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Henrik Ibsen's preliminary notes to his masterpiece *Et Dukkehjem (A Doll House)* state his awareness that a "woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is exclusively a masculine society" (qtd. in Rhodes 127), indicating that he considered societal constructs of women pertinent to the drama. However, in an 1898 speech to the Norwegian Society for Women's Rights, he claimed that in writing the play he had not sought to address "women's rights" but "a question of human rights" (qtd. in Gilman 49). We might suppose Ibsen considered "women's rights" inclusive in these "human rights," but it is illuminating to probe the drama for an explication of what the playwright believes constitutes the human being. Gilman suggests that Ibsen's major concern is the struggle for self-realization: "In its central movement *A Doll's House* is a drama of preparation, pitched beyond sexual difference, a play of encounter with the obstacles . . . that act to prevent us from knowing ourselves and the world" (65). Simply, Nora's obstacle is her marriage, which out of its specific character prevents her from becoming fully human. Nora and Torvald have built their marriage and lives around a shared mythology, based loosely on Christian concepts of morality, sin, and redemption, in which Nora idolizes Torvald as a god in whose presence she must submit and behind whose back she lives a secret, "sinful" existence. Ibsen reveals this psychological mythology through visual metaphors: the Christmas tree, Torvald's study door, and the stove combine to form the tabernacle of the Helmer marriage and to illustrate the effects of Nora's reverence of Torvald. The collapse of this mythology propels Nora (and the audience) along her journey to become a true human being.

Our sense of Nora's relationship with her husband as skewed or unbalanced arises chiefly from the cultish fervor of her devotion to him. The most prominent symbol of this devotion is the Christmas tree. Durbach notes that the Christmas tree appears to symbolize in its placement and treatment both

Nora's illusions and her attempts to solidify those illusions in the face of impending catastrophe (54). Such an attempt occurs after her jarring interview with Krogstad in Act I, when Nora has her maid place the tree in "[t]he middle of the floor" (Ibsen 945). Yet Northam's reading of this placement merely as "a visual equivalent of Nora's obstinate, but uncertain, persistence that everything will be all right" (102) is simplistic. According to Quigley, "the notion of inherited conventions is an overlooked implication of the Christmas tree" (592) adorning the stage through the first and second acts: one such convention is religion and its accompanying morals. As Nora trims the Christmas tree, the traditional emblem in the modern Western world for the birth of Jesus Christ, her private musings resemble an adulatory prayer or chant: "I'll do anything to please you Torvald. I'll sing for you, dance for you" (945). Ibsen implies an analogy between Christ and Torvald, whom Nora already reveres as her lord and hopes will become her savior, now that Krogstad has threatened her.

The ensuing scene (946-47), in which Torvald explains Krogstad's moral failings to Nora, reinforces the analogy: "Krogstad's been going home year in, year out, poisoning his own children with lies and pretense; that's why I call him morally lost . . . I literally feel physically revolted when I'm anywhere near such a person" (947). Nora's sin is the same as Krogstad's, and she cannot help but apply what Torvald has just said to herself. In one of the most interesting moments of the play, she "withdraws her hand and goes to the other side of the Christmas tree" (947), distancing herself from Torvald while simultaneously hinting that she takes the moral judgment he has just made very seriously. Here Ibsen introduces Nora's pivotal conflict over the morality of her own actions. As Northam posits, "Nora now believes that she is corrupt because of her deceitfulness; she is terrified to think that she may corrupt and poison her own children" (102). She also begins to doubt Torvald's moral grounding: "Hurt my children—! Poison my home? (*A moment's pause; then she tosses her head*) That's not true. Never. Never in all the world" (Ibsen 947). Although suspicion nags her, Nora's refusal to accept the moral verdict against her is an act of paramount importance. For the first time, she questions her husband and dares to think for herself. Ibsen signifies the effect this act has on the psychological mythology in the stage directions commencing Act II: "Beside the piano the Christmas tree now stands stripped of ornament, burned-down candle stubs on its ragged branches" (948). The mythol-

ogy still holds sway over the scene, and thus over Nora and Torvald, but it has lost its luster.

In the theater of the mind, Ibsen's set is rather difficult to construct. For one thing, it has four doors and one window—a ghastly situation for anyone directing the traffic of characters on and off the stage, in and out of these doors, while simultaneously trying to inject the scenes with a dose of atmosphere. The effect is claustrophobic, and for good reason: as Durbach explains, the rooms of *A Doll House* represent the "compartmentalized lives of modern urban living dominated by doors . . . that shut in fantasies and shut out reality, that isolate a community of domestic strangers and insulate them against the cold and forbidding world outside" (42). Ibsen explores motifs of fantasy, isolation, and secrecy through the treatment of Torvald's study door. As the focal point of the interior spatial realm, this door represents both the barriers that cut Torvald and Nora off from each other and the means by which Nora hopes to hide her secrets. Again, the metaphor has religious connotations. Torvald's study is an inner sanctum in which he "[c]an't be disturbed" (927). Ibsen highlights the significance Nora attaches to the study door by placing it in the rear wall, which suggests, albeit obscurely, the veil of the Hebrew tabernacle: "You shall hang up the veil under the clasps, and shall bring in the ark of the testimony there within the veil; and the veil shall serve for you as a partition between the holy place and the holy of holies" (*New American Standard Bible*, Exodus 26:33). Christian scholars will grasp in this allusion the significance of the ark into which Moses placed the stone tablets on which were written God's commandments (Exodus 31:18); the "holy of holies" was the source of divine moral order. Hence, Torvald's position as god in Nora's personal mythology suggests that her relationship to his study door concerns her sense of the morality of her actions. In the opening scene, as Nora enters the house after a shopping spree and eats macaroons (both activities forbidden by Torvald), she "steals over and listens at her husband's study door" (Ibsen 927) to determine whether he is at home. The language itself—"steals"—implies the breaking of the divine law of the Ten Commandments. Only with Torvald's door closed could Nora ever conduct her sexually provocative scene with Dr. Rank in Act II (955-56). Even plainer examples of Nora's hiding away of her sins appear later in this act. Before her last meeting with Krogstad, "[s]he goes and bolts Helmer's door" and then implores Krogstad to "[t]alk softly. My husband's home" (958). While consult-

ing with Mrs. Linde over Krogstad's incriminating letter, she reacts to Torvald's knock on the study door "with a cry of fear" (961). This last action especially gives tangible evidence of Nora's growing, instinctive desperation to conceal her sins from Torvald.

As much as Nora has ensconced Torvald as her god, he has accepted, even embraced that role, remaining an aloof, didactic figure throughout the play. For Torvald, his study door is an isolating barrier, a buffer between the professional life that absorbs him and the family life in which he takes almost no interest. He has no relationship of any kind with his children, so when they arrive, he makes an excuse for a hasty exit: "this place is unbearable now for anyone but mothers" (Ibsen 940). Torvald considers Nora a lesser being whose activities he finds interesting only when they directly concern him, and he emerges from his study and takes part in scenes merely to lend his voice of moral authority. He "[c]an't be disturbed" until he realizes that his "little spendthrift [has] been out throwing money around again" (927). Although he pampers her and hangs on her every move, Torvald's relationship to Nora does not really extend beyond the satisfaction of possession. The profusion and phrasing of animal imagery in Torvald's dialogue evidences his perception of Nora as less than human, a mere pet he owns: "my little lark" (927), "my squirrel" (927), "you little goose" (951). Nora subconsciously acquiesces to her husband's possessive nature; her wheedling is littered with references to herself as "your squirrel" (951), "[y]our lark" (952), "a wood nymph . . . danc[ing] for you in the moonlight" (952). However much Torvald adores Nora, he never connects with her on a truly human level and therefore must separate himself constantly from her. At the end of the scene in which he impetuously mails Krogstad's dismissal, he flippantly dismisses Nora's fears and beats a retreat to his refuge: "There, there, there—not these frightened dove's eyes. It's nothing at all but empty fantasies—Now you should run through your tarantella and practice your tambourine. I'll go to the inner office, and shut both doors, so I won't hear a thing" (953-54). But something more goes on in this scene than Torvald's patronizing and distancing Nora: he promises her to "have strength and courage enough as a man to take on the whole weight [him]self" (953). As Northam astutely points out, Nora realizes "her deceit will ruin not only herself . . . and her children, but her beloved husband. This is the last straw. She now feels a moral leper" (103). Ironically, Torvald compromises himself through his brash self-assurance as a

god in his own mind, just as Nora, to save his position as a god in hers, will soon determine to stave off disaster by sacrificing herself.

This business of sacrifice on Nora's part is important to Ibsen's drama, and he plays up its significance through the visual metaphor of the stove, which in the tabernacle of Nora's private mythology becomes an altar for the symbolic purging of sin, comparable to the altar God orders Moses to erect in the Hebrew tabernacle for the offering of burnt sacrifices (Exodus 27). When the sight of Krogstad in her home reminds Nora of her hidden sins, she "begins stirring up the stove" (Ibsen 937) in an effort to dispel the hazard his appearance presents. Torvald figures into the scheme of the tabernacle here as well: after he scolds Nora for lying to him—admonishing his "songbird" to give "[n]o false notes"—he sits by the stove, sighing contentedly, "Ah, how snug and cozy it is here" (946). Appropriately, Torvald's juxtaposition with the altar commences the scene in which he preaches to Nora on Krogstad's moral defunctness. A more explicit instance of the stove's metaphorical power appears when Nora speaks to Mrs. Linde of destroying her sin: "I've got to clear up this other thing; *that's* also behind [Torvald's] back . . . When you pay everything you owe, then you get your note back . . . [and you] can rip it into a million pieces and burn it up—that filthy scrap of paper" (951). Nora's particular thinking in this passage is crucial to our understanding of her character; the logic of paying what she owes assures us that she is not talking about eliminating the *evidence* of her sin but the *substance*.

This logic sets us up for an irony in her mythological system, because as we shall later see, Torvald's true concern is not for moral righteousness but the appearance of it. By contrast, Nora demonstrates actual nobility when, after flirting with Dr. Rank in a last-ditch attempt to get the money she needs to pay off Krogstad, she rejects his amorous advances toward her. The doll Nora might obtain a favor through sexual cajolery, but "the heroic woman underneath, the woman of fundamentally sound principles . . . puts a stop to the nonsense when it begins to offend her sense of rightness" (Northam 105). Nora will not trade one sin for another. Instead, she orders the maid to "bring the lamp in," banishing the seductive darkness of the scene, then she "[g]oes over to the stove" to cleanse herself of what she now realizes was a misdeed (Ibsen 957). Having denied herself the easy way out, Nora resolves to "kill herself to prevent Torvald from assuming the burden of sin" (Northam 105). Krogstad's taunts only embolden her, especially once he threatens Torvald.

The fiery tarantella becomes more than a crazed effort to rid herself of an infection: as Torvald stands "by the stove and repeatedly gives her directions" (Ibsen 963), Nora frantically tries to burn away the guilt of sin in preparation for the ultimate sacrifice of her life.

Ibsen has strung out several visual metaphors to illustrate the psychological mythology by which Nora and Torvald live; now let us see how he ties them together in the final scene. When Krogstad's letter reveals Nora's secret to Torvald, he "throws open his door and stands with [the] open letter in his hand" (972). Nora still does not intend to let Torvald ruin himself for her: "You're not going to suffer for my sake. You're not going to take on my guilt" (973). In the context of the psychological mythology, the final opening of the study door parallels the death of Jesus on the cross: "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split" (*NASB*, Matthew 27:50, 51). However, the rending of the veil, symbolizing in Christianity that the faithful for whom Jesus died no longer must offer sacrifices because they now have a direct channel to God's mercy, does not reveal the Christ figure Nora expects to perform a "miracle" (Ibsen 964) by sacrificing himself for her. Rather, it exposes Nora to a wrathful, implacable deity who can only see the *evidence* of sin, not the *substance* of virtue:

Oh, what an awful awakening! In all these eight years—she who was my pride and joy— a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal! How infinitely disgusting it all is! The shame! . . . All your father's flimsy values have come out in you. No religion, no morals, no sense of duty—Oh, how I'm punished for letting him off! I did it for your sake, and you repay me like this. (973)

All isolation and secrecy has fallen away, allowing Nora to confront the realities of her marriage. In that instant, Nora realizes Torvald's moral superficiality, his inadequacy as her god. He is the true hypocrite: his lofty principles have never amounted to anything more than mere selfishness and concern for his reputation. Torvald further demonstrates the invalidity of the mythology by burning in the stove Nora's note, which the reformed Krogstad returns; his desire for the affair to "fade like a dream" (974) shows he is not burning actual sin at the altar, only the façade of sin.

The importance of Nora's psychological mythology to her own and her husband's actions becomes most apparent in Torvald's attempt to bridge the rift he has created by his loathsome reaction upon learning her secret. His

speech is rife with interesting material:

How nice and snug our home is, Nora. You're safe here; I'll keep you like a hunted dove I've rescued out of a hawk's claws. I'll bring peace to your poor, shuddering heart . . . For a man there's something indescribably sweet and satisfying in knowing he's forgiven his wife—and forgiven her out of a full and open heart. It's as if she belongs to him in two ways now: In a sense he's given her fresh into the world again, and she's become his wife and his child as well . . . Don't be afraid of anything, Nora; just open your heart to me, and I'll be conscience and will to you both. (Ibsen 975)

Coming on the heels of his inexcusable behavior, this speech, which distills the animal symbolism rampant throughout the play, must harden Nora's conviction about her newfound perspective on her husband's actual moral fiber. To hear that he will protect her "like a hunted dove [he has] rescued out of a hawk's claws" (975) must be anathema to the new Nora, who is no longer a "lark" (927) or "songbird" (947). Predictably, the speech also contains religious undertones—foremost dealing with the subject of forgiveness. Although he claims to appreciate Nora's motives, saying she has "loved [him] the way a wife ought to love her husband" (974), Torvald does not ask her forgiveness for the reprehensible way he has treated her; he considers himself beyond reproach. Instead, he will forgive her for committing what was at its root a virtuous action. His promises to "bring peace to [her] poor, shuddering heart . . . [to give] her fresh into the world again" (975) resonate with allusion to the idea of spiritual absolution. He even proposes to supplant her "conscience and will" (975). But Torvald's utter lack of true morality renders ludicrous his ultimate perception of himself as a god, a perfect source of will and conscience, able to grant absolution and restore spiritual peace. Surfacing vibrantly in this speech to reveal Torvald's delusions, recently Nora's as well, the spiritual overtones of the play lend even greater impetus to Nora's final decision to leave her husband's house.

Nora now understands the true nature of her relationship with Torvald: he has pervaded every inch of her life, consuming her spiritually and psychologically. She knows that she must stand independent of Torvald's influence and assert her own will and conscience if she is ever to become a true human being: "I have to stand completely alone, if I'm ever going to discover myself and the world out there" (Ibsen 977). True to form, Torvald first protests that Nora is "not even thinking about what people will say" (977), showing himself

once again a morally shallow person more concerned with appearance than substance. He then appeals to Nora to respect her "most sacred vows," insisting that "[b]efore all else, [she is] a wife and a mother," to which she simply replies that she "do[es not] believe in that anymore" (977). Nora's religious convictions have shifted, or more to the point, have collapsed completely, as she indicates in her exasperated response to Torvald's invocation of religious principle: "Oh, Torvald, I'm really not sure what religion is" (977). As she further states, she is no longer certain of herself even on matters of morality and conscience (977)—this is why she must go out into the world, to probe the accepted and popular truths and to determine whether she can reconcile her own intuited beliefs to them.

If Ibsen gives us in *A Doll House* his first fully realized heroine, he also proclaims through the exploration of her psychology what he feels to be intrinsic and necessary to the life of the true human being: freedom. Only by declaring her right to examine for herself the fundamentals of existence—morality and spiritual truth—can Nora step onto the path to self-discovery. In the end, she claims that she has "stopped believing in miracles" (980), but the road we know she will tread, the road she has already chosen to follow, promises to lead her inexorably to the greatest miracle of all: the fully realized human being.

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