b. 1928) has a long political career in the conservative party in Norway. He was Norwegian Prime Minister (1981-86). He retired from the Parliament in 1989. Willoch has since been active in political and social debates in Norway.

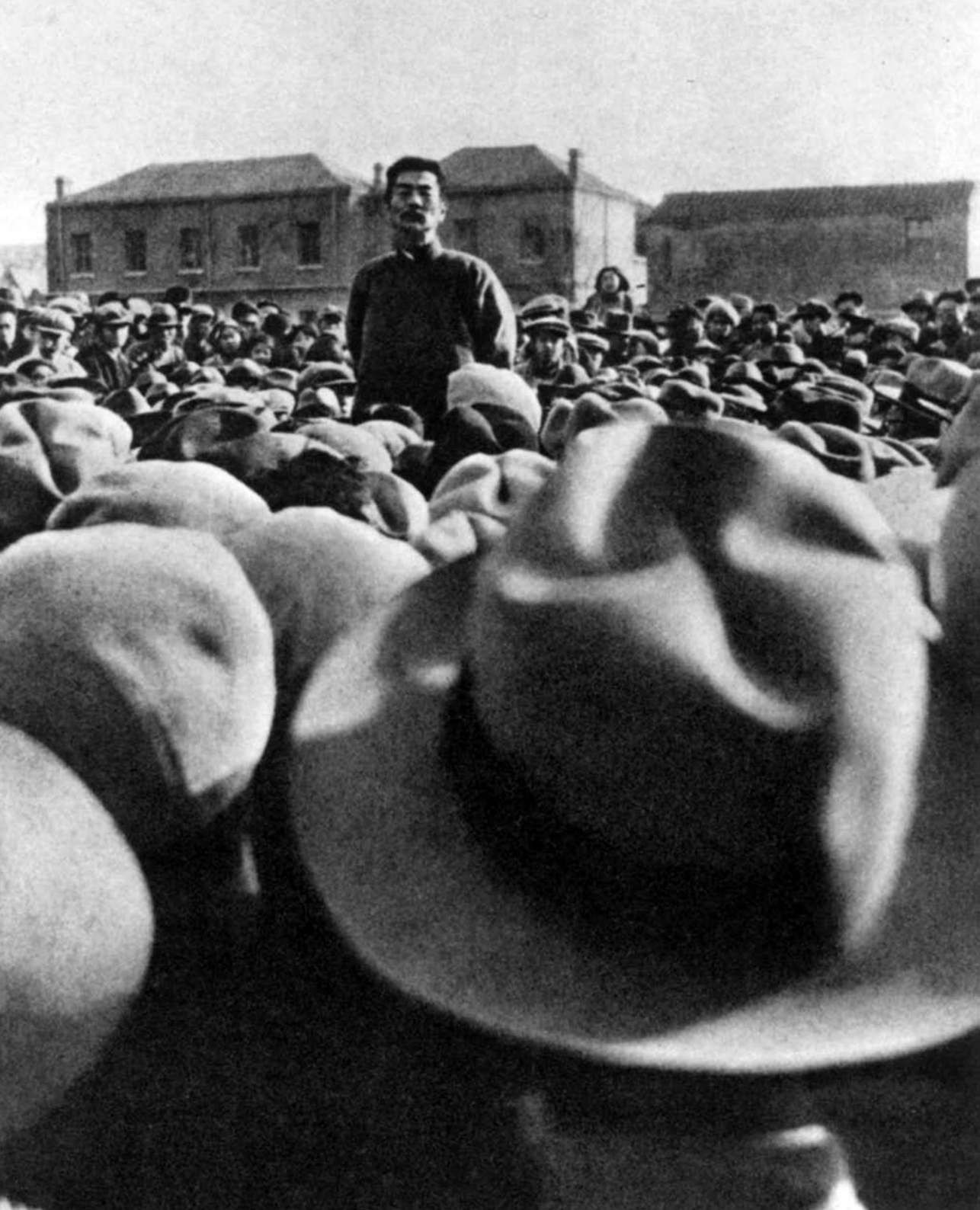
Doll's House, Power House, Human House

During this special year, we celebrate the life of the Norwegian poet, playwright and genius, Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen was blessed with the rare insight into the human soul and was a master at depicting the individual in turmoil. He pushed the boundaries in his writing, focusing on issues that stirred the 19th and 20th centuries and continue to touch the raw nerves of the 21st century. He explored life behind the facade, dramatizing the hidden conflicts, the stigmas of society, the moral dilemmas. He showed what was behind the closed doors of families, of institutions and of society and where strategies were also formulated. He challenged the social norms of gender relations in marriage and in society and

eventually the need for women to be agents of change – to redefine themselves and the values they want to live by. Ibsen did not offer a final solution to women's dilemmas. However, his plays promoted reflection and he offered thoughts and ideas regarding social justice and equality.

His themes resonated powerfully across time and across the world beyond Scandinavia, Australia and New York. In the early 20th century Ibsen had a profound influence on Asian societies in search of a "modern self". His work was introduced to China in 1907 by Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature. During the social fermentation in post-imperial China which culminated in the May 4th Movement seeking to overthrow the



feudalism and patriarchy, Lu Xun and other writers looked to Ibsen for inspiration to build a modern society.

His play, “A Doll’s House” and the character Nora stimulated discussion on feminism in China in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1923, Lu Xun delivered a lecture to a woman college entitled “What happens after Nora Leaves home?” He felt that Nora’s liberation would be short-lived. Without a society fit for women and without economic security and rights, Nora would be forced either to sell herself or return to her unhappy marriage. He said, “The crucial thing for Nora is money”.... “money cannot buy freedom, but freedom can be sold for money.”

In Ibsen’s plays, the unfolding of the human drama was no longer driven by kings and patriarchs, by bureaucracies and influential people. His characters were ordinary people. All were given credible voices in the plot, with their own vision, hopes and personal goals. Nora, in “Doll’s

House”, was an ordinary woman who dared to break away and shape a different life. Today we, “Nora’s sisters”, are still getting up and shaping new possibilities. We do not always leave a husband but often a social norm, an expectation of how we must behave and the injustices and social inequalities we are asked to accept: work that lacks security, violence against women, the spread of HIV/AIDS, wars that waste lives and turn children into soldiers.

Nora’s sisters want houses – not doll’s houses but houses where they belong – the power houses of governments and house of representatives where they can help shape a better human future. Today, as we celebrate 100 years after Ibsen’s death, we also celebrate the appointment of the first woman Head of State in Africa, in Liberia and the first woman Head of State in Chile. From Rwanda to India, women are becoming significant players in parliament and village councils.

Today, compared to even five years ago, we have 20 women ministers of Finance who can ask “where is the money for women’s development?” From their positions

Lu Xun holding a speech outside the High School in Peking 1932.



© Christophe Calais/In Visu/Corbis

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the new president of Liberia in November 2005. She is the first democratically elected female Head of State in Africa.

of power, their powerhouses, these women leaders take action to create the spaces where justice, peace and hope can thrive and where our world can be shaped to be a house fit for both women and men and for all our children – a human house fit for all!

This year, we indeed bear witness to the mastery with which Ibsen accomplished his poetic tasks. His spirit lives on.

Noeleen Heyzer (PhD) is the first executive director from the South to lead UNIFEM, the leading operational agency within the United Nations to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. She has been the policy adviser to Asian governments and in 1994-95 she played a key role in the preparatory process for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.



Faith Ringgold: For the Women's House, 1971 © Faith Ringgold

Wonderful Nora

When Henrik Ibsen introduced women's liberation to the Nordic countries in 1879, sparking discussions of gender roles in bourgeois Norwegian living rooms, he set a whole new agenda that had revolutionary consequences.

A Doll's House was anticipated ten years earlier by John Stuart Mill's essay *The Subjection of Women*, which was translated by Georg Brandes in Denmark. But philosophy is one thing, and real-life drama quite another. Before Ibsen showed us Nora's solution to her dilemma, no one could have imagined a woman going anywhere, and certainly not leaving her family. And for many years, the unanswered question remained: Where did Nora go?

Feminist

In the 1970s, the heyday of feminism, there was no doubt: Nora had become a feminist. She stopped wearing a bra and went to the Femø women's camp; she was to be found in every grass-roots group campaigning against patriarchy, phallocracy and male chauvinism. A Danish critic reviewing my first book, *Deliver Us from Love*, suggested that this was where Nora went. It may not be as ridiculous as it sounds; once she has gained new insight into her situation, Nora knows that she has to educate herself in a new way.

The contraceptive pill was the cornerstone of the emancipation of the 1970s and the whole revolution in intimate relationships. Today, 30 years later, at a time when sex is being constructed and deconstructed,

fertility – both women's and men's – is impaired by stress and pollution, and the people in the new doll's houses have to plan for new family members at fertility clinics, the gender question is once again becoming a radical one. Thirty years after the legendary women's liberation movement, mature (i.e. aging) women, who used to cultivate the "soft man", now want the hard version.

Hard or soft – times change, and fashions and men change accordingly. Ibsen's purpose lies somewhere beyond the fluctuations of this cycle. So it is inevitable that we keep returning to this old play with fresh curiosity. And if he really is the great writer we acclaim him as, he must bear continual reinterpretation and keep giving us new answers.

What is A Doll's House about today?

The first surprise is in the *dramatis personae*, where we find Torvald Helmer, a lawyer, listed as the main character. Further down we learn that he has three small children, but not who has borne them (his wife?), and neither do we really know where his wife lives, as "The action takes place in Helmer's flat". This is not necessarily the home of both spouses.

I have had elderly aunts whose visiting cards gave their husband's name only, and who had his name alone inscribed on the name plate outside their flats, they themselves remaining nameless. Where is Nora's home? Where does she belong?

The scenography does, however, hint at where Nora's place might be. Two doors lead off from the room that forms the backdrop to the play. One leads to Helmer's study, and the other to the hall, and on to the outside world. Between the two doors stands a piano. And it is here, perhaps, that we would place Nora – in a sphere of music, dreams and fantasy. Somewhere between outer and inner demands, beyond the reality principle – Ibsen anticipates Freud – where the burdens of culture can be put down for the time it takes to play a minuet – or, for that matter, a tarantella. Ibsen has been considerate enough to equip this room with various china ornaments and other bric-à-brac. Is this the lady of the household's contribution to a home that has no real place for her?

Nora is portrayed at the beginning of the play as a content, cheerful and generous young lady, a lover of food and pleasure, with macaroons in her

pocket, a young wife who gives twice as much as is asked of her. But we sense the underlying tension right at the start of the play: here is someone who is giving the double of what is asked, who perhaps has a dual personality. A magnanimous woman who is seen by her partner as a sweet little creature. Already, in the *dramatis personae*, the scenography and the opening lines, a brilliant dramatist is anticipating the whole drama seething beneath the surface.

Nora seems to believe that the four walls of the home are the ultimate protection against the dangers of the outer world, including creditors – who are “just strangers” – while Ibsen’s purpose is to demonstrate that she is under an illusion – and so are we. The privacy of the home, one of the spoils of the bourgeois social revolution, is not at all the bastion of security middle class families faithfully put their trust in. Just as today, when the holy nuclear family, the child treated as a fetish, shows a similar disregard for our present-day creditors, for the global accounts that are being drawn up outside the garden gate: homelessness, terrorism, and the war for resources. We protect ourselves with brand names and style, dreaming of the

new designer kitchen that promotes happy family life, of a security that does not exist.

Nora’s husband, Torvald Helmer, Manager of the Savings Bank, is conscious of the responsibility entailed by his secure, permanent position, and his good income. His position rests on the family foundation, and he knows full well that it will only hold for as long as it is solid and solvent. It is therefore only logical that Nora’s apparent dreaminess must give way for Torvald’s sense of responsibility and reality:

“Very well, Torvald, if you say so.”

There is a sense of relentlessness in the drama Ibsen intones in the play. Will this irresponsible young woman grow up? Will the weaker party in the relationship develop? And what will be the consequences? Or to put the question in more modern terms: Will the dark, weak sides of the individual grow and threaten the whole (false) harmony that the façade both hides and hints at.

We are all asymmetrical, with split personalities and raw surfaces. This is why we have the eternal problem of two people in a relationship developing in different directions, the

balance between them being upset, and all the inevitable conflicts that ensue. As long as the trophy of modernity – individualism – remains a value, there will still be personal development and deviation. So the question is, even today: How can two people develop together without a risk of developing in different directions?

The questions raised in the play are unsolvable, and can only be resolved by living them out.

Helmer may sense right from the beginning that behind the song-bird's "featherbrained" approach to money there may lie a more masculine aspect. The skylark, the song bird, may not be so childishly feminine. After all she's just like her father – it's in her blood, these things are hereditary, as Helmer points out. But Nora just wishes she had inherited more of her papa's good qualities.

Ibsen had a unique talent for letting the subconscious speak, and allowing his characters to be drawn, albeit reluctantly, from the stream of words that flows from their lips. Nora has indicated that there is an imbalance in her personality, in her upbringing, between the masculine and feminine

aspects. She wants to redress it, while Helmer prefers the status quo and would like to retain the imbalance just as it is.

However, the characters in Ibsen's plays are driven on by their subconscious, whether they want to be or not. And we find ourselves caught up in the drama, as part of the audience, rather than distant readers or know-alls who have all the answers. We are powerless to intervene, but we identify with the characters as they move towards the abyss. Who owes what to whom? Ibsen's collected works constitute an endless thriller. A real "who dunnit". And the author sees that he is the main suspect, the person most likely to be the murderer.

"The miracle"

It is here in the doll's house that the difference between the little Christmas secrets and the great revelation, the miracle, will be disclosed.

And the most important thing you can ever owe anyone is life.

Nora has saved Torvald's life. She is not at all the tinsel-Christmas-decoration woman she pretends to

be; her disguises conceal a true magnanimity and an unwillingness to compromise. How can this deception be maintained?

Inside this extravagant, irresponsible skylark there is a breadwinner with her feet on the ground and a heavy responsibility on her shoulders, an ascetic, who is willing to renounce pleasures and do without. This is an aspect of Nora that is clearly personified in her friend, Mrs. Linde. Nora has been sitting up transcribing until after midnight to pay down the loan that enabled them to travel to Italy, the trip that saved Torvald's life.

"It was almost like being a man," she says.

The most explosive imbalance in a relationship is when one of the partners has to hide their talents to avoid envy, breakdown or just an unpleasant mood. Nora says it straight. If Torvald knew her secret it would spoil everything between them, and their lovely home would never be the same again. And, one could add, society as a whole might be quite different if there was greater and more equal representation of women in management positions, on boards and in politics. The fact

that actresses constantly complain that there are not enough parts for women who are no longer skylarks reflects the conditions of society today – despite a century of campaigning for equality.

Ibsen's method

Mrs. Linde is not the only role that sheds light on who Nora is. Ibsen also reveals aspects of Nora's character through two other minor parts, Krogstad and Dr. Rank. Using characters as mirrors to reflect each other's subconscious has come to be regarded as part of Ibsen's method, and has inspired a number of other writers here in Denmark, particularly Karen Blixen. The drama's core question is thus not so much whether the Helmer family can stay together, whether Nora leaves or not, but whether they as individuals will be able to become whole people and heal the various splits in their personalities by gaining insight into their own hidden motives. None of Ibsen's characters are who they pretend to be. Those who are portrayed in the most positive light are often the worst; those who seem most naïve are the most calculating – as in the case of Nora.

Krogstad is, as his name suggests, a



Tejal Shah: What are you?, 2006 © Tejal Shah/Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

man who can catch people on his hook, and whom poverty has taught to fish in troubled waters. Krogstad knows where Nora's weak spot is – the disparity between the power she has had over her husband's life and her complete lack influence over him.

Krogstad, the hook on which Nora is hanging, represents society's formal laws, which take no account of the deeper human law relating to life and death – the law that Krogstad himself is subject to. Will Nora save his life as she saved her father's and her husband's? This moral obligation has not been formalised. The law is not concerned with motives and thus – in Nora's and our own eyes – it is a very stupid law.

Nora and Krogstad are conspirators, both at the edge of an abyss, both at risk of suicide. Who has power over them? Who controls whose reputation?

At the edge of the abyss

The candles are being put on the Christmas tree. Nora is decorating the doll's house and they will celebrate Christmas at the edge of an abyss. We are reminded of the Buddenbrook family in Thomas Mann's novel,

moving into their splendid new home, oblivious to their future decline.

The family idyll in the doll's house is based on a lie. The song bird must have a clear voice to sing with – no false notes. How long can the song bird stay in the air? Sooner or later she will have to land – when Krogstad gets her on his hook. The hook they both will hang on. Both have committed the worst crime of all. Both are guilty of forgery. Nora is in debt to Krogstad and in that connection has falsified a signature. But in a way – in an Ibsenian way – Nora's false signature is true. It reveals her secret identity, the performance the doll's house requires of her.

For young people today, who switch identities on the Internet and live in a world where identity is not a commitment but something that can be constructed and deconstructed through designer labels and the fictitious names of pop stars, it may be difficult to understand why forgery is the worst, the absolute worst imaginable crime. Living in a society where role play is a popular leisure activity, we ask ourselves, "Does anyone have a true self? And would this be desirable? If my true self is a

loser and my false self is more successful, why not choose the winning role?"

Today a true signature will only be found in the finger prints given at the ballot box in Iraq or at the "immigration" desk at Kennedy Airport, and these too may well be falsified. Meanwhile, Ibsen is staking the truth of a name, the authenticity of a character as a counterweight to a fancy-dress costume.

It is the graphologist versus the Wall Street businessman, or a modern Gucci terrorist disguised as one.

"Domestic terrorist"

Helmer gives a name to Nora's crime and declares her to be a kind of "domestic terrorist". A person who forges a signature infects the whole life of the home and poisons the children. Such poisoning is generally the fault of the mother, he maintains. Fathers represent the formal laws, but we, with our feminine sense of justice, are drawn down into a more ancient, more swampy terrain. "Nearly all young men who go to the bad have had lying mothers," Helmer concludes.

It is the vapours of this ancient swamp that Nora can sense at the beginning of the second act – she feels she is approaching a place where people may be a danger to themselves and to others, where they no longer know who they are.

Helmer used to get jealous when Nora mentioned people she had liked back at home. Nora has had to cut herself off from her background in order to fit into this bourgeois room, the ideal of the doll's house. The only link to her own world is her old nurse, Anne-Marie, but her nurse is also a reminder that she is still essentially a child. And it is as a child that Nora best fits into the feminine sphere of the doll's house, deprived of all responsibility and decision-making power. She doesn't even choose her own fancy-dress costume. Torvald has had it made in Italy, and Torvald has decided that she shall wear it to the forthcoming fancy-dress party, just as he has decided that she will perform the tarantella as a Neapolitan fisher-girl. For the Manager of the Savings Bank is also musical; he plays the piano and takes care of the choreography. And he can describe the aesthetic difference between embroidery and knitting.

Façades and brand names

The observation “Torvald can’t bear to see dressmaking” touches the very nerve of bourgeois male-dominated society – or the prevailing lie at the time. The façade must shine, the costume must sparkle, just as in the age of the brand name, while the suffering beneath the surface, the stitches that hold it all together, must be hidden at all costs. It is a question of maintaining the scenographer’s ability to seduce, to sell the product, to camouflage crime, forgeries, deficits and deceit.

If it were not for the realities of the outside world, Nora could have continued her existence as a puppet and could safely have allowed Torvald to pull the strings. She could have gone on playing at being a squirrel, performing tricks and dancing on a moonbeam for her husband. But she has a debt to pay. In the world outside, she owes money to Krogstad, and she has a debt to pay to society for her crime. But above all, she owes it to herself to live according to her own truth.

The play could have had a happy ending if Torvald had been part of the reckoning. But sadly, he is not. Nora assumed that he would join her on

the side of the truth she represents, but, it turns out, he does not. So, in a way, they are already separated, their home is already (morally) broken, regardless of how many Christmas trees are lighted.

The family friend Dr. Rank, the ailing doctor who suffers from consumption of the spine as a result of his father’s syphilis, is Nora’s other shadow. Through the very nature of his illness, he raises questions about the psychological and sociological factors of sexual instinct, and bodes dissolution of the inner being. His diagnosis, his status is: bankrupt.

Nora and Dr. Rank share the fate of being condemned by another’s actions. Nora will go to jail for saving her husband’s life. Dr. Rank will pay for his father’s excesses with his own life. For Dr. Rank’s father was too fond of asparagus, foie gras, truffles, oysters, port and champagne. The syphilitic’s menu translated into the language of the Oslo parlour, anno 1879.

Dr. Rank knows, as Nora does, that Helmer cannot stomach the foul-smelling truth behind the façade, and that he must therefore be kept from his friend’s sick bed, soon to be his deathbed.



Dilara Begum Jolly, Mukti © Ibsen Commemoration 2006

Images of Ibsen's Life and Plays, an exhibition in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

You should not take away a person's life lie, as Ibsen is well known to have acknowledged. But this is exactly what Ibsen always does. And acting the part of skylark in a doll's house is not Nora's only life lie. There is more to it than bird song and fancy-dress parties. There is also this family friend's genuine erotic fascination with her, which she chooses to interpret as harmless affection. Nevertheless she envisages the possibility of exploiting his interest to pay down another instalment on the loan from Krogstad.

Stroke of genius

Again this is a stroke of genius on the part of Ibsen. Nora is no better than Helmer when it comes to life lies. And Nora too finds security in the façade. Her life is also divided into an upstairs and a downstairs. Love resides upstairs, personified by her father and her husband, and the more unbridled passions are let loose downstairs in the maid's room, among the servants and the attractions of the (syphilitic) life below stairs. A division between those one loves and those one would rather be with. Ibsen has placed Dr. Rank in the latter category.

The reader immediately becomes

suspicious. Why was Nora so determined to save her husband's life? Was the real reason that she wanted to keep at any cost the authoritative father figure who would protect her from her own true desires and (self)destructive passions? When we try to balance the accounts of love, we see that there is an element of duty in Nora's feelings for her husband. She is afraid of him, she needs him as head of the family, but there does not seem to be much pleasure involved. He, on the other hand, regards her with desire – his secret fiancée, his little bride, his pretty doll.

Can the doll's house accommodate the new situation? Nora dances the tarantella a bit too easily. She reveals that beneath the skylark image there is a bird of prey. Her successful performance, which gives free rein to her eroticism, is also a death dance. Nora and Dr. Rank have become allies, and together they have danced into the kingdom of death. She turns down her husband's advances and is far more concerned about what the two of them – she and the doctor – are to be at the next fancy-dress party, to which the doctor replies that he will be wearing the "Invisible Hat."

Sex and disease

Dr. Rank announces his forthcoming death by leaving a visiting card with a black cross over his name, and we hear that he has gone away like a “wounded animal”. The image of the wounded animal, the castrated, life-threatened creature, is one that Nora and Dr. Rank share. The doctor has inherited a sexually transmitted disease from his father, while Nora has inherited the disease of her sex through social norms and conventions. Ibsen is more than hinting at the close connection between the rampant venereal diseases of the time and the well established norms that suppress women.

Helmer realises that the doctor is necessary for his and Nora’s happiness. It may be that it was the presence of their family friend that made it possible for Mr. and Mrs. Helmer to live together. They are being drawn closer to the crisis, to the edge of the abyss, where the doll’s house is in danger of collapsing like a house of cards. It is here that the “miracle” is to happen.

“I’ve often wished that you could be threatened by some imminent danger so that I could risk everything I had – even my life – to save you.”

This is one of Helmer’s key lines. Nora’s change of clothes after the fancy-dress party represents the undressing of their marital relationship. Truths are bared.

Helmer has in fact kept his part of the bourgeois family contract, and he intends to continue to do so in the future. Nora will remain his child bride, and he is willing to be a father to her. He will be her will and her conscience. It is Nora who breaks the contract, and from now on will have to take responsibility for her will and her conscience herself.

Nora’s new self-awareness brings her into contact with the masculine aspect of herself, and she decides to leave the infantilising sphere of the family, its repressive tendencies and attractions.

Eternal question

How can anyone develop within a family? This is the eternal question. Just like Helmer, Nora has dreamt of “the miracle”, where her husband would appear as a knight in shining armour and rescue her from the real world. The miracle would in fact be Torvald sacrificing his life, his honour, for her.

But Torvald has revealed in a moment of anger that just where Nora had hoped he would act like a man, he did not. And that is perhaps the most telling thing about the marriage. The “miracle” would be the ability to overcome the recurrent disappointments of the real world.

But Nora makes her choice when she withdraws her wounded projections, and cuts all the ties that have forced her to lie and dissemble; and she enters into a new illusion – the misconception that you can only be yourself, you can only stand on your own feet, if you are alone.

And the future awaiting Nora as a divorced woman with no money and no education in the society at the time can be read about in the works of writers like Amalie Skram.

Ibsen leaves his main character in a classic Kierkegaardian double bind. Whatever she decides to do will be wrong. It will be wrong to stay and it will be wrong to go:

“Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way.”

Paradoxically, love, the “miracle”, comes true for two of the minor characters in the play, Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, who have been through such hard times and have put all their sorrows and disappointments behind them.

Their relationship bears little resemblance to society’s concept of happiness and success. The “miracle” comes about in an unexpected way for this ship-wrecked couple who have no parts in the role play of respectability and marriage. Where all is lost, love may grow.

Translated into English from Kjell Risvik’s Norwegian translation of the Danish text.

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Suzanne Brøgger (b. 1944). Danish writer, poet and essayist was born in Copenhagen. Her debut novel “Deliver us from Love” (1973) whose topic was concerned with the problem of liberating oneself, was translated into twenty languages. Her subsequent works includes “Crème Fraîche” (1978) and “The Jade Cat” (1997), a study of a collapse of a family. In 1997 she became the third woman ever to become a member of the Danish Academy.



Kari Gisholt Noddeland: Osvalds father, 2003 © Kari Gisholt Noddeland

Wild Duck Fathers

In the play *The Wild Duck* Henrik Ibsen illustrates three fathers by presenting three different forms of fatherhood: the patriarchal father, the fallen father, and the loving, but helpless father.

They are significant forms of fatherhood in Ibsen's drama that correspond to actual father roles in Ibsen's time.

In the play we meet three real father figures in three father-child relationships: Werle-Gregers, Ekdal-Hjalmar, and Hjalmar-Hedvig. One key aspect of Ibsen's dramas is the manner in which he weaves together these father roles. He does not separate them as three distinct forms of fatherhood, but instead demonstrates how they are interconnected through relationships, dissolutions and

continuity/discontinuity. In *The Wild Duck* the focus is on the family relationships, or the "family sorrows," and more precisely, the family represented through the father-child relationship.

I can hardly think of a more pervasive motif in Ibsen's works than fatherhood. However, fatherhood is not what most of us associate with Ibsen's dramas. Fatherhood lies in the background, ahead of the drama and underlying the dramatic interactions and scenes. Fatherhood is pervasive, yet kept discretely in the background.

Ibsen's dramatizations of fatherhood are part of a contemporary social debate in which fathers and paternal authority are subjected to a sweeping critique. The spotlight is placed on

the father, both on and off stage, and he must explain himself. The role of the father is not taken for granted.

The Wild Duck is especially effective at illustrating the significance that the various father roles may hold for the next generation. Almost as in a novel, we can read of the life connections between three generations in this tightly constructed drama.

The Patriarchal Father

Old Werle in *The Wild Duck* is a patriarch willing to do anything to save his own skin, including abandoning his own son. But in the end Werle emerges as the only one who seems capable of changing both his attitudes and perspective on life, and the only one capable of creating a relationship of truth and openness in his new marriage to Mrs. Sørby.

At the opening of the play, we become acquainted with Werle, both as a “stud” who has had erotic escapes and as a father who, in his instrumental reason, has not publicly acknowledged for the past 16 years that he actually has a son. His estrangement from his son is demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, Werle has not written one personal word to his son during

their 16-year separation; instead, their correspondence has been strictly businesslike.

Their family life has consisted of an ongoing battle between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, and the most important fight between the couple was for power over their son Gregers. In this fight we recognize gender-oriented positions: Mrs. Werle is emotional and long-suffering, “sickly” and “high-strung,” as Werle calls her. Werle is rational and authoritarian. The rationality emerges since the marriage was not based on love, but on economic motivation. Later it became apparent that Werle had miscalculated, and a large dowry did not accompany the marriage. The economic motivation is clear in Werle’s persistent hate, as expressed in the drama by Werle’s bitter comment:

WERLE [...] From being a child, you’ve always had a sickly conscience. It’s a heritage from your mother, Gregers... one thing she did leave you.

GREGERS. [With a contemptuous smile.] That must have been a bitter pill to swallow when you found you had miscalculated, after expecting her to bring you a fortune. (VI: 196)

In the same conversation between father and son at the end of the third act, the father's authoritarian role also emerges. Gregers says: "I didn't dare. I was scared... too much of a coward. I can't tell you how frightened of you I was then and for a long time after, too" (VI: 196). Because Gregers was so frightened of his father, he stayed away from him for 16 years. In the end, the loss of his son has cruel consequences for Werle, who loses his heir when Gregers rejects all his inheritance rights out of contempt for his father.

It is often overlooked that Werle loses even more than this. He also loses his other potential heir, his illegitimate child, Hedvig. When Hedvig dies, this opportunity is also lost, and Werle finds himself completely alone again. His loneliness is also expressed in particular passages when he touches upon his own suffering. In a conversation with Gregers, he says: "I'm a lonely man Gregers; I've always felt lonely, all my life; but especially now that I'm getting on a bit in years" (VI: 148). He also says later: "Laughter doesn't come so easily to a lonely man, Gregers" (VI: 150).

Werle's authoritarian and economic rationality has not achieved any

results. On the contrary, he has failed miserably. The fight between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, or a family drama based on economics rather than love, leads to loss for both husband and wife, to the son's blind, unrealistic idealism and, ultimately, to the death of the illegitimate child.

In 1884 The Norwegian National Assembly debated the issue of separate property rights for married women. In a petition dated 12 April 1884, Norway's most acclaimed authors at that time, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland wrote to the Norwegian National Assembly, requesting that women be granted separate property rights. They also criticized the Assembly for its unwillingness to go all the way and make these rights automatic. In April of the same year Henrik Ibsen had begun writing *The Wild Duck*. Its theme was the consequences of a failed marriage, in which the issue of economics and love played a key role.

The Fallen Father

The other form of fatherhood in *The Wild Duck* consists of the relationship between old Ekdal and Hjalmar Ekdal.

The fallen father has received little attention although this form of



Tina Barney: The Ancestor, 2001 © Tina Barney/Courtesy of Janet Borden Gallery, New York

fatherhood was probably not too unusual in the 1800s. This omission has a likely cause: The patriarch who does not master the task of building a masculinity that is solid, acceptable and strong of character, and who thus falls by the wayside, leaves little source material about his own demise. While bourgeois men write autobiographies about their masculine achievements, there are very few who write extensively about their own failures and unmanliness.

There is a much-discussed fallen father in the Norwegian material from the 1800s, though, namely Henrik Ibsen's own family history.

His father, Knud Ibsen, was a successful businessman in Skien, who married Marichen, the daughter of the well-to-do John Andreas Altenburg. When Knud Ibsen received an inheritance following the death of his father-in-law in 1830, the Ibsen family became one of the most prosperous in Skien. However, just a few years later in 1834-35, Knud Ibsen lost the entire fortune. Partly due to over-investment and poor management and partly due to an economic recession, the family was forced to give up all its property. The family had to move from their

patrician villa in Skien to a smaller house in the country. The father never recovered from this fall from their economic and social class. He died a poor, lonely alcoholic in 1877.

Henrik Ibsen, who was the family's eldest son, left his father immediately after his confirmation in 1843 and probably made a visit home in 1850 before leaving for Christiania. After this, father and son never saw each other again. Nor did Henrik ever send a letter or greetings directly to his father and this can be seen as evidence of the pain the father's downfall inflicted on the son.

While historical documentation on Knud and Henrik Ibsen lacks reflections on the downfall, it nonetheless tells indirectly of the great emotional cost of such a downfall: social marginalization, loss of face and position, isolation and loneliness, cooling of family relationships (between mother and father, as well as between father and son), and finally alcoholism and abject poverty. In this context, the term unmanliness is relevant. Henrik Ibsen's relationship to his father emerges, though, in the continual problematizing of fatherhood throughout his works. The most amenable of the fallen fathers

is possibly old Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*.

Old Ekdal experiences a greater fall than Knud Ibsen. He is prosecuted for illegal logging, imprisoned for several years, and returns a broken man. His punishment is even harder to bear because his partner and friend, Werle, lets him down by allowing him to take all the blame for the illegal logging. He has been both punished and betrayed, and upon his return he finds that the man who betrayed him has become one of the city's most prominent men. He seeks isolation in the attic and drowns his sorrows in alcohol. Old Ekdal has lost his masculinity and tries to restore it metaphorically by putting on his old lieutenant's uniform once in a while and going on an illusionary hunt in the attic.

His son, Hjalmar Ekdal, is also greatly affected by his father's downfall. He withdrew behind the blinds when his father was imprisoned, he has since moved into the dark attic with his own family, and we come to know him as a person with amazingly little self-insight and inflated notions of his masculinity and of his own role as provider. Hjalmar's self-absorption falls into a totally different category

than old Werle's authoritarian egoism. Therefore, it is not his striking egocentrism, but his comical way of taking himself too seriously that makes him a rather pathetic and wretched fellow.

This creates a strong ambivalence in the character; clearly comical, but utterly without self-insight into his own comic effect, and at the same time, clearly pathetic, but apparently with great self-confidence.

Hjalmar behaves exactly the opposite of what we saw in Henrik Ibsen's relationship to his own father. While Henrik leaves his father at an early age and never sees or contacts him again, Hjalmar and his father seek out each other in their sorrow over the father's downfall.

Hjalmar's relationship to both his father and his illegitimate child Hedvig is unusual. He is the only man in the drama, and one of the few in all of Ibsen's works, who openly expresses love. For this reason, this part must be taken seriously, and I will do just that in the next aspect of fatherhood brought forth in *The Wild Duck*.

The Loving, but Helpless Father

Many Ibsen critics have taken Gregers' plan in relation to the Ekdal family too literally. That is, a genuine idealism lies at the bottom of his play-acting, and he knows the truth about the Ekdal family's false foundation.

There are good reasons to doubt that Gregers' discourse is the truest one in this work. Everything suggests that Werle is Hedvig's biological father and that Werle has actively manipulated the situation so that Hjalmar is prepared to marry Gina. The other true narrative in this drama is in fact that Hjalmar clearly married Gina for love and that he has always regarded Hedvig as his own daughter, loving her more than anything else in the world. Hjalmar has achieved a good marriage based on love rather than economic motives, in contrast to the marriage of old Werle.

Similarly, the relationship between Gina, Hedvig and Hjalmar (and old Ekdal) is characterized by solidarity and a great deal of trust in and caring for each other. There is love within the Ekdal family, in contrast to the Werle family. In a conversation with Gregers in the fifth act, after Gregers

has disclosed Werle's plot against the family, Hjalmar exclaims:

HJALMAR. I can't tell you how I loved that child. I can't tell you how happy I felt every time I came home to my modest room and she would come running across to me, with her poor sweet, strained little eyes. (VI: 235)

Hedvig's relationship to her father is also shown in a clearly positive light. She runs to meet him, sits on his lap, expresses love for her father and manifests purity and goodness, always seeking out love. As the others, however, Hedvig is a product of the family she grows up in, and her feelings of love are spawned from the Ekdal family and no other. While Gregers and Hjalmar are each in their own way negatively affected by their childhoods, Hedvig is the exact opposite. She has grown up with love and expresses love.

Gregers does not see this. He is so deprived of love that he is not able to see love when it is present. His admission of the truth is therefore based on blindness to the truth that is right in front of him, the Ekdal family's relative happiness. And it is in this context that we must understand the inversion of the stage rooms.

The Werle family is wealthy, but loveless, while the Ekdal family is poor, but filled with love and warmth. Werle is characterized by a patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love.

However, it should not be ignored that Hjalmar's ability to care is limited at times. His self-pity makes it sometimes difficult for him to show real caring. He forgets to bring something tasty to Hedvig from the party at old Werle's as he promised, and asks her to be satisfied with a menu instead. He is not willing to take responsibility for her eyes when she takes over his job to earn money for the family, so that he can go up to the dark attic:

HJALMAR. But don't ruin your eyes! D'you hear? I'm not taking any responsibility; you have to take the responsibility yourself. Understand? (VI: 179)

Hjalmar is not a mature, responsible father. He likes to be seen as the father in the house, but he does not act with the authority, which would

indicate that he in fact is the father. In many ways he is truly "a man with a childish disposition," as Relling points out within the play. He trusts others with an absolute naivety and changes according to whom he is talking to. The consequence of this is that it becomes difficult to talk about Hjalmar as egotistical in the true meaning of the word since we can hardly speak of the presence of any ego in Hjalmar at all.

When Hjalmar pulled down the blinds, his mind and soul remained undeveloped, and thus we meet a childish disposition with the same longing for love as Hedvig. As a grown person who tries to act like an adult, he becomes cowardly and helpless, largely guided by the whims and suggestions of others (which he does not manage to see through), except at home, where he attempts to play the role of the father. It is thus a loving, but helpless father role that he plays.

A reading such as this, emphasizing Hjalmar's ability to love, makes the tragic aspect of the play emerge even more clearly. Hjalmar becomes more than a self-absorbed idiot without the ability to understand what is happening. In his own way he has

tried to achieve a genuine marriage and give Hedvig a life of love. Gregers not only leads Hedvig into death – he also kills the attempt to establish a family based on love. Hjalmar thus becomes even more of a tragic figure, first subjected to old Werle's game, then exposed to Gregers' game, which he believes in just as much. He believes just as easily in Gregers' proposition as in Werle's. The tragedy lies in this combination of Gregers' false idealism and Hjalmar's lack of inner strength and sense of responsibility.

The Ekdal family is the personification of the patriarchy as comic tragedy and a portrait of the infeasibility of the loving father role at the end of the 1800s.

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Mercy Moyo: Strings of Confusion, 2006 © Mercy Moyo

What Helmer Said

Ibsen was first and foremost concerned with people's lack of will or opportunity to live a life of truth and freedom.

There is *one* particular reason why we never cease to be intrigued by *A Doll's House*, *Peer Gynt*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler* and Ibsen's other plays, and that is that the characters in his dramas are always searching for the truth in some way or other. They are searching for their inner core and how best to live their lives. Throughout the century we recently put behind us, a century characterised by individualism, this theme was perceived as fresh and exciting. The reason why Ibsen's dramas have not lost their vitality, but can still be presented and experienced in new ways, is that while letting his characters grope for truth in varying degrees of

desperation, Ibsen did not himself serve it on a platter. The truths in his plays are numerous, and it is up to us to find them. These truths are fluid, depending on the perspective taken. Historical perspective, the director's angle and our own experience all influence our interpretation.

A Doll's House has meant a lot to many people, but it has been particularly important for the female half of mankind. The drama played a key role in the past century's greatest political movement – the women's liberation movement. Nora's rebellion against a man who did not appreciate her as a human being, and against a society that gave women very little freedom, has acquired great symbolic value. For 125 years Nora's famous statement, that before all else she is a human being, has been a beacon

for countless women. But attempts to cast Helmer as “the bad guy” and Nora as “the good girl” have not always been easy – except perhaps in the 1970s. The characters are simply too human. This was one of Ibsen’s strong points, one that would make him and his characters immortal. He created complex characters and wove the ties between them into intricate fabrics that nobody is quite able to unravel.

Nora and Helmer in the 1970s

In several interviews, Liv Ullmann has told a revealing story from when she was playing Nora on Broadway in 1975. Since this was in the heyday of women’s lib, Nora was the great heroine, and Sam Waterston, who was playing Helmer, had a hard time inspiring any enthusiasm for his character. At the last rehearsals, at which an audience was present, he was booed outright. Waterston was upset by this, and wanted to quit. Ullmann suggested that they should do yoga before the dress rehearsal to bolster his resolve. As a result, he sprained a toe and had to use a small walking stick on stage. This proved to be just the thing. There was no more booing. At the premiere, Watson had upgraded the stick to

crutches, and this time there was not even applause when Nora left him. Somehow the woman’s victory lost some of its luster when her male counterpart was left abandoned and incapacitated. As we see, the verdict of the 70s was so harsh that Helmer had to be played with crutches.

Nora and Helmer in China

Agnete Haaland had an in some ways similar, yet quite different, experience when she was playing Nora in a Chinese production in 1997. She noticed that if the audience was young, it supported Nora with shouts of encouragement. On the other hand, the more mature audiences vociferously expressed their sympathy for Helmer. But in this production, Helmer had studied in the West, and had brought the Norwegian Nora back to China. The conflict between Nora and Helmer is therefore not only a marital conflict, but also a cultural clash between a Western woman and a male representative of the old China. Here, the man still wears the pants, and losing face is the worst thing that can happen. Seen in this perspective, Nora’s financial manoeuvres are the acts of a Western woman who, due to lack of respect for Chinese culture,

causes great harm to her husband. Therefore, many in the audience breathed a sigh of relief when Nora took her bags and walked out the door. But seen from a different angle, Nora was rebelling against the establishment, and this could be interpreted as an allusion to rebellion against Mao. Perhaps she could in fact play a useful role out there. So Nora's departure elicited approval among the *young* and relief among the older members of the audience. Therefore nobody was upset by her exit in China.

Those wretched macaroons

Ibsen's Nora became a symbol of the women's liberation movement, but Ibsen was first and foremost concerned with people's lack of will or opportunity to live a life of truth and freedom. And in this respect, women were indeed at a disadvantage in Ibsen's time. The playwright was crystal clear about one thing: Without truth there can be no change and no real freedom. But he does not lecture us, and he does not venture into psychological analysis. Rather, he explores the place of the individual in a given context. A question that must be raised in connection with Ibsen's family dramas today is whether we

still live in the same kind of bourgeois society that inhibits us and deprives us of our freedom.

One of the most disturbing scenes in the play is the "macaroon scene", in which Helmer completely infantilises Nora, but where it also becomes clear that Nora is resorting to lies and deceit:

HELMER. [Threatening with his finger.] Hasn't the little sweet-tooth been playing pranks to-day?

NORA. No; how can you think such a thing!

HELMER. Didn't she just look in at the confectioner's?

NORA. No, Torvald; really –

HELMER. Not to sip a little jelly?

NORA. No, certainly not.

HELMER. Hasn't she even nibbled a macaroon or two?

NORA. No, Torvald, indeed, indeed!

HELMER. Well, well, well; of course I'm only joking.



Merry Alpern: Shopping, 1999 © Merry Alpern/Courtesy of Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York

NORA [Goes to the table on the right.]

I shouldn't think of doing what you disapprove of.

Here, Nora has just stealthily eaten a macaroon and brushed off the crumbs. Of course it seems silly of her, but we find his behaviour even more objectionable. And perhaps we think "Thank God we don't go on like that nowadays!" But wait a second... Don't we? Today's women hide their impulse purchases at the back of the wardrobe, so that when the new handbag or jacket finally emerges, they can exclaim "But I bought it ages ago!" Even today, the idea is apparently to pull the wool over Helmer's eyes. But what impact do such "macaroon scenes" have in Norwegian homes, now that most women are financially independent? That is not easy to determine. But there is reason to believe that in many cases women still need to fight for their freedom.

"The miracle of miracles"

The key phrase "the miracle of miracles" has counterparts in several of Ibsen's other plays, for example in "the unspeakable" in *The Lady from the Sea*. In these plays, abstract, enigmatic concepts are used to

express what the protagonists are not capable of putting into words. These concepts become the core of the drama, or rather the black hole that everything revolves around. Indirectly, Ibsen gives us a key to what is going on inside the characters, to their deepest, darkest, strongest feelings and desires. Again and again we can discuss what Nora means when she longs for the "the miracle of miracles", and what it signifies when, at the very end, Helmer utters the same phrase.

Ibsen gives us quite a few clues as to what Nora means. To her "the miracle of miracles" would be to find the evidence that she is so desperately looking for, to prove that Helmer is, in fact, the strong, wise husband she hopes and believes him to be. She wants proof that he is worthy of her love and of the sacrifice she has made by borrowing money to save his life. To Helmer, those same words express his hopes of getting Nora back, at least as he utters them. But it is possible they will take on greater meaning for him too, if only he lets them resound in his mind for a while.

There is no end to the discussion about what happens to Nora after

she slams the door behind her, and some of the many interpretations of the play have been pretty imaginative. But what happens to Helmer? Here there are fewer theories. Helmer pays a high price too. He has followed the rules of the game, as he understood them to be. In Beijing the older members of the audience breathed a sigh of relief when Nora left. At last Helmer was rid of this source of worry in his life. In New York he was left abandoned – pitiful and dejected – with his crutches. In fact, wherever Helmer is placed in space and time, his future life as a single parent will probably not be easy.

What Helmer said

It is unthinkable that the relationship between Nora and Helmer should continue after what has happened, once innocence has been lost and Helmer has uttered the fatal words. That would imply an unbearable undermining of Nora's position, now that its precariousness has been revealed. Throughout the play, Nora has been assessing her own worth, and now Helmer's simple words have made it clear to her that she is not held in particularly high esteem:

HELMER. The matter must be hushed up, cost what it may. – As for you

and me, we must make no outward change in our way of life – no outward change, you understand. Of course, you will continue to live here. But the children cannot be left in your care. I dare not trust them to you.

How do you assess your worth, your position in a marriage? One indicator might be how well equipped you are to deal with adversity. Nora and Helmer have enjoyed some good years – at least it seems so to Helmer, who has been happily ignorant of Nora's financial machinations. Now things have suddenly changed for the worse, and, incomprehensibly to Helmer, it seems that everything he has believed in, everything he believed to be firmly established, has vanished in a split second.

HELMER. [Walking up and down.]
Oh! What an awful awakening! During all these eight years – she who was my pride and my joy – a hypocrite, a liar – worse, worse – a criminal. Oh, the unfathomable hideousness of it all! Ugh! Ugh!

Even when the letter of regret from Mr. Krogstad, the lawyer, has put an end to the crisis, and Helmer is basking in his feeling of magnanimity

over having forgiven Nora completely, she cannot accept simply being erased from history in this manner. It is impossible for her to stay in a house where she can be demoted at any moment, just by Helmer opening his mouth. Nora realises that she has never been happy in Helmer's home – "only merry". The full extent of the falseness on which their marriage is built dawns on her. It has all been a game. Their common life does not have room for truthfulness and moral integrity. Having realised all of this, Nora has nobody to rely on but herself. If she stays with Helmer, one thing is for sure: She will never experience "the miracle of miracles". If, on the other hand, she leaves, there is a chance that they will both experience it some day, either separately or together.

Ibsen concedes that society is at fault, but he is very clear in placing responsibility on the individual. In *A Doll's House*, the moral of the story is very explicit, in that Nora acknowledges her responsibility, takes the consequences, and leaves. Unlike Peer Gynt, she is not tempted by "the Boyg" (also known as "the Voice in the Darkness") to go around all obstacles. She realises that if she were to pretend that what Helmer

said had never been uttered, the rest of her life would become an even greater lie than the one she has been living so far.

(All quotations are from William Archer's translation of A Doll's House)

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Ibsen as Analyst of Power: A Scene from *The Lady From the Sea*

What looks like a free choice may be the result of coercion embedded in a particular social situation.

Set in a small town by a fjord in the west of Norway, *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) deals with women's freedom in relation to marriage.

At the beginning of the play, the protagonist, Ellida Wangel, is almost mad, broken down by her sense of guilt over the death of her baby and persecuted by the idea that the baby died because she failed to remain faithful to the Stranger, a sailor (and quite possibly a murderer), who once threw their entwined rings into the sea, and made her promise to wait for him. Although Ellida wrote to him several times to call their "engagement" off, he never replied. Later,

after the death of her father, she married the kindly Dr. Wangel.

Over the course of the play, Dr. Wangel helps Ellida to emerge from her tormented state by patiently and lovingly listening to her attempts to explain herself. (Their conversations are precursors of Freud's "talking cure.") In the end, Ellida chooses Dr. Wangel again, this time freely and with love. In a contrasting subplot, Ellida's stepdaughter, Bolette Wangel, decides to marry her old tutor Arnholm, who now is a headmaster in the capital. By juxtaposing the two marriage plots, Ibsen gives us an uncommonly subtle analysis of freedom, choice and the force of promises.

ELLIDA. Freedom acknowledged

A conversation in Act 4, in which Ellida tries to explain how she came to marry Wangel after the death of her father, brings out the key concerns:

ELLIDA. And I for my part –. There I was, helpless, not knowing where to turn, and so completely alone. So it was only reasonable to accept – when you came and offered to provide for me for the rest of my life.

WANGEL. I didn't see it as providing for you, dear Ellida. I asked you honestly if you would share with me and the children what little I could call mine.

ELLIDA. Yes, you did. But I shouldn't have accepted it anyway! Not at any price should I have accepted! Not have sold myself! Rather the most wretched work and the most miserable circumstances – freely – and by my own choice!

WANGEL. [Gets up.] Then the five–six years we have lived together have been completely worthless to you?

ELLIDA. No, don't ever think that! I have been as content here with you as any human being could wish for. But I did not enter your home of my own free will. That's the point.

WANGEL. [Looks at her.] Not of your own free will!

ELLIDA. No. I did not go with you of my own free will.

Ellida challenges the notion of “free choice” just as profoundly as Nora challenges the notion of marriage. “I asked you honestly if you would share with me and the children what little I could call mine,” Wangel says. He means that Ellida can hardly say he forced her: she chose to marry him. By rejecting this idea, Ellida shows that to her the verb *ville* [“will” or “would”] is not at all synonymous with “i frivillighet – og efter eget valg” [freely – and by my own choice]. If a promise has been made under coercion, it is worthless. This explains why she is inclined to think that only her *first* promise (to the Stranger) could have turned out to be a “complete and pure marriage,” for as she puts it: “a promise freely given is just as binding as a wedding ceremony”.

What, then, does it take for Ellida freely to choose Wangel as her husband? To find some answers, we need to turn to the scene in which she makes her choice. It is common to interpret the climactic scene of Act

5 as if it simply showed Dr. Wangel giving Ellida permission to choose. Ibsen, however, goes out of his way to show that this is not at all what happens, by inserting the following conversation at the very beginning of Act 5:

ELLIDA. I must speak to him myself.
For I am supposed to make my choice freely.

WANGEL. You have no choice, Ellida.
You won't be allowed to choose. I won't let you.

ELLIDA. You can't prevent my choosing.
Neither you nor anyone else. You can forbid me to go away with him – to follow him – if that's what I choose. You can keep me here by force. Against my will. You can do that. But that I choose – choose in my innermost mind – choose him and not you, – in case I will and must choose that way – you can't prevent that.

WANGEL. No, you are right. I can't prevent that.

Ellida knows that she does not require Dr. Wangel's permission to choose. She requires him, rather, to *acknowledge her right to choose*.

That is what it would take for her to recognize that he too is transformed, that he has learned to consider her a free and equal human being, and that he therefore is qualified to be her husband. Marvellously, in the decisive scene, Dr. Wangel finally rises to the challenge:

WANGEL. Now you can choose your path – in full – full freedom.

ELLIDA. [Staring at him, as if speechless, for a while.] Is it true, – true, – what you are saying? Do you mean it – in your innermost heart?

WANGEL. Yes, I do mean it – in my innermost, suffering heart.

ELLIDA. And can you do it, too? Can you let this happen?

WANGEL. Yes, I can. I can – because I love you so much.

ELLIDA. [Slowly, tremulously.] I have come this close – so deeply inside (så inderligt) your heart?

WANGEL. The years and our life together brought it about.

ELLIDA. [Clasping her hands.] And I never noticed it!



John Ngugi: African Queen, 2005 © John Ngugi

Ellida's questions are quintessentially skeptical: Are you really speaking the truth? Do you really mean it? In your innermost heart? And even if you say you mean it, and really think you do, you may still be mistaken, so the question is can you really let it happen? Can you let me go off with this stranger standing here with a gun in his hand? When Wangel claims that he does and he can, Ellida strikingly replies by talking about love, closeness and intimacy.

In the end, by choosing finite, imperfect, ordinary love over fantasmatic and obsessive Romantic ideals, Ellida chooses human community. Choosing to "acclimatize herself," Ellida embraces change, evolution, transformation and frees herself from the frozen stasis of her mad longing for absolute infinity.

BOLETTE. Freedom Denied

The crucial scene between Arnholm and Bolette begins innocently enough. Arnholm offers to help Bolette to get out in the world, to travel, to get the education she is longing for. Although she is a little dubious about whether she can receive such a great gift from a stranger, she soon expresses her

delight: "Oh, I could both laugh and cry for joy! For happiness and bliss! Oh, then I'll really get to live after all. I was beginning to be afraid that life would pass me by". But her joy is short lived, for Arnholm quickly explains what he has in mind:

ARNHOLM. Well – since you are free, Bolette, since no relationship binds you –. So I ask you then – if you could want (*kunde ville*) – could want to join me – for life?

BOLETTE. [Recoils in horror.] Oh, – what are you saying!

ARNHOLM. For your whole life, Bolette. If you will (*vil*) be my wife.

BOLETTE. [Half beside herself.] No, no, no! This is impossible! Completely impossible.

Twice Arnholm says not just *ville*, but *kunde ville* ("could will," which here means something like "could you bring yourself to want") – as if he knows that Bolette will have to overcome a resistance in order to want to marry him. The third time, however, his proposal has come to sound like a simple choice ("will you"), and Bolette recoils in horror. But Arnholm does not give up:

stressing the economic and sexual facts, he reminds Bolette that when her father dies, she will need money (just like Ellida once did), and that if she refuses him, she may one day have to accept someone she likes even less. These are scare tactics, and it is not surprising that in the end, Arnholm's proposal sounds more like a threat than a promise:

ARNHOLM. Then will you (vil De) rather remain at home and let life pass you by?

BOLETTE. Oh, it is so terribly painful to think of it!

ARNHOLM. Will you (vil De) renounce the opportunity to see something of the world outside? Renounce taking part in all those things that you say you have been yearning for?... Think carefully, Bolette.

BOLETTE. Oh yes, – you are so completely right, Mr. Arnholm.

Playing the phrase *Vil De* ("do you want to"; "will you") like a virtuoso, Arnholm makes it look as if by refusing him, Bolette freely chooses to renounce all her dreams and ambitions. His final "Think carefully, Bolette" is pure menace. And it

works: a moment later, he gets his wish. In this sequence, Ibsen handles all the different expressions for choice and will in a particularly masterful way:

ARNHOLM. Do you mean that you perhaps nevertheless could be willing to (kanske dog kunde være villig til) –? That at least you could want to allow me (kunde vilde unde mig) the pleasure of helping you as a faithful friend?

BOLETTE. No, no, no! Never that! For *that* would be completely impossible now. – No, – Mr. Arnholm, – then you'd better take me.

ARNHOLM. Bolette! You will, after all!

BOLETTE. Yes, – I think – I will.

ARNHOLM. Then you will be my wife!

BOLETTE. Yes. If you still feel that - that you ought to take me.

As the dialogue develops, Arnholm moves from his hesitant *kunde vilde* (could bring yourself to want) to the triumphant *vil*. The repetition of "will" reinforces the ideology, making it

look as if Bolette here freely chooses to marry him. Her repetition of the phrase “take me,” on the other hand, signals not only that she feels sexually threatened, but also that she knows that she is here agreeing to commodify herself. Does Bolette freely choose to trade her body and her life for financial security, travel and an education? What powers does she have to ensure that Arnholm keeps his part of the bargain?

Ibsen’s analysis of the ways in which what looks like free choice may be the result of coercion embedded in a particular social situation is matchless. *The Lady from the Sea* shows us both how difficult it is for a woman to assert her freedom and have that freedom acknowledged, and how easy it is for a woman’s freedom to be perverted and undermined.

All translations of Ibsen’s text are by Dr. Moi.

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Norwegian Gender Equality Milestones

1839 "Feeble women over the age of 40, who were otherwise unable to make a living", are allowed to become master craftsmen.

1842 All women who are not financially provided for, are given the right to conduct business: "Widows, wives living completely separate from their husbands, and unmarried spinsters, when regarded as being of legal age by concession of the king."

1845 Unmarried women over the age of 25 are given the same rights by law as "male persons who have not attained majority".

1854 The same rights of inheritance for sons and daughters. Before this date, sons inherited twice as much as their sisters.

1858 The telephone and telegraph administration is opened to women, as first among the public services.

1860 Women are given permission to work as teachers in rural, primary schools. In 1869 they were given the same right in city schools.

1863 Unmarried women over the age of 25 attain majority like adult men, but lost this status when they married.

1866 Women are given the same rights as men to carry on a trade.

1869 Unmarried women attain majority at the same age as men, 21 years old.

1874 Charlotte Lund takes the middle school examination in Stavanger, and two years later the Ministry states "there appears to be no obstacle preventing young women from achieving the middle school examination".

1875 "The Women's School of Arts and Handicrafts" opens in Christiania.

1882 Women are given the right to attain "artium" (university entrance) examination, and Cecilie Thoresen is the first woman student to do so.

1884 Women are given the right to study and achieve the final examination at all faculties at the University. After completing the examination, women could open practice as medical doctors and dentists, but in other respects they were not given access to work in public offices, such as law, philosophy and within other fields for which they were qualified. The Norwegian Association for Women's Rights is founded, with Gina Krog as chairman.

1885 Ragna Nielsen establishes the first integrated school for girls and boys.

1887 Public prostitution is banned in Norway.

1888 A new Marriage Act is passed by which married women retain their majority and have the right to separate ownership.

1889 Women are allowed as members of School Boards. Girls are allowed to "accompany" the boys in the National Day Parade in Oslo, the 17th of May. Women working in a matchstick factory go on strike.

1895 Women are allowed to vote for the first time. This applied to referendum in the municipalities concerning the sale of spirits.

1898 The National Women's Suffrage Association is founded, with Fredrikke Marie Qvam as chairman.

1900 Women are allowed as member of the "Poor Relief Board" in the municipalities.

1901 Women are given a limited right to vote, and can be elected in the municipalities' elections.

1906 Mathilde Schjødt becomes the first woman obtaining a Norwegian official post.

Continues on inside cover >