

# “First and Foremost a Human Being”: Idealism, Theatre, and Gender in *A Doll’s House*<sup>1</sup>

TORIL MOI

## INTRODUCTION

*A Doll’s House* is the first full-blown example of Ibsen’s modernism. It contains a devastating critique of idealism entwined with a turn to the everyday, a celebration of theatre combined with a fierce analysis of everyday theatricality (*A Doll’s House* is teeming with metatheatrical elements) and a preoccupation with the conditions of love in modernity. In *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen mobilizes all these features in a contemporary setting and in relation to a fundamentally modern theme: namely, the situation of women in the family and society.<sup>2</sup> The result is a play that calls for a radical transformation [*forvandling*], not just, or not even primarily, of laws and institutions, but of human beings and their ideas of love.

This article explores three major themes in *A Doll’s House*: idealism, theatre, and gender. Although idealist aesthetic norms were a primary concern for many of the play’s first critics, contemporary literary scholars have barely raised the subject.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I use the term “idealism” to mean “idealist aesthetics,” defined broadly as the idea that the task of art is to create beauty, combined with the belief that beauty, truth, and goodness are one. Taking questions of beauty to be questions of morality and truth, idealist aesthetics thus seamlessly merge aesthetics

This article is a slightly edited version of chapter seven of Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, to be published by Oxford University Press in July 2006. A Norwegian version, *Ibsens modernisme*, translated by Agnete Øye, was published by Pax Forlag in Oslo in May 2006. Printed with permission.

and ethics. Although the earliest versions of idealist aesthetics had been espoused by Romantic radicals such as Friedrich Schiller, Madame de Staël, and – a little later – Shelley, by the time of *A Doll's House*, the Romantic movement was long dead; yet idealist aesthetics lived on, albeit in increasingly tired and exhausted forms, which often were aligned with conservative and moralistic social forces. Not surprisingly, then, in the wake of the radical Danish intellectual Georg Brandes's fiery call for a modern literature in his 1871–72 lectures on *Hovedstrømninger i Europeisk litteratur*, idealism was increasingly coming under attack, and – as I show in my book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* – Ibsen's works were the linchpin of the burgeoning modernist opposition to idealism.<sup>4</sup>

The moment of *A Doll's House* marks a clear shift in the increasingly intense cultural battle between idealists and emerging modernists in Europe. Idealist responses to *A Doll's House* were *embattled* in a way that idealist responses to *Love's Comedy* and *Emperor and Galilean* were not.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will show that defenders of Ibsen's realism nevertheless come across as less sophisticated than their idealist opponents. In fact, by propagating the idea that *A Doll's House* was to be understood as a “slice of life,” Ibsen's first admirers entirely missed his pro-theatricalism, his metatheatrical insistence that what we are seeing is *theatre*. Around 1880, then, neither Ibsen's enemies nor his friends were in a position truly to grasp the scope of his aesthetic achievement.

But idealism was not just an important element in the reception of *A Doll's House*. It is also embedded in the play, most strikingly in the character of Torvald Helmer, a card-carrying idealist aesthete if ever there was one. Moreover, Helmer's idealism and Nora's unthinking echoing of it make them theatricalize both themselves and each other, most strikingly by taking themselves to be starring in various idealist scenarios of female sacrifice and male rescue.

Ibsen's critique of idealism is the condition of possibility for his revolutionary analysis of gender in modernity. In this respect, the key line of the play is Nora's claim to be “first and foremost a human being (359).”<sup>6</sup> Nora's struggle for recognition as a human being is rightly considered an exemplary case of women's struggle for political and social rights.<sup>7</sup> But Nora claims her humanity only after explicitly rejecting two other identities: namely, “doll” and “wife and mother.” In order to show what these refusals mean, I first consider the signification of the figure of the doll. “The human body is the best picture of the human soul,” Ludwig Wittgenstein writes (152). What happens if we take Nora's body dancing the tarantella to be a picture of her soul? Starting from this question, I show that the tarantella scene is revolutionary both in its

handling of theatre and theatricality and in its understanding of different ways of looking at a performing woman's body.

I read Nora's refusal to define herself as a wife and mother as a rejection of Hegel's theory of women's role in the family and society. Read in this light, *A Doll's House* becomes an astoundingly radical play about women's historical transition from being generic family members (wife, sister, daughter, mother) to becoming individuals (Nora, Rebecca, Ellida, Hedda). I do not mean to say that Ibsen set out to illustrate Hegel. (No claim would have annoyed him more.) I mean, rather, that Hegel happens to be the great theorist of the traditional, patriarchal, and sexist family structure that *A Doll's House* sets out to investigate. There is no need to posit any knowledge on Ibsen's part of Hegel's theory of women and the family: we only need to assume that Ibsen saw the situation of women in the family at least as clearly as Hegel did, and that, unlike Hegel, he saw it as something that would have to change if women were to have a chance at the pursuit of happiness in modern society. If, as Rita Felski has claimed, modernist literature represents women as outside history and, in particular, as outside the modern, then Ibsen's modernism is a glorious exception, not just because *A Doll's House* is about Nora's painful entrance into modernity but because all his modern plays contain women who are as radically engaged in the problems of modern life as the men who surround them (see Felski 30).

#### IDEALIST AND REALIST RESPONSES TO *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

*A Doll's House* was published on 4 December 1879 in Copenhagen. The first performance took place at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen on 21 December 1879, with Betty Hennings as Nora. In 1873, Arne Garborg's idealist reading of *Emperor and Galilean* was written in a situation in which alternative aesthetic points of view were unavailable. Six years later, this had changed. Norwegian and Danish reviews of the book and the world premiere show that *A Doll's House* was received in a cultural moment when the war between idealists and realists was already raging.

On 9 and 10 January 1880, *Aftenbladet* in Kristiania published two articles on *A Doll's House*, which come across as exemplary instances of belated and embattled idealism. The author was Fredrik Petersen (1839–1903), a professor of theology at the University of Kristiania and thus a typical representative of the alliance between idealist aesthetics, established religion, and conservative social views that characterized the opponents of Ibsen in the 1880s and 1890s. (It is no coincidence that the character of Pastor Manders in *Ghosts* personifies precisely this social and political constellation.)

Explicitly fusing Christianity and idealist aesthetics, Petersen's analysis is based on the idea that "[s]ociety needs divine ideality, needs faith in the idea of the good and the beautiful to survive." The glaring flaw of *A Doll's House*, therefore, is the absence of reconciliation: "And yet one does not leave this play in the uplifted mood which already in the time of the Greeks was regarded as an absolute requirement for any artistic or poetic work. Having seen something profoundly ugly [*noget saare Uskjønt*] we are left only with a distressing [*pinlig*] feeling, which is the inevitable consequence when there is no reconciliation to demonstrate the ultimate victory of the ideal."<sup>8</sup> According to Petersen, the defining characteristic of realism in general was the refusal of reconciliation and uplift.

Why was the sense of uplift so important to idealist critics?<sup>9</sup> Starting from the premise that art is a "a child of humankind's creative capacity in its highest ideality, the aspect in which human beings are most like God," Petersen insists that anything that is to be called a work of art has to bear the "creative, idealizing stamp of the human spirit." Pointedly contrasting such idealization to "mere reproduction," he expresses himself in terms that recall Schiller but also the discussion between George Sand and Balzac: "The ideality of art is beauty, because beauty is the natural external expression of the good. Even when art represents ugliness [*det Uskjønne*], it is not real but idealized ugliness" (Peterson). Reconciliation enables the reader and spectator to leave the work with "ideality awakened in his soul," and this, precisely, is what triggers the sense of uplift. Art is thus crucially important in the world because it empowers and ennobles us.

According to Petersen, realism is the antithesis of true art. By deliberately withholding reconciliation, realism demonstrates that it has lost all faith in the "divine ideality's power in life." In this way, realism is aligned with scepticism and secularism. This is significant, for the culture war that broke out over the Scandinavian "modern breakthrough" was articulated as a battle between Christian idealists and freethinking realists, led by the Jewish Georg Brandes.

Although he was the most interesting and most articulate, Petersen was not the only idealist to respond to *A Doll's House*. Other critics, too, lamented the play's lack of reconciliation. In Denmark, M.V. Brun, reviewing the play in *Folkets Avis* on 24 December 1879, even claimed that the absence of reconciliation between the spouses was entirely unnatural, running against common psychological sense. Once Nora understood that she had committed a crime, the natural thing for her to do would be to "throw herself into her husband's arms and say, 'I have erred, but I have erred without knowing it, and out of love for you, save me!' and her husband would then have forgiven and

saved her" (Brun). Throughout the play, Brun writes, the spectator still hopes that Nora will confess and that her confession will be followed by reconciliation. The audience is, therefore, completely unprepared for the "revolting break-up" in the third act, which he considers "hideous." Indeed, *A Doll's House* exhibits "such screaming dissonances that no beautiful harmony capable of resolving them exists."

Socialists and radicals, on the other hand, praised the play without reservations, but also without aesthetic sophistication. In the Danish newspaper *Social-Demokraten*, the owner of the signature "I-n" treated the play as a completely realistic, political treatise: "Our own life, our own everyday life has here been placed on stage and condemned! We have never in dramatic or poetic form seen a better, more powerful intervention in the question of women's liberation!" In the radical Norwegian paper *Dagbladet*, Erik Vullum uses idealist terms to laud the play's aesthetic perfection (he speaks of its "clarity and artistic harmony" and used beauty as his highest term of praise), a practice that he obviously considers entirely compatible with political praise for Ibsen's radical social thought.

In January 1880, the feminist novelist Amalie Skram published a brilliant commentary on *A Doll's House* in *Dagbladet*. It is a tremendously insightful, sympathetic, and passionate defence of Nora's actions, as well as a clear-eyed registration of the play's radical challenge to the social order. Strikingly combining feminism and idealism, Skram completely identifies with Nora's idealist fantasies: "Like lightning an insight strikes in Nora's soul: too base, his soul cannot understand, let alone nourish, the kind of love that accepts all blame, yes, even offers up its life. [He rages] at the hypocrite, liar, criminal, yet the inner, essential truth is that she has risked everything to save his life" (309). Skram's conclusion practically repeats Schiller's idea that modern poets must either lament the absence of the ideal or glorify its presence: "Marriage is judged here. Its high and holy idea has fled away from earth. The poet can only expose the caricature that has been put in its place, or admonish us by pointing upward" (313).

Around 1880, then, the idealists still monopolized the concepts required for a serious discussion of art and aesthetics. Even in its belated, moralizing form, idealism had intellectual power. Petersen's review of *A Doll's House* gives voice to a highly articulate and sophisticated theory of art, derived from German idealism and infused with Lutheran Christianity.

Cultural modernizers, on the other hand, either treated art as if it were life, or simply combined idealist aesthetic concepts (the ideal, beauty, harmony) with radical politics. In so far as they saw *A Doll's House* as an impressive political tract, a slice of life on stage, they did Ibsen

a disservice, for their reactions helped to cement the impression that Ibsen's realism was nothing but the unselfconscious presentation of real life. Although the idealists did not yet know it, they were doomed to historical oblivion. Paradoxically, then, the victorious realists laid the foundations for the still widespread belief that Ibsen's contemporary plays are nothing but unselfconscious and boring realism. Both his opponents and supporters, moreover, completely missed the self-conscious and pro-theatrical use of theatre in *A Doll's House*. In this respect, Ibsen's own practice far outstripped the aesthetic categories of his audience.

Late in his life, Ibsen always adamantly declared that he never wrote with politics or social philosophy in mind. Surely these claims should be understood as a reaction against the reductive and, as it were, over-politicizing reception of his plays, which dominated the 1880s and the 1890s. The most famous instance of such a denial is his speech at the gala evening organized in his honour by Norsk Kvindesagsforening [the Norwegian Association for the Cause of Women] in 1898: "I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than one generally appears inclined to believe. [I] must decline the honour consciously to have worked for the cause of women. I am not even quite clear what the cause of women really is. For me it has appeared to be the cause of human beings . . . My task has been to *portray human beings*" (Ibsen, "Ved norsk" 417).

#### HELMER'S SENSE OF BEAUTY

Throughout *A Doll's House* Torvald Helmer is represented as an aesthetic idealist. I am not the first to notice this. In 1880, the great Danish writer Herman Bang criticized Emil Poulsen, the actor who played Helmer in the first production, for making his character insufficiently refined. Helmer, Bang writes, quoting most of the relevant passages in support, is a "completely aesthetic nature," in fact, an "aesthetically inclined egoist" ("*Et dukkehjem*").<sup>10</sup> This is a fine perception: Helmer is an egoist and a rather brutal and petty-minded one, too. Astute contemporary readers and theatregoers were perfectly capable of noticing the veiled critique of idealism produced by this juxtaposition of idealism and egoism. We should note, however, that Bang never calls Helmer an idealist; the word he uses is always "aesthete."<sup>11</sup> This seems to me to confirm what the newspaper reception of *A Doll's House* also shows; namely, that in 1880, there was still only one way to be an aesthete and that was the idealist way. To be a realist was to be radical, political, committed, another register of experience altogether.

Torvald Helmer, then, prides himself on his sense of beauty. "Nobody has such a refined taste as you," Nora says to him (306). He enjoys seeing Nora beautifully dressed, but he "can't stand seeing tailoring" (314). He prefers women to embroider, for knitting "can never be anything but ugly [*uskkønt*]" (344). In these lines, Helmer also manifests his social class: knitting is ugly because it is useful, embroidery is beautiful because it is a pastime for leisured ladies. Helmer's sense of beauty, moreover, admits no separation between ethics and aesthetics. He has never wanted to "deal with business matters that are not fine and pretty [*smukke*]" (280–81). His love for the good and the beautiful makes him despise people like Krogstad who have sinned against the ideal. Blighted by guilt and crime, they are doomed to bring the pestilential infection of lies and hypocrisy into their own families, and the result is ugliness:

HELMER. Just think how such a guilt-ridden human being must lie and pretend and be a hypocrite to all and sundry, how he must wear a mask even with his closest family, yes, even with his own wife and his own children. And the children, Nora, that's just the most horrible thing.

NORA. Why?

HELMER. Because such a stinking circle of lies brings infection and bacteria into the life of a whole home. Every breath that the children take in such a house is filled with the germs of something ugly. (307).

Sickness, pollution, infection, pestilence: these are the motifs that regularly turned up in idealist attacks on Ibsen's later plays. Helmer also draws on idealism's characteristically anti-theatrical language: hypocrisy, pretence, mask. "No play-acting!" Helmer says to Nora as she is on her way to drown herself (351). Then he calls her a hypocrite, a liar, and a criminal (see 352).

The macaroons are forbidden in the name of beauty too, for Helmer is worried that Nora will destroy her pretty teeth. Nora, therefore, eats them only in the presence of Dr. Rank or when she is alone. At one moment, when she is alone with Dr. Rank, she munches some forbidden macaroons and then announces that she is dying to take into her mouth some "ugly" swear words. Given Helmer's incessant harping on beauty, it is no wonder that the swear words Nora wants to say are "*Død og pine* [Death and pain]," and that she says them to Dr. Rank (293).

Helmer's refinement cannot deal with death and pain. Dr. Rank makes it perfectly clear that Helmer is unwanted at the deathbed of his best friend: "Helmer, with his refined nature, has an intense sense of disgust for everything that is hideous. I don't want him in my sick room," Dr. Rank says when he tells Nora that he will die within a month (320). No wonder, then, that Helmer's first reaction to the news of Rank's

impending death is purely aesthetic: "With his suffering and his loneliness, he provided as it were a cloudy background to our sunlit happiness" (274). Helmer speaks like a painter, or perhaps even like a painter of theatre décor: all he can think of is surface effects. When prodded by Nora, Helmer is even capable of giving up sex at the thought of something ugly. When she questions whether they really should have sex just after learning about Rank's impending death, he acquiesces, for "something ugly has come between us; thoughts of death and decay. We must try to free ourselves from them" (350).

For Helmer, beauty is freedom; freedom is beauty. Right at the beginning of Act One he warns Nora against borrowing money: "No debt! Never borrow! There is something unfree, and therefore also something ugly [*uskønt*] about a home founded on borrowing and debt" (274). If Helmer had not thought of debt as ugly and unfree, he might not have objected to borrowing money for the trip to Italy.

Helmer's constant display of his sense of beauty, then, is responsible for what he calls the "bottomless hideousness" uncovered by Krogstad's letter (352). His refined aesthetic sense does not prevent him from proposing that their life together should now be lived in the mode of theatre: "[a]nd in so far as you and I are concerned, it has to look as if everything between us remains just as it was. But of course only before the eyes of the world" (353). The irony is that just when Nora is finally ready to "take off the masquerade costume," Helmer is more than willing to put it on (355).

#### IDEALISM AND THEATRICALITY: MELODRAMAS OF SACRIFICE AND RESCUE

Both Nora and Helmer spend most of the play theatricalizing themselves by acting out their own cliché idealist scripts. Nora's fantasies are variations on the idealist figure of the noble and pure woman who sacrifices all for love. First, she casts herself as a pure and selfless heroine who has saved her husband's life. Her secret is the source of her identity, the foundation of her sense of worth, and makes it easy for her to act the part of Helmer's chirping songbird and playful squirrel. That she has aestheticized her secret – turned it into a thing of beauty – is also clear, for when Krogstad threatens to reveal their dealings to Helmer, Nora replies, on the point of tears: "This secret, which is my joy and my pride, he is to learn about it in such an ugly and coarse way, – and learn it from *you*" (300).

When she realizes that her secret in fact is a crime, she feels besmirched by ugliness. To save her sense of self-worth, she mobilizes the plainly melodramatic fantasy of *det vidunderlige* (literally, "the wonderful thing"; often translated, somewhat too religiously,



as "the miracle," or – better – as "something glorious"). Nora imagines that once Helmer learns about her crime, he will generously and heroically offer to rescue her by sacrificing himself. In an even higher and nobler spirit of self-sacrifice, she will refuse his sacrifice and drown herself rather than let him sully his honour for her sake. This is debased idealism, a melodramatic scenario of the kind that routinely played in nineteenth-century boulevard theatres.

That the figure of the pure and self-sacrificing woman had become no more than a well-worn cliché by the time Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* is made clear in Krogstad's suspicious reaction to Mrs. Linde's offer of marriage: "I don't believe in this. It is nothing but a high-strung woman's sense of nobility, driving her to sacrifice herself" (340). Insofar as Mrs. Linde and Krogstad are counterpoints to Nora and Helmer, it is not least because they refuse to build their marriage on theatrical clichés.

Helmer, of course, is also fantasizing. First of all, he thinks of himself as extremely manly, even heroic. Nora is perfectly aware of this: "Torvald with his masculine pride – how embarrassing and humiliating would it not be for him to know that he owed me anything" (287). Helmer's sense of masculinity depends on Nora's performances of helpless, childlike femininity: "I wouldn't be a man, if just this feminine helplessness did not make you twice as attractive in my eyes" (354). As cliché and theatrical as Nora's, his fantasies are more frankly sexual, although they represent sexuality in idealist terms (probably to avoid acknowledging what the idealists considered to be mere animal lust). After the masked ball, for example, Helmer reveals that he has a fantasy about ravishing his virginal child-woman – but only after the wedding: "[I] imagine . . . that you are my young bride, that we have just come from the wedding, that I am bringing you into my house for the first time – that for the first time I am alone with you – completely alone with your young, trembling, delightful beauty! (346).

Helmer also thinks of himself as the dashing hero coming to the rescue of the pure woman: "You know what, Nora – often I wish that some imminent danger threatened you, so that I could risk life and blood, everything, everything for your sake" (350). When Nora takes him literally and urges him to read his letters, the result is a savagely ironic demolition of idealist stage conventions and a reminder that people who claim to live by idealist clichés are liable to theatricalize themselves and others.

The most destructive expression of Helmer's fantasies comes just as he has finished reading Krogstad's second letter, realizes that he is saved, and suddenly becomes all forgiveness. When Nora says she will "take off her masquerade costume," Helmer completely mishears her tone and launches into a horrendously self-aggrandizing monologue.

The stage directions indicate that he is supposed to speak through the open door, with Nora offstage, changing her clothes. By placing Helmer alone onstage, Ibsen stresses the distancing, estranging effect of his self-theatricalization: "Oh, you don't know a real man's heart, Nora. For a man there is something indescribably sweet and satisfying in knowing that he has forgiven his wife – that he truly has forgiven her with his whole heart. It is as if she has doubly become his property; as if he has brought her into the world again; as if she has become his wife and his child as well. This is what you will be for me from now on, you little bewildered, helpless creature" (355). This discourse on forgiveness is surely what Gregers Werle had in mind when he urged Hjalmar Ekdal nobly to forgive Gina. This is the moment where the idealist reconciliation ought to be, and Ibsen undermines it completely by having Nora coming back onstage in her *hverdagskjole* [everyday dress].

At this point, with Nora in her everyday dress and Helmer still in his evening clothes, the famous conversation that completely destroyed idealist expectations begins. Ibsen's masterly exploration of the relationship among theatricality, melodrama, and debased idealism here reaches its logical end and high point, for Nora cuts straight to the chase. Requesting – or rather, ordering – Helmer to sit down to talk, she says,

NORA. Sit down. This will take a long time. I have a lot to talk to you about.

HELMER (*sits at the table directly opposite her*). You make me anxious, Nora. And I don't understand you.

NORA. No, that's just it. You don't understand me. And I have never understood you either – until tonight. (356)

There is a clear acknowledgment here that both Nora and Helmer have been blinded by their self-theatricalizing fantasies. Without letting Helmer off the hook, Nora acknowledges that she has contributed to this outcome: "I have earned my living by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But you wanted it that way" (357).

Nora's recognition of her own participation in their games of concealment should make us pause. So far, I have written about Nora's and Helmer's theatricalization of themselves and each other in a way that might give rise to the idea that the two of them are, as it were, pure performers. But their fantasies reveal them as much as they conceal them. Because they are fantasies of rescuing the other, of doing something heroic for the sake of love, they reveal that Nora and Helmer love each other as well as they can. They just cannot do any better. Had they known what they were doing when they performed their masquerades, they would have stopped doing it.<sup>12</sup> By showing us their

theatrical marriage, Ibsen did not mean to turn these two decent people into villains but to make us think about the way we theatricalize ourselves and others in everyday life.

If to grow up is to choose finitude, as Stanley Cavell puts it, then it is clear that neither Nora nor Helmer have been grown-ups until this point (*Claim* 464). They have, rather, been like children playing house together. In the final conversation, their performances of adult masculinity and femininity come across as mere impersonations. But perhaps they are not children, or not just children, but dolls: after all, the play in which they appear is called *A Doll's House*.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE DOLL AS A LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL

##### FIGURE: CORINNE AND NORA

We have arrived, then, at the figure of the doll. When Nora tries to explain her experience of life and marriage, this is the figure she uses to describe her past self. Her father, she says, "called me his doll-child and played with me the way I played with my dolls" (357). And Helmer has done the same thing: "But our home has been nothing but a play-house. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child" (358).<sup>14</sup> She herself has carried on the tradition: "And the children, in turn, have been my dolls" (358). Nora leaves, then, because she no longer wants anything to do with this doll-life.

The figure of the doll is the most important metaphor in *A Doll's House*. In philosophy, the living doll – the doll that moves, that gives the impression of being alive – has been used as a figure for the problem of other minds ever since René Descartes looked out of his third floor window one evening in 1641 and saw people walking around in the street below. Or did he? His moment of vertigo arose when he realized that he could not *with certainty* say that he was watching real human beings. All he could really be sure of seeing were "hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs" (*Discourse* 84). In this sentence, the phrase "artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs" translates a single Latin word, namely *automata* (see Descartes, *Méditations* 49).

The imagery of automata, robots, dolls – and in modern science fiction – aliens gives voice to a fundamental philosophical question: how do I know that another human being is another human being? that he or she thinks and feels as a human being? how can I tell the difference between the human and the non-human, between life and death?<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the doll easily becomes a figure of horror: in European literature the image of the doll-woman is often found in the borderlands

between Gothic horror and Romanticism. In E.T.A. Hoffmann's horror story, "The Sandman," the writer Nathanael rejects his real life fiancée, Clara, for the doll Olympia, who can only nod and say, "Oh! Oh!"<sup>16</sup> While still part of a horror story, Hoffmann's doll also serves to criticize some men's preference for subservient women. In Ibsen's own works, the uncanny character of Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*, who is half woman, half statue, also evokes the Gothic and the uncanny. In recent film history, the original *Stepford Wives* articulates the same preoccupation with the horror and uncanniness of the woman-doll, in ways that can't fail to recall *A Doll's House*.<sup>17</sup>

In Madame de Staël's works, the figure of the doll, without Gothic overtones, is also used to criticize sexist attitudes towards women. In her short satirical play, *Le Mannequin*, a German painter called, of all things, Frédéric Hoffmann helps his beloved Sophie de la Morlière to trick the stupid French count d'Erville, an enemy of "*l'esprit des femmes* [the intellect of women]," into preferring a paper doll to a real woman. In the key scene, the count falls in love with the doll precisely because she doesn't say a word. More important to *A Doll's House*, however, is Madame de Staël's use of the figure of the doll in *Corinne, or Italy*, where it certainly has affinities to *A Doll's House*. During a long stay in England, Corinne is forced to remain silent in society just because she is a woman, and complains that she could just as well have been a "*une poupée légèrement perfectionnée par la mécanique* [a doll slightly perfected by mechanics]."<sup>18</sup> When Corinne does speak (or dance or sing), the situation does not improve, for then she is accused of being theatrical.<sup>19</sup>

Whether Corinne is forcibly silenced or accused of being theatrical, she is reduced to her body. In the first case she is entombed in it, in the second, it is turned into a theatrical spectacle. Either way, she is not listened to, her words are not heard, and her humanity – what the Romantics would have called her soul – remains unacknowledged. Corinne, then, is caught in a sexist dilemma in which she is either theatricalized or forcibly silenced, and, in both cases, she is reduced to a thing. A woman in such a position will struggle to signify her existence, her humanity. This is true for Corinne, but it is true for Nora, too, for she too has to try to assert her existence by finding a voice, by launching into what Cavell elsewhere calls her "cogito performance," an aria-like expression of her soul intended to proclaim, declaim, declare her existence (*Contesting Tears*; "Opera").<sup>20</sup> Losing her voice, Corinne dies misunderstood and unacknowledged.<sup>21</sup> Ibsen's Nora, however, finds her voice and claims her own humanity: "I believe that I too am first and foremost a human being, just as much as you" (359).

“THE HUMAN BODY IS THE BEST PICTURE OF THE HUMAN SOUL”:

NORA'S TARANTELLA

The tarantella scene in Act Two is something like Nora's bodily “cogito performance”: a performance in which she demonstrates her humanity (as opposed to her “dollness”) not through song but through dance. The tarantella scene is melodramatic in all the usual meanings of the word. It provides music and dance, and it is staged in order to postpone the discovery of a secret, a discovery that Nora believes will lead to her death. Nora, moreover, dances her tarantella motivated by fear and anxiety and gives a performance that is explicitly said to be violent or vehement [*voldsom*] (334).

The exaggerated expressivity of melodrama, Cavell writes, can be understood as a reaction to the fear of the “extreme states of voicelessness” that can overcome us once we start wondering whether we can ever manage to make others recognize and acknowledge our humanity (*Contesting* 43). If this is right, then the melodramatic obsession with states of terror, of suffocation, of forced expression, expresses fear of human isolation, of being reduced to a thing, of death. Such states are at once bodily and quintessentially theatrical, both in the sense that they belong to the traditional repertoire of the stage, and in the sense that anyone exhibiting them will be suspected of overacting, of expressing more than they feel.

This is precisely the reaction that many actresses and directors have had to Nora's tarantella. They have wished to tone down the sheer theatricality of the scene, in the name of realism and in an effort to preserve Nora's dignity. Eleanora Duse was famous for hardly dancing the tarantella at all. Even Elizabeth Robins, the actress who pioneered many of Ibsen's plays in Britain, thought the tarantella was “too stagey,” Alisa Solomon writes (55).<sup>22</sup> But theatre and theatricality are central concerns of *A Doll's House*, and, if we are to understand Nora's tarantella, we need to see that it is, among other things, an invitation to reflect on the nature of theatre. As Solomon brilliantly puts it, the tarantella is “not a *concession* to the old effect-hunting, [but] an *appropriation* of it” (55).

Given all the melodramatic elements of the tarantella, it would be easy to conclude that it simply shows Nora theatricalizing her own body, that she deliberately turns herself into a spectacle in order to divert Helmer's attention from the mailbox, thus acquiescing in her own status as a doll. Although this is surely Nora's main motivation for insisting on rehearsing her tarantella right away, the scene itself exceeds such a limited reading. Feverish with fear, Nora dances extremely fast and violently. This could also be a part of her act, for she wants to

persuade Helmer that he needs to instruct her instead of reading his mail. But the stage directions tell us more: "Rank sits down at the piano and plays. Nora dances with increasing wildness. Helmer stands over by the stove regularly addressing instructions to her during the dance; she does not appear to hear him; her hair comes loose and falls over her shoulders, she does not notice, but continues to dance. *Mrs. Linde enters*" (334). We could, of course, link Nora's dancing to Freud's hysteria, to the woman's body signifying the distress her voice cannot speak.<sup>23</sup> But that would be to deprive Nora of agency by turning her into a medical case. It may be better simply to say that Nora's tarantella is a graphic representation of a woman's struggle to make her existence *heard*, to make it *count* (this is what I assume Cavell means by "cogito performance").

During the performance Nora's hair comes undone. Ibsen, I am sure, here deliberately invokes the theatrical convention known as "back hair," which in nineteenth-century melodrama handbooks signifies the "onset of madness" (see Meisel 8). As her hair comes down, Nora no longer listens to Helmer's instructions. Now she dances as if in a trance, as in the grip of madness, as if she genuinely *is* the body Helmer reduces her to. But if Nora is her body and nothing else, then the tarantella would be pornographic, a mere display of a sexualized body. What happens to our understanding of the tarantella if, instead of agreeing with Helmer, we invoke Wittgenstein and say that, in this moment, Nora's body is the best picture of her soul?

The first question is what does this mean? What makes Wittgenstein's "[t]he human body is the best picture of the human soul" pertinent to *A Doll's House*? The sentence appears in section four of the second half of *Philosophical Investigations*, a section that begins in this way:

"I believe that he is suffering." – Do I also *believe* that he isn't an automaton? It would go against the grain to use the word in both connexions.  
(Or is it like this: I believe that he is suffering, but am certain that he is not an automaton? Nonsense!) (152)

Here the question of the suffering of others is linked to the picture of the automaton (I take this to be a deliberate invocation of Descartes' scepticism). At stake, then, is the question of the difference between dolls (automata) and human beings. This is reinforced by the next few lines: "[s]uppose I say of a friend: 'He isn't an automaton.' – What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a *human being* who meets him in ordinary circumstances?" (152). If I imagine a situation in which I would say, "He isn't an automaton" to a friend (A)

about another friend (B), I find that I would say it if I were trying to tell A to stop treating B as she has been doing, perhaps because I think that A has been cruel to B, that she has behaved as if she did not think that B, too, had feelings. That is what the "soul" means in these passages: the idea of an inner life, of (unexpressed) pain and suffering (but – I hope – joy, too).

To grasp what Wittgenstein is getting at here, it is necessary to understand the sceptical picture of the relationship between body and soul. For one kind of sceptic – let us call her the Romantic kind – the body hides the soul. Because it is (literally) the incarnation of human finitude (separation and death), the Romantic thinks of the body as an obstacle, as that which prevents us from knowing other human beings. True human communication, the Romantic believes, must overcome finitude; thus we get fantasies of souls commingling, of perfect communication without words, and of twin souls destined for each other from all eternity.

Another kind of sceptic – let us call her the postmodern kind – may impatiently reject all talk of souls as a merely metaphysical constructs; she prefers to picture the body as a surface, an object, or even as materiality as such. Considered as pure materiality, the body is neither the expression nor the embodiment of an interiority. To think of the body as a surface is to theatricalize it: whatever that body does or says will be perceived as performance, not expression. To think of it as a thing or as pure materiality is to de-soul it, to render it inhuman. While the Romantic will deny finitude by rising to high idealist heaven, the postmodern sceptic will deny human interiority ("the subject," "agency," "freedom") altogether.<sup>24</sup>

Wittgenstein's "the human body is the best picture of the human soul" is meant as an *alternative* to such sceptical positions. It is meant to remind us that scepticism ends up wanting either to escape the body or to obliterate the soul. The difference between a "doll perfected by mechanics" and a human being is that the former *is* a machine, while the second has an inner life.

Dancing the tarantella, Nora's body expresses the state of her soul. Nothing could be more authentic. At the same time, however, her body is theatricalized, by herself (her performance is her own strategy) and, even more so, perhaps, by the men watching her. For the tarantella scene does not simply show Nora dancing; it also stages two different ways of looking at her dance. First, there are the two men. They watch her, I surmise, pretty much in a theatricalized, quasi-pornographic mode. For them, Nora's dance is a display of her body; their gaze desouls her and turns her into a "mechanical doll." But as Nora

dances, her friend Mrs. Linde, who is privy to Nora's secret, also enters the room:

MRS. LINDE (*stands tongue tied by the door*). Ah –!

NORA (*still dancing*). Watch the fun [*løjer*], Kristine.

HELMER. But dearest, best Nora, you are dancing as if your life were at stake.

NORA. But it is!

HELMER. Rank, stop it. This is pure madness. Stop it, I say. (*Rank stops playing and Nora suddenly stops*). (334)

Nora cries out to Mrs. Linde that she should *watch* her. In Norwegian, the phrase is "*Her ser du løjer, Kristine,*" which literally translates as "Here you see fun, Kristine." In a nineteenth-century Danish dictionary, *løjer* is defined as "something that is fun, that entertains and provokes laughter, something said or done in jest, without serious intentions." A traditional Norwegian dictionary defines it as "pranks; jest; entertainment; fun; noisy commotion."<sup>25</sup> The word describes what Helmer and Rank think they are seeing. But Nora tells Mrs. Linde to watch, look at, *see*, the fun going on: what Kristine is to see, is not just Nora, but the relationship between Nora's performance and the men's gaze.

Mrs. Linde sees Nora's pain; she also sees that the men do not. They see only Nora's wild body, which they theatricalize in the very moment in which it is most genuinely expressive. The point is stressed by Ibsen, for after the tarantella, Dr. Rank asks Helmer, privately, "There wouldn't be anything – anything like that on the way?" which I take as a reference to pregnancy, that is, an attempt to reduce her dance to a mere effect of hormonal changes (335). Helmer replies that it's just "this childish anxiety I told you about" (335). Refusing to consider Nora's bodily self-expression as an expression of her soul (her will, intentions, problems), both men reduce it to a matter of hormones or the unfounded worries of a child. In either case, Nora is seen as someone who is not responsible for her actions. (Paradoxically, perhaps, the only man in this play who treats Nora as a thinking human being is Krogstad, the man who teaches her that they are equal in the eyes of the law.)

This scene, then, invites the audience to see Nora both as she is seen by Helmer and Dr. Rank and as she is seen by Mrs. Linde. While the former theatricalize her, the latter sees her as a soul in pain. But the scene does not tell us to choose between these perspectives. If we try, we find that either option entails a loss. Do we prefer a theatre of authenticity and sincerity? Do we believe that realism is such a theatre? Then we may be forgetting that even the most intense expressions of the body provide



no certain way of telling authenticity from theatricality, truth from performance. Do we prefer a theatrical theatre, self-consciously performing and performative? If so, we may make ourselves deaf to the pain and distress of others by theatricalizing it. If I were asked whether I would call Nora's tarantella theatrical or absorbed, I would not quite know what to say. Both? Neither the one nor the other? Here Ibsen moves beyond the historical frame established by Diderot.<sup>26</sup>

Ibsen's double perspective, his awareness of the impossibility of either choosing or not choosing between theatricality and authenticity, stands at the centre of his modernism. It is the reason why his theatre is so extraordinarily rich in depth and perspective. In Nora's tarantella, then, Ibsen's modernism is fully realized. Here Ibsen asks us to consider that even the most theatrical performance may at the very same time be a genuine expression of the human soul. (But it may not: there is no way of knowing this in advance.)

But there is more. The striking theatricality of the tarantella – the fact that it is such an obvious theatrical show-stopper – reminds us that we are in a theatre. Ibsen's modernism is based on the sense that we need theatre – I mean the actual art form – to reveal to us the games of concealment and theatricalization in which we inevitably engage in everyday life. I do not base this claim only on Nora's dancing. By placing two kinds of spectator on stage during the tarantella, Ibsen tells us that only the audience is capable of seeing the whole picture, seeing both the temptation to theatricalize others and the possibility of understanding and acknowledging Nora's suffering. Admittedly, the audience's perspective is closer to that of Mrs. Linde than to that of the two men, for Mrs. Linde knows more than the men do about Nora's deal with Krogstad. The audience, however, knows even more than Mrs. Linde about what is at stake for Nora, for it has just heard that she is determined to commit suicide when Helmer learns the truth:

KROGSTAD. Perhaps you intend to –

NORA. I have the courage now.

KROGSTAD. Oh, you don't frighten me. A fine, spoiled lady like you?

NORA. You'll see; you'll see.

KROGSTAD. Under the ice perhaps? Down in the cold, coal-black water? And then float up in the spring, ugly, unrecognizable, with all your hair fallen out –

NORA. You don't frighten me. (329)

This masterly exchange conveys to the audience what picture Nora has in her head as she dances the tarantella. (Both declare that they are not frightened by the other's words, but surely they are.) The vision of Nora's ugly dead body conveys all the death and pain that Helmer's

sense of beauty tries to disavow, and explains why Nora can't help answering, "But it is!" when Helmer says that she is dancing as if her life were at stake.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora has seven very brief soliloquies. These have often been read as indicators of Ibsen's still clumsy stagecraft, as unwitting or unwilling breaks in the realist illusion.<sup>27</sup> But already in 1869, in *The League of Youth*, as Ibsen himself proudly pointed out in a letter to Georg Brandes, he managed to write a whole play without a single monologue or aside (see 16:249). Had he wanted to, he could have avoided soliloquies in *A Doll's House* as well. Nora's moments alone onstage are there to show us what Nora is like when she is not under the gaze of the man for whom she constantly performs, but they are also there to remind us that we are in a theatre.

Nora's fear and horror only appear when she is alone onstage.<sup>28</sup> At one point in Act Two, Helmer dismisses Nora's fears of Krogstad's revenge as "empty fantasies" (319) and claims that he is "man enough to take it all on myself" (318). Left alone, Nora is "wild with fear," whispering almost incoherently to herself: "He would be capable of doing it. He will do it. He'll do it, in spite of everything in the world . . . No, never ever this! Anything but this! Rescue—! A way out—" (319). These moments are almost Gothic. This is particularly true for the last one:

NORA (*wild-eyed, gropes about, grabs Helmer's domino, wraps it around herself; speaks in a fast, hoarse and staccato whisper*). Never see him again. Never. Never. Never. (*Throws the shawl over her head*). Never see the children again either. Not them either. Never; never— Oh, the icy black water. Oh, this bottomless— this— Oh, if only it were over— He has it now; he is reading it now. Oh no, no; not yet. Torvald, goodbye to you and the children— (*She is about to rush out through the living-room; in that moment Helmer flings open his door and stands there with an open letter in his hand.*) (351)

In his 1879 review of the book, Erik Vullum wrote that this passage is "too beautiful not to be copied," and quoted it in full. Lear-like, Nora says "never" seven times, using the word "bottomless" to describe the black, icy water she is going to drown herself in; a few lines later, in a deliberate theatrical irony, Helmer uses the very same word to describe the "hideousness" of her crime (352). The moment when Helmer stands there with the letter in his hand is a tableau, a moment of high melodrama that could have been a typical nineteenth-century genre painting.

By having Nora behave most authentically in what, from a formal point of view, are her most theatrical scenes, Ibsen signals, again, the

power of theatre to convey the plight of a human being. Sitting in the audience we are given a precious opportunity. If we will not acknowledge Nora's humanity, then perhaps nobody will.

WIFE, DAUGHTER, MOTHER: HEGEL REBUFFED

Nora's claim that she is "first and foremost a human being" stands as an alternative to two refusals. We have already seen that she refuses to be a doll. But she also refuses to define herself as a wife and mother:

HELMER. It's outrageous. That you can betray your most sacred duties in this way.

NORA. What do you count as my most sacred duties?

HELMER. And I have to tell you! Are they not the duties to your husband and your children?

NORA. I have other equally sacred duties.

HELMER. No, you don't. What "duties" might you have in mind?

NORA. My duties to myself.

HELMER. You are first and foremost a wife and a mother.

NORA. I no longer believe that. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, just as much as you – or, at least, that I'll try to become one. (359)

In *Cities of Words*, Cavell gives a bravura reading of this passage, in which he discusses the moral grounds that Nora can claim for the notion that she has duties towards herself: "Where do these distinctions come from in her? These are the opening moments of this woman's claiming her right to exist, her standing in a moral world, which seems to take the form of having at the same time to repudiate that world." (260). On Cavell's reading, Nora is heading for exile (thus imitating Corinne's withdrawal from the world). It is an open question whether she will feel able to return to society, to her marriage, to Torvald, who after all loves her as well as he can. Cavell rightly notes that the "final scene is only harrowing if his live love for her is not denied. I have never seen it played so" (258). Neither have I.

Most critics have not taken this passage as seriously as Cavell does. Joan Templeton has shown that many scholars insist that if Nora wants to be a human being, then she cannot remain a woman (see 110-45). Their motivation appears to be the thought that, if *A Doll's House* is taken to be about women and therefore, inevitably, about feminism, then it would follow that it is not a truly universal, that is to say, truly great work of art. In support of this idea, such critics usually

invoke Ibsen's 1898 speech opposing the cause of women to the cause of human beings.

It strikes me as an over-reading, to say the least, to try to turn Ibsen's refusal to reduce his writing to social philosophy into evidence that Ibsen never thought of Nora as a woman or into grounds for denying that Nora's troubles have to do with her situation as a woman in modernity. Such claims are fatally flawed, for they assume that a woman (but not a man) has to choose between considering herself a woman and considering herself a human being. This is a traditional sexist trap, and feminists should not make the mistake of entering into its faulty premise, for example, by arguing (but can this ever be an *argument*?) that Nora is a woman and therefore not universal. Such critics refuse to admit that a woman can represent the universal (the human) just as much or just as well as a man. They are prisoners of a picture of sex or gender in which the woman, the female, the feminine is always the particular, always the relative, never the general, never the norm. That Ibsen himself never once opposes Nora's humanity to her femininity is evidence of his political radicalism as well as of his greatness as a writer.<sup>29</sup>

Nora, then, refuses to define herself as a wife and mother. This refusal comes just after she has asserted that she has duties towards herself and just before she says that she is first and foremost a human being, thus aligning the meaning of "human being" with "individual" and opposing it to "wife and mother." To me, this irresistibly brings to mind Hegel's conservative theory of women's role in the family and marriage. To explain why, I need first to look at a key passage in the first act, which establishes Nora's own unquestioned commitment to the traditional understanding of women's place in the world. This is the exchange when Krogstad confronts Nora with her forgery and explains to her that she has committed a crime:

KROGSTAD. But didn't it occur to you that this was a fraud against me?

NORA. I couldn't take that into consideration. I didn't care at all about you.

I couldn't stand you for all the cold-hearted difficulties you made, although you knew how dangerous the situation was for my husband.

KROGSTAD. Mrs. Helmer, you obviously have no clear notion of what you really are guilty of. But I can tell you that what I once did, which destroyed my whole status in society, was neither anything more nor anything worse.

NORA. You? Do you want me to believe that you ever did something brave to save your wife's life?

KROGSTAD. The laws don't ask about motives.

NORA. Then they must be very bad laws.

KROGSTAD. Bad or not, – if I present this paper in court, you will be sentenced according to those laws.

NORA. I really don't believe that. Has not a daughter the right to spare her old, dying father from anxiety and worry? Has not a wife the right to save her husband's life? I don't know the laws very well, but I am sure that somewhere in them it must say that such things are permitted. And you don't know about that, although you are a lawyer? You must be a bad legal scholar, Mr. Krogstad. (303)

Krogstad asserts that there is no difference between what he once did, and what Nora did; and that the law and the community will treat them both as criminals. To Nora, this is insulting: *she* acted as a good wife and daughter should, for the benefit of her family. Left alone onstage after Krogstad's departure, she says "But? No, but it's impossible! I did it for love" (304). To Nora, then, her forgery was noble and selfless, an example of the highest form of ethics she knows.

What makes the conversation between Krogstad and Nora so Hegelian is the conflict between the law of the community invoked by Krogstad and Nora's sense of her ethical obligations as a *wife* and *daughter*, rather than as an individual. According to Hegel, the family is not a collection of individuals but a kind of organic unit: "one is present in it not as an independent person, but as a member," he writes in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (§158). Within the family, feeling is the dominant principle. For Hegel, words like wife, daughter, sister, mother (and husband, son, brother, father) are, as it were, generic terms. They refer not to this or that individual person, but to a role or a function. Any woman can be Mrs. Torvald Helmer, but only Nora is Nora.

This unit of generic members (father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter) is headed by the father, the family's only connection to the state. Through his interaction with other men outside the family, the man gains concrete individuality: "Man therefore has his actual substantial life in the state, in learning, etc., and otherwise in work and struggle with the external world and with himself, so that it is only through his division that he fights his way to self-sufficient unity with himself," Hegel writes (§166). Men become citizens and participate in public life; women remain locked up inside the family unit.

For Hegel, women never really become self-conscious, concrete individuals (that is only possible if a person enters into a struggle with others through work and conflict outside the family). Enclosed in "family piety," women neither have nor care about having access to the universal (the state, the law) (§166). In family piety we find the "law of woman," Hegel writes; this law is "emotive and subjective," whereas the law of men is the "public law, the law of the state" (§166). The reference to "piety" reminds Hegel of Antigone, whom he extols in *The Phenomenology*

of *Spirit* as an example of the highest kind of ethical behaviour that a woman can ever reach. (The parallels between Nora and Antigone have often been explored.)<sup>30</sup>

Women's exclusion from the universal has two consequences. First, Hegel thinks that women are not really capable of education. (Apparently, he always refused to let women attend his lectures.) Nor can they ever be artists and intellectuals, for their work requires understanding of the ideal, that is to say, of the concept, which in its very nature is universal. Their capricious, contingent, emotional defence of their family interests also makes them entirely unfit to govern:

Women may well be educated, but they are not made for the higher sciences, for philosophy and certain artistic productions which require a universal element. Women may have insights, taste, and delicacy, but they do not possess the ideal. The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant; the animal is closer in character to man, the plant to woman, for the latter is a more peaceful [process of] unfolding whose principle is the more indeterminate unity of feeling. When women are in charge of government, the state is in danger, for their actions are based not on the demands of universality but on contingent inclination and opinion. (§166)

Second, Hegel thinks that because women's position in the family makes them incapable of relating to the universal, they will always be unreliable and disloyal citizens of the state, an eternal fifth column of the community. The most famous formulation of this idea comes from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Womankind – the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community – changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family. Woman in this way turns to ridicule the earnest wisdom of mature age which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal. (§475)

In her conversation with Krogstad, Nora is the perfect incarnation of the Hegelian woman. Flighty, irresponsible, caring only for her family's interests, she has no relationship to the law (the universal). At the end of the play, however, all this has changed. Nora has undergone a transformation. She began by being a Hegelian mother and daughter; she ends by discovering that she too has to become an individual, and that this can be done only if she relates to the society she lives in

directly and not indirectly through her husband: "I can't be satisfied anymore with what most people say and what's written in the books. I must think about them for myself and get clear about them" (360). Although the law of her day made it impossible for a woman who left her home to keep her children, this is not why Nora leaves them. She makes a point of saying that she *chooses* to leave her children, precisely because she is not yet enough of an independent individual to educate them: "The way I am now, I can't be anything for them" (363).<sup>31</sup>

What Ibsen's Nora wants that Hegelian theory denies her is expressed in her desire for an education. Education is the prerequisite for access to the universal – to participation in art, learning, and politics. As long as marriage and motherhood are incompatible with women's existence as individuals and citizens, Nora will have none of them. It follows that, after *A Doll's House*, marriage must be transformed so as to be able to accommodate two free and equal individuals.

Freedom and equality, however, are not enough: Nora leaves above all because she no longer loves Helmer. Picking up the thread from *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House* insists that to love a woman, it is necessary to *see* her as the individual she is, not just as wife and mother, or as daughter and wife:

NORA. That's just it. You've never understood me – A great wrong has been done to me, Torvald. First by Papa, and then by you.

HELMER. What! By us two – the two people who have loved you more than anyone else?

NORA (*shakes her head*). You never loved me. You just thought it was fun to be in love with me. (357)

Nora, then, demands nothing short of a revolutionary reconsideration of the very meaning of love.

When Helmer asks what it would take for her to return to him, Nora answers that the *det vidunderligste* (the most wonderful thing; sometimes (mis)translated as the "miracle of miracles"), would have to happen: "That our life together could become a marriage" (364). I take the difference between *samliv* [life together] (what they have had) and *ægteskab* [marriage] (which Nora now thinks of as an impossible dream) to be love. What will count as love between a man and a woman in a world where women too demand to be acknowledged as individuals? What will it take for two modern individuals to build a relationship (whether we call it marriage or, simply, a life together) based on freedom, equality, and love? These are questions Ibsen will return to. These are questions we all return to.

## NOTES

- 1 This article is a slightly edited version of chapter seven of my forthcoming book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. The book contains detailed discussion and analysis of the criteria for Ibsen's modernism summarized here (see particularly chapter six, on *Emperor and Galilean*). The chapter on *A Doll's House* is the first of the four chapters that make up the third and last section of the book, a section that is entitled "Love in an Age of Skepticism." The subsequent chapters analyse, respectively, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Lady from the Sea*.
- 2 Although I will show that *A Doll's House* contains most of the features of Ibsen's modernism as I define them in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, I will try not to dwell on the obvious. It can hardly be necessary, for example, to show that *A Doll's House* is intended to produce an illusion of reality. The extensive references to acting have also been much analysed, both in relation to Nora's performance of femininity and in relation to their implications for a reassessment of Ibsen's realism. I recommend Solomon's excellent chapter on *A Doll's House*, which stresses Ibsen's self-conscious use of theatre in the play, and Aslaksen's analysis of Ibsen's use of melodramatic elements in *A Doll's House*. The best general presentation and analysis of the play is Durbach, *Ibsen's Myth*.
- 3 Shatzky and Dumont begin by invoking Bernard Shaw's claim that "Ibsen's real enemy was the idealist" (qtd. in 73), but they also follow Shaw in reducing idealism to a moral and political position.
- 4 In chapter three of *Moi, Henrik Ibsen*, I show that the concept of idealist aesthetics has been largely forgotten by literary historians and literary theorists today and that the relationship between realism and modernism changes radically if we discuss them against the background of idealist aesthetics. I also show that idealism lived on in various ways until the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 5 I discuss idealist responses to *Love's Comedy* and *Emperor and Galilean* in *Moi, Henrik Ibsen*.
- 6 Translations are mine. To save space, I have not included the Norwegian original texts. (They can be consulted in *Ibsens modernisme*.)
- 7 Socialists and feminists have always praised *A Doll's House* as a breakthrough for women's rights. For a general overview of Ibsen and feminism, in which *A Doll's House* figures centrally, I have found Finney to be very useful. Templeton's review of an important part of the reception of *A Doll's House* is also informative reading.
- 8 Two words in this quotation often recur in idealist reviews: *uskjønt* and *pinlig*. *Uskjønt* literally means "unbeautiful." The word also turns up in *A Doll's House*, usually in relation to Torvald Helmer. It is generally translated as "ugly," although the most common word for "ugly" today is *stygt*.



(In Ibsen's time, *stygt* often had a clear moral meaning.) *Pinlig* means embarrassing, painful, distressing; the word is derived from *pine* [pain, torture].

- 9 The same views are expressed in an anonymous review of Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (Review).
- 10 "He was, as Helmer, not sufficiently refined" (Bang, "*Et dukkehjem*").  
The text is also available in a modern critical edition (see Bang, *Realisme*).
- 11 Bang also calls Nora and Ibsen himself idealists, but in those contexts, the word is not used primarily in an aesthetic sense ("*Et dukkehjem*").
- 12 Postmodern readers might find this a little too simplistic. (Can we just stop performing our masquerades?) As I will show, Ibsen's play is anything but simplistic on these matters. But right here, I am not trying to say anything general and theoretical about the "performance of gender" in modernity. Rather, I am trying to say something about the depressing consequences of Nora's and Torvald's lack of insight into their own motivations and behaviour and, particularly, to draw attention to the fact that it is because they do not understand themselves that they do not understand others either.
- 13 Americans sometimes ask me whether *Et dukkehjem* should be translated as *A Doll House* or *A Doll's House*. As far as I know, both terms designate the same thing: a small toy house for children to play with, or a small model house for the display of miniature dolls and furniture. If this is right, the only difference between them is that the former is American and the latter British. In Norwegian, the usual word for a doll[']s house is *en dukkestue* or *et dukkehus*. (*Hjem* means "home," not "house.") *Et dukkehjem* is thus far more unusual than either the British or the American translation. What did Ibsen mean by the title? To indicate that Nora and Helmer were playing house? To signal that Nora's and Helmer's home life is made for display only (this would be the theme of theatricality)? That both of them are as irresponsible as dolls? As unaware of the real issues of human life as dolls? Or simply that both Helmer and Nora's father have treated Nora as a doll? Durbach's *A Doll's House* also contains an interesting discussion of the problems involved in translating the play into English; see particularly 27–39.
- 14 "Play-house" is a translation of *legestue*, which means a small house for children to play in. It does not mean play-pen, as many translators suggest.
- 15 I am speaking of the doll in the philosophical imagination. It doesn't matter to my argument whether or not mechanical dolls or automata actually existed. The link between the figure of the artificial human body and scepticism was first explored in Cavell, *Claim* esp. 400–18.
- 16 The story of "The Sandman" was also told in a popular 1851 French play by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré called *Les Contes fantastiques d'Hoffmann*. Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffman* did not open until 1881, two years after *A Doll's House*.

- 17 By turning *The Stepford Wives* into a light-hearted comedy, Frank Oz's 2004 remake gutted the doll motif of its potential horror.
- 18 For the French text, see Staël, *Corinne, ou L'Italie* 369. The published English translation is slightly different: "a delicately improved mechanical doll" (*Corinne, or Italy* 249).
- 19 Explaining her hostility to Corinne, Lady Edgermond says to Oswald: "She needs a theatre where she can display all those gifts you prize so highly and which make life so difficult" (*Corinne, or Italy* 313).
- 20 In his analysis of *Gaslight*, Cavell writes that Ingrid Bergman's character launches into "her aria of revenge" at the end of the film (*Contesting Tears* 59–60). See also Cavell's discussion of the unknown woman's cogito performances as singing, in "Opera."
- 21 I analyse Corinne's death in Moi, "Woman's Desire."
- 22 Solomon also describes Duse's low-key performance of the tarantella.
- 23 See the discussion of "realism's hysteria" in Diamond. A similar claim is made in Finney 98–99.
- 24 Langås's brilliant analysis of *A Doll's House* is deeply attuned to the ambiguities of the tarantella. We agree on many details in the analysis of the tarantella. But in the end, Langås reads the play as a "play about the feminine masquerade" (66) and turns Nora into a postmodern performative heroine: "Nora is so good at performing 'woman' that we do not see that she is performing. In her performance she cites established ways of being a woman and, at the same time, confirms those ways. By doing this, she confirms and strengthens the idea of femininity, and at the same time her reiteration legitimates this way of being" (76). Her postmodern perspective makes it impossible for Langås to take Nora's claim that she is first and foremost a human being quite seriously: "It is possible that she thinks she will find this 'human being' in her new life, but given the premises established by the play, her only option will in my view be to explore and shape new parts to play" (67). In my view, Langås's ahistorical reading fails to grasp the revolutionary aspects of this play.
- 25 I am grateful to Vigdis Ystad for providing these definitions from *Riksmålsordboken*.
- 26 This is a reference to Denis Diderot's aesthetics and to Michael Fried's discussion of it in his epochal book *Absorption and Theatricality*. The importance for Ibsen's work of the nineteenth-century aesthetic tradition drawing on Diderot and G.E. Lessing is discussed in chapter four of *Moi, Henrik Ibsen*.
- 27 Solomon writes that "if students learn anything about Ibsen, it's that his plays follow a clear progressive trajectory from overwrought verse dramas to realistic paragons, the prose plays themselves evolving like an ever more fit species, shedding soliloquies, asides, and all the integuments of the well-made

- play as they creep, then crouch, then culminate in the upright masterpiece, *Hedda Gabler*" (48).
- 28 Northam lists all of Nora's monologues and considers that they "lack the illustrative power of comparable passages in poetic drama." As they stand, he claims, they provide but a "small opportunity of entering into the souls of [Ibsen's] characters" (16). I truly disagree.
- 29 I discuss the way in which women (but not men) are invited to "choose" between their gender and their humanity in Moi, "I Am a Woman"; see particularly 190–207.
- 30 For a good account of various comparisons between Nora and Antigone, see Durbach, "Nora as Antigone."
- 31 In her excellent study of Ibsen's revisions of the manuscript of *A Doll's House*, Saari shows that Ibsen began by thinking of Nora as "a modern-day Antigone, one in whom the sense of duty was grounded in a specifically feminine conscience" and that he was thinking in terms of writing a tragedy about a "feminine soul destroyed by a masculine world" (41). This, she stresses, was not the play he actually wrote. To me, this shows that although Ibsen may have begun by thinking in Hegelian terms, he ended up breaking with them.

## WORKS CITED

- Aslaksen, Kamilla. "Ibsen and Melodrama: Observations on an Uneasy Relationship." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 10 (1997): 36–47.
- Bang, Herman. "Et dukkehjem [*A Doll's House*]." 1880. *ibsen.net*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Realisme og realister. Kritiske studier og udkast [Realism and Realists. Critical Studies and Drafts]*. Ed. Sten Rasmussen. Copenhagen: Borgen, 2001.
- Brandes, Georg. *Emigrantlitteraturen [Emigré Literature]*. 1872. *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur [Main Currents in European Literature]*. Vol. 1. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk, 1971.
- Brun, M.V. "Det Kongelige Teater. Et dukkehjem [The Royal Theatre (in Copenhagen): *A Doll's House*]." *Folkets Avis* 24 Dec. 1879. *ibsen.net*.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. 1979. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Opera and the Lease of Voice." *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994. 129–69.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*. Trans. John Veitch. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1989.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Méditations Métaphysiques [Metaphysical Meditations]*. 1641. Ed. and trans. Florence Khodoss. Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1956.
- Diamond, Elin. "Realism's Hysteria". *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. London: Routledge, 1997. 3–39.
- Durbach, Errol. *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies, No. 75. Boston, Mass: Twayne, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nora as Antigone: The Feminist Tragedienne and Social Legality." *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 5 (1992): 29–41.
- Felski, Rita. *Gender and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Finney, Gail. "Ibsen and Feminism". *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Ed. James McFarlane. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 89–105.
- Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1980.
- Forbes, Bryan, dir. *The Stepford Wives*. Fadsin/Palomar, 1975.
- Garborg, Arne. *Henrik Ibsen's "Keiser og Galilæer": En kritisk Studie [Henrik Ibsen's Emperor and Galilean: A Critical Study]*. 2nd. ed. Christiania, 1874.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. 1821. Trans. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 1807. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Hoffmann, E.T.A. "The Sandman." Trans. Ritchie Robertson. *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2000. 85–118.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *Et dukkehjem [A Doll's House]*. Ibsen, *Samlede Verker*. Vol. 8. 269–364.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Henrik Ibsens Samlede Verker [Henrik Ibsen's Collected Works]*. Ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik Arup Seip. 21 vols.; *Hundreårsutgave [Centennial ed.]*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1928–57.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Letter to Georg Brandes. Dresden. 26 June 1869. Ibsen, *Brev 1844–1871. [Letters 1844–1871]*. *Samlede*. Vol. 16. 248–50.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Ved norsk kvindesagsforenings fest i Kristiania 26. mai 1898 [At the Norwegian Women's Cause Association's gala evening]." *Artikler og Taler [Essays and Speeches]*. Ibsen, *Samlede Verker*. Vol 15: 417–18.
- ibsen.net*. 12 June 2006 <<http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=355&subid=0>>.
- I-n. "Et dukkehjem, Skuespil i 3 Akter af Henrik Ibsen [*A Doll's House: Play in Three Acts by Henrik Ibsen*]." *Social-Demokraten* 23 Dec. 1879. *ibsen.net*.
- Langås, Unni. "Kunstig liv: Simulasjon og sykdom i *Et dukkehjem* [Artificial Life: Simulation and Illness in *A Doll's House*]." *I skriftas lys og teatersalens mørke: Ein antologi om Ibsen og Fosse [In the Light of Writing and the Darkness of the Theatre Auditorium]*. Ed. Gunnar Foss. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2005. 51–79.
- Meisel, Martin. *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

- Moi, Toril. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "‘I Am a Woman’: The Personal and the Philosophical." *Sex, Gender and the Body: The Student Edition of What Is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 120–250.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ibsens modernisme*. Trans. Agnete Øye. Oslo: Pax, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Woman’s Desire to Be Known: Expressivity and Silence in *Corinne*." *Untrodden Regions of the Mind: Romanticism and Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Ghislaine McDayter. Spec. issue of *Bucknell Review* 45.2 (2001): 143–75. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2002.
- Northam, John. *Ibsen’s Dramatic Method: A Study of the Prose Dramas*. London: Faber, 1953.
- Oz, Frank, dir. *The Stepford Wives*. Paramount, 2004.
- Petersen, Fredrik. "Henrik Ibsens Drama *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*]." Review of *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*] by Henrik Ibsen. *Aftenbladet* 9–10 Jan. 1880. *ibsen.net*.
- Review of *Et dukkehjem. Fædrelandet*, by Henrik Ibsen. 22 Dec. 1879. 12 June 2006. *ibsen.net*.
- Saari, Sandra. "Female Become Human: Nora Transformed". *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*. Ed. Bjørn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad. Vol. 6. Oslo: Norwegian UP, 1988. 41–55.
- Shatzky, Joel, and Sedwitz Dumont. "‘All or Nothing’: Idealism in *A Doll House*." *Edda* 94.1 (1994): 73–84.
- Skram, Amalie. "En Betragtning over ‘Et dukkehjem’ [Considerations on *A Doll’s House*]." *Dagbladet*, 19 Jan. 1880. Ibsen, *Samlede Verker*. Vol 7: 300–13.
- Solomon, Alisa. "Reconstructing Ibsen’s Realism." *Re-dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*. London: Routledge, 1997. 46–69.
- de Staël, Germaine. *Corinne, or Italy*. 1807. Trans. Sylvia Rafael. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Corinne, ou l’Italie*. 1807. Ed. Simone Balayé. Collection Folio. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Le Mannequin* [*The Puppet*]. *Œuvres complètes de Mme. la baronne de Staël* [*Complete Works of Baroness de Staël*]. Ed. Auguste Louis Staël-Holstein. Paris, 1820. Vol. 16. 478–91.
- Templeton, Joan. *Ibsen’s Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Vullum, Erik. "Literatur-Tidende [Literary News]." Review of *A Doll’s House*, by Henrik Ibsen. *Dagbladet* 6, 13 Dec. 1879. *ibsen.net*.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. German text, with a revised English translation. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

Copyright of *Modern Drama* is the property of University of Toronto Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.