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The Politics of Money: Incomplete Feminism in *A Doll's House*

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Ibsen criticism in recent decades has shown a marked tendency to adopt a generally ahistorical stance. With respect to *A Doll's House*¹, canonized Ibsen criticism often makes the claim that the play is concerned more with the process of individuation and self-discovery than with feminism. The question of women's rights in *A Doll's House* has been regarded as a "metaphor for individual freedom" (Brustein 105); the play's central concern has been identified as the "reality" beyond sexual difference (Gilman 65); the theme of the work is not women's rights, we are told, but individual self-discovery (Meyer 457). This hermeneutic drive to unveil the meaning of *A Doll's House* represents, in the words of Joan Templeton, "a gentlemanly backlash" (29) against the original understanding of the play as having for its subject the "woman question."

Within a predominantly male critical tradition, this "backlash" strikes against the "feminist" view of *A Doll's House* taken by Ibsen's contemporary critics and those close to his time, for these critics never failed to classify *A Doll's House* as a play about the "woman question." Contemporary epithets for Ibsen² included "A Prophet of New Womanhood" and "A Pioneer of the Woman Movement." Early criticism hailing *A Doll's House* as a feminist work was nevertheless limited by its incapacity to look beyond the theatrical and emotional furor the play often engendered. Notwithstanding the validity of the observation that more recent Ibsen criticism has indeed shown signs of "backlash," an unqualified recuperation of *A Doll's House* as a feminist text fails to recognize the incomplete feminism of *A*

Doll's House, since it ignores the social, historical, and ideological implications of the play.

It is relatively easy to see that *A Doll's House* should not be considered a single-mindedly feminist play merely because contemporary reviewers and commentators considered it so. While the play does echo Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, the political subtext of the play calls for a cautious pause to examine the ways in which the contemporary feminist position has been revised by Ibsen's vision. Arbitrary isolation of a few "textbook" speeches from the intricate context of the play to highlight a particular observation is a seductive trap critics, gyno- or otherwise, must avoid. One might say, after sporadically looking at the exchange Henry V has with Bates and Williams (*Henry V*, IV.i), that *Henry V* is about Shakespeare's passionate denunciation of kingship, despite the fact that some images of regal authority are quite disinterestedly examined in the play. Likewise, we must consider the whole context of Nora's speeches and departure. Clearly, by the time she slams the door of the doll's house both her personality and the concept of the family have been transformed. Yet underneath that alteration of relations, the play remains an ideologically unaltered discourse.

One pertinent example of a late nineteenth-century "new woman" inscribed within an insidious alternative is George Meredith's Diana Warwick of *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). After abandoning her ill-chosen husband and winning a lawsuit against him, Diana establishes her own social position as an independent writer. She falls in love with a politician, however, and having run into debt providing him with entertaining evenings, in desperate need of money, she betrays him and her government by selling a state secret to the press. Chastened and abandoned, Diana in the end settles the whole matter of autonomy and lack of cash by marrying a wealthy industrialist who had loved her all along. The problem for a feminist reader of Meredith's novel, as for feminist readers of *A Doll's House*, is the persistence of the cash nexus. Not content to allow their heroines to initiate a re-organization of society after they have slammed the door on old sex roles, these authors insist on the capitalist alternative. To read Ibsen's play as an embodiment of feminist values and nothing else is, therefore, to compromise feminism severely.³

Feminist theorists remind us that any feminist reading *must* explore and examine the "assumptions of hierarchical differences"⁴ in relation to which gender is constructed in fiction. "Gender difference," they insist, "is a

historically specific cultural construct with diverse forms and damaging consequences for characters in plays" (Adelman *et al.* 77). The critic should, therefore, address the construction of gender difference and its consequence in a play. *A Doll's House* demonstrates that femininity and masculinity are, in essence, hierarchical values, and that the "weaker" of the sexes must be transformed into the "stronger" other. In the course of the play, Nora changes into the complete opposite of what she was at the beginning. The woman wishes to "settle accounts" with Torvald in clearly logical and rational terms. As we shall see, the play underscores the notion that spontaneity of human relationships is inferior to the rationality of the individual. That life must be subjected to rationality and unemotional syllogism is precisely the error, irredeemably determined by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history, that *A Doll's House* perpetuates. "The view that 'science' and 'rationality,'" write the group of feminist critics mentioned earlier, "can comprehend 'complex factors in human development' without the messy intrusion of 'gender and ideology' is an Enlightenment dream long since turned to nightmare" (Adelman 78).

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We wish to argue in this study that the apparent chiasm (dramatic reversal) of *A Doll's House*, so often applauded by critics, in effect, suffers from an irreversible vision. The play remains, when all is said and done, a male discourse, essentially unaltered. On the surface, it replaces such exponents of feudalism as the authority of the father with the autonomy of the individual, changing superficial reality into its antithesis. Ironically, however, *A Doll's House* ends at the same juncture where it began: man and his conceptualization of the world remain as ever the referents in relation to which woman is portrayed. To the stupefied Torvald, Nora declares that she must try to "become" "a reasonable human being" just "as you are" (65).⁵ The image of the "reasonable human being" in the play is imbued with the notion of freedom defined by money. *A Doll's House* not only vouches for the ideology of abstract individualism—a correlate of post-industrial capitalism—it ultimately denies woman what Virginia Woolf identified as the female "inheritance" ("the difference of view, the difference of standard" [Culler 50]). At the end of the play, Ibsen transforms Nora into the woman patriarchy and nineteenth-century capitalism had conspired to construct.

Ibsen wrote that the purpose of his play was to dispense with the "woman-like" (McFarlane 90): infantile, hysterical and instinctive Nora. What he created instead is a masculine effigy of a woman which Nora unquestioningly accepts as an appropriate self-image. Raymond Williams notes that the final scene of *A Doll's House* epitomizes, not what Shaw saw in it, that is, "a living confrontation between actual people," but rather, a "straight, single declaration" (Williams 77).⁶ Torvald's questions are only rhetorical ones inserted feebly in the impassioned expressions of Nora's self-discovery. The erasure of his viewpoint from the last scene and the introspective clarity Nora seems to achieve—"I have never felt my mind so clear and certain as to-night" (66)—affirm a rearranged perception about man, woman and society in the play.

About his time, Ibsen believed that "the age we now stand in could just as well be described as a closure, and that from it something new is in the process of being born" (McFarlane 108). To usher in the "new age" and to let a woman be "herself in contemporary society," we read, Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* (McFarlane 90). The play therefore embodies the playwright's idea of a civilization ("the transformation of social conditions" [McFarlane 105]) which, he thought, should invalidate the conventional relationships and enable every individual woman and man alike to engage in social intercourse. Historical verities, Ibsen tells us, should be objects of derision. "I do not believe in the eternal validity of human ideals," he wrote (108).

Unfortunately, the new perception of ideals in the play is not quite so novel. Ibsen once remarked that his "intention [in *Ghosts*, the play immediately following *A Doll's House*] was to try to give the reader the impression of experiencing a piece of reality" (McFarlane 94). His concept of reality, however, was far from consistent. In *The Harvest of Tragedy*, T. R. Henn writes of Ibsen being afflicted with the question: What is reality? Ibsen's mind was virtually characterized by an unresolved contradiction in a ceaseless encounter between an ever-fluctuating reality and the idealized intent (McFarlane 207). This contradiction was evident in his concern for the status of women in modern society ("A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society" [McFarlane 90]) and his unconscious adherence to the Victorian image of woman. As long as Nora remains a "woman," and hence incapable of pursuing any rational course of action, she is unable to realize her self. "Self" for the Hegelian playwright meant something beyond femininity. He dreamed of a reoriented social perspective on women (McFarlane 105) but described the Victorian view of the mother, devoted

to educating children and inculcating in them a sense of discipline and culture, as woman's ideal state (Ibsen, *Speeches and New Letters* 66). Though Ibsen claimed that he believed in "the transformation of social conditions . . . concerned with the future status of the workers and of women" (McFarlane 105), he certainly on occasion resented being called a social philosopher (*Speeches* 65).⁷ His stated purpose was not to offer social criticism, rather to present "a description of humanity" (*Speeches* 65). Did he presuppose a human nature beyond the constraints of historical events and experiences of Scandinavian society (see Helge Ronning "Individualism and the Liberal Dilemma" 105) and still await the advent of a new culture for men and women?

This incongruity between intent and belief underlies *A Doll's House*. On the surface the play is a statement about women's rights and emancipation, it is so only on the deceptive surface. A closer look reveals that the play belongs to a historically determined ideology which had far-reaching patriarchal objectives. For *A Doll's House* is an evaluative account, imperceptible to the unwary eye, of the images of the two predominant ideologies of the nineteenth century. Ibsen's society was riven between a fading feudalism with its code of chivalry and an emerging industrial capitalism with its notion of bourgeois individualism. The play quite conspicuously foregrounds the new ideology. What remains unchanged within the changing structure of the play, however, is its innate patriarchy, or as Ann Rosalind Jones puts it, the essentially "masculinist ways of seeing the world" (Jones 361). Only recently have critics begun to realize how inextricable capitalism has been from patriarchy throughout history (see Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction* xiv). Henrik Ibsen's praise for the "new age" turns out, in reality, to be an apology for industrial capitalism—an ideology infused with patriarchal structures. To sum up, the text of *A Doll's House* is a dramatic plea made in favor of nineteenth-century capitalism historically ensconced in patriarchy. It constructs a "new woman" only within a system which is indisputably masculine, monetary and repressive. In other words, Ibsen's "new woman" exists under the control of a sort of "new man": the newly minted abstraction of "the individual."

Following Barthes, Catherine Belsey demonstrates in *Critical Practice* how *illusionism*, characterized by closure and a hierarchy of discourses, establishes the so-called truth in some nineteenth-century realist texts (70). The primary characteristic of such a text is a terminal and transcendent wisdom which it purports to convey to the reader. Through events and

characters, the realist text meanders forward and eventually introduces closure ensuring the reinstatement, however precarious or untenable in prospect, of order. This closure via reinstatement of order arises out of a movement from inconsistency towards consistency in the subject position within the text (Belsey 68-69). The movement from contradiction, which in Lacanian theory is the ingredient of the human mind, towards the unified person was the construct of the contemporary ideology. This ideology emphasized the wholeness of the individual and the freedom of the mind above everything. Writes Belsey:

"The mind of man," infinite and infinitely mysterious, homogeneous system of differences, unchangeable in its essence however manifold its forces, is shown in classic realism to be the source of understanding, of action and of history.(75)

The bourgeois ideology assumed in the realist works a vision of the non-contradictory individual whose "unfettered consciousness was the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (Belsey 67). This "unfettered consciousness" underlies Nora's decision in the last scene of *A Doll's House*. From a world rife with contradictions, lies and secrets, the play progresses towards an absolute non-contradiction achieved through gradual jettisoning of the discorrespondences. Ibsen's Nora *appears* to be a representative of the free, unified and autonomous subject. Historically, however, as Marx, Engels and Weber note, this notion of freedom is an euphemism for consumer choice. Marx and Engels write: "By freedom is meant, under the present bourgeois conditions of production, free trade, free selling and buying." (*Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* 22; also compare Max Weber's phrase "the fondness for external goods" in "Protestant Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism" 160; Fromm, *To Have or To Be* 57; Belsey 67). The freedom Nora achieves thus is illusory; what she earns by rejecting the subordination of being a "wife" and a "mother" in order to embrace her rational "individuality" is subjection to money: the "father," says Lionel Trilling, in a different context, of the illusions and lies capitalism spreads.⁸ Freedom within the context of the play implies a new bondage; Nora's servitude at home ends but it resumes elsewhere. By expressing her determination to be rational, whole and autonomous, she makes herself not a "new woman" but a token of exchange.

A Doll's House builds up, in the manner of the intrigue drama, a subtext which points towards the dichotomy of perceived reality and undisclosed truth in the Helmer household (see Williams 26). The play makes unceasing allusions to a secret which must be uncovered at the expense of the superfluity of domestic living. Not only the so-called truth but also the urgency of its coming to light is underscored. "This unhappy secret must be disclosed," says Mrs. Linde to Krogstad near the beginning of the third Act. "They [the Helmers] must have a complete understanding between them." This "understanding" is "impossible," she tells Krogstad, in a relationship that allows for "concealment and falsehood" (67). In order for the Helmers to have "a complete understanding," to have "perfect freedom" and to experience "a real wedlock" (68), the discrepancy in their relationship as well as in their understanding of each other must be laid bare in the open and overcome. The skeleton of the formidable "truth" lurking in the closet must put the much too familiar mode of existence to which the Helmers are used to a trial of rational scrutiny.

The absence of understanding between Nora and Torvald is manifest in the incompatibility of their worlds. Her lying, pretentiousness, affection, cajoling and, finally, the desperate yet fragile attempts to keep the secret from being discovered are contrasted with his self-righteousness, ludicrous pomposity and myopic vision of beauty, honor and the family (4). Torvald's insensitivity is quite tellingly expressed in his inability to appreciate Nora's spontaneous vivacity (her humming, laughing, singing, physical agility, affectionate attempts to win his admiration). To him, her every action is simple puerility.

From the beginning, the play is fraught with disjunctions and contradictions. This is especially true of Nora who begins as a complex of traditional "feminine attributes." She is imbued with love, care, lies, games, pretences and extraordinary insight into Torvald's psyche ("Good Heavens, no! . . . And besides, how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything!" [13]). Clearly enough, she stands in opposition to the spirit of the "new age" that sought to establish the absolute, ideologically non-contradictory, and individualistic human Ibsen so idolized. Nora's final comment about herself reflects her desire to become this rational, independent and introspective individual. She says, "I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things myself and get to understand them" (65).

The bourgeois delusion of the free and rational individual⁹ is what forever lures Nora's psyche. *A Doll's House* initially dramatizes Lacanian desire, manifest in conflict, multiplicity and sexual awareness, but gradually removes it and centrestages Nora's relentless will. Interestingly, her will is described only in terms of monetary power. The play unequivocally weaves the power of money with freedom. This alliance is evident in the definition of freedom, selfhood and knowledge the play purports to communicate. Nora describes her emotional state in monetary terms and it is money that will allow her freedom. Freedom and beauty for Torvald may mean a home without debt (4), but for Nora they mean the ability to do "just as we like"(9). Money means "a big salary and a lot of commissions" (9): the financial power that can ensure a life without anxiety.

The movement from the play's beginning to its end highlights the conversion of humanity into bourgeois property relations defined by money, in other words into "exchange value" (see Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings* 9-10, 23-24). In the beginning, Nora considers freedom as freedom from care in human situations and relationships, and believes that only money can guarantee such felicity: "to be able to play and romp with the children; to be able to keep the house beautifully and have everything just as Torvald likes it! And, think of it, soon the spring will come and the big blue sky! Perhaps we shall be able to take a little trip—perhaps I shall see the sea again!" (15). In the end, Nora awakes to clarity of mind and realizes that her worth must be ascertained in part by her education but mostly by her financial ability. "The perfect freedom"(67) Nora claims to have achieved finally translates into her fierce ability to divorce herself from home and children. The ideology of money, wrote Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, tore away from the family its "sentimental veil," and "reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (*Basic Writings* 10). Through her estrangement from her family relations, Nora attests to the veracity of the statement.¹⁰

When the curtain rises on *A Doll's House*, Nora is shown as impulsively subscribing, without appreciating its full dramatic import, to what Marx called "that single, unconscionable freedom" (*Basic Writings* 10)—the freedom of trade: of buying (to be able to make up the mind on buying [5]) and selling. She is inclined to understand human possibility and aspiration in terms of financial excess. To Mrs. Linde's comment that it would be delightful "to have what one needs," Nora retorts: "No, not only what one needs, but heaps and heaps of money" (9). One must note that the initial

implication of money in the play is theatrically ambivalent; it allows for Nora's independence from the "saddest time" (10) as well as guarantees her ability to buy, as Helmer puts it, "any number of unnecessary things" (5). Money enables Nora to express "the best of intentions to please us all" (7), but also allows her to be in a position to "waste" (9). Through references to money, we are offered glimpses into her character and learn that since her childhood money has had a vicious lure for Nora. She has been a notorious spendthrift (9). Her need of money characterizes an off-and-on passion for it which is to become, by the end of the play, the mainstay of her personality.

Despite Nora's excitement about it, money nevertheless remains subordinate to human emotions in the first act. Interhuman relations are more important than the value of money. To Mrs. Linde, Nora throws the vital question: "Is it imprudent to save your husband's life?" (13). As the chiasmus of the play evolves, making the prey the predator, a nearly imperceptible metamorphosis of money takes place. It sheds its barter value (its ability to be exchanged for goods and services) and emerges as the sole arbiter of human action. Nora's vocabulary in the last scene alters radically. The "discussion" in which marriage, matrimonial love, motherhood, conventional family, religion and morality crumble becomes "a settling of accounts" (62). As relations are commercialized, Nora becomes aware that the hope about "the wonderful thing" is futile. That Torvald, like a romance hero, would save her ends up an illusion (66). Marx and Engels describe the phenomenon of the loss of "feudal" and "idyllic" relations in this way:

The bourgeoisie . . . has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment."
(*Basic Writings* 9)

Nora affronts nineteenth-century masculinity and patriarchy by embracing a new capitalist, individualist ethic. She does not, however, embrace feminism. The new individual of capitalism is not a sexual being but an acquisitive one. To hail the outcome of *A Doll's House* as a purely feminist paean to the "new woman," all of Ibsen's statements and intentions aside, is to devalue the very project of feminist theory by inscribing it within a capitalist discourse. Just as Nora (regardless of her sex and more so because of it) affronts feudalism by becoming a capitalist, so too does

ignoring the clearly capitalist ideology of *A Doll's House* while reading its feminist aspects in isolation affront feminism. The play's substitution of one form of patriarchal dominance (based on sex) for yet another (based on money) is certainly not the rejection of patriarchal dominance in favor of independent feminist values, nor is it the rejection of all patriarchal structures in favor of an acceptance of difference.

The rhetoric of money that internally stitches *A Doll's House* together finds its impeccable representation in Mrs. Linde. Once married for money, now widowed, a castigator of Nora's affection, nervous about sexual responsiveness (underscoring perhaps her displaced eroticism) and financially totally independent, she stands for the ascetic individual Marx noticed at the advent of bourgeois capitalism. In Ibsen's eyes, however, she would be the individual capable of eliminating all "conventional views of honour" (McFarlane 90). It is not surprising that Mrs. Linde appears as the representative of impersonal competitiveness, sexual aridity and monetary independence. She thus ironically reveals the stark and dehumanized destiny of both women and men envisaged in Marx's description of capitalism. Her remark to Krogstad ("This unhappy secret must be disclosed; they must have a *complete understanding* between them which is impossible with all this concealment and falsehood" [52]) in the end becomes Nora's article of faith and inducts her into Mrs. Linde's territory. The "absolutely clear and certain" "reason" in Nora's mind for abandoning Torvald is that she has to "understand myself and everything about me!" (64). Mrs. Linde's voice is recognizably echoed in Nora's excited harangue.

With the foregrounding of the concept of the individual and abstract freedom, the heterogeneous motives and action that have separated Nora from other personages are gradually brought under ideological impress and led to coalesce into homogeneity. The images of her former self: affectionate mother and homemaker, playful singer, wasteful shopper, exuberant lover and flirtatious wife are discarded to make way for the rational and financially independent (self-owning?) individual prescribed by nineteenth-century political economy. It is evident that Nora, after she leaves Torvald's home, will be defined entirely by the exchange value she is likely to have, not by her psycho-physical and emotional reality as a human being. (Marx and Engels diagnosed the malaise of the time which changed women into "mere instruments of production" in *The Communist Manifesto* [*Basic Writings* 25]). In the final outburst she is made to call her home "a playroom" (64) and her acts of love and care "tricks" (63) and pretensions

(63). But how much can we trust what she says? If she ever were aware of any distance between pretension and reality, it was in her former role when she was able to refute categorically Mrs. Linde's ostentatious claim to seriousness (11). It was then that her insight into Torvald's character summed up the wooden, confused and self-righteous man pitifully locked in his own workroom. It was then that she was able to demonstrate the multilayered interior of her own personality (13).

The transmutation of Nora into a free individual, not possessed (55) by or financially dependent on anybody's unthinking wishes (33)—the concept of human *laissez-faire*, one could say—is curiously simultaneous with the process of the denial of her personality. No other character in the play interacts with as many people or exudes such interpersonal intimacy with others as she does, except when she is dealing with Torvald of course. (Even in the middle of her jubilant vibrancy in the first scene, she is cautious about Torvald [3].) She wants the Christmas tree to be a surprise for the children, tips the porter generously, and after Mrs. Linde arrives, recounts the sad days of her misery with a transparent innocence ("That was the saddest time I have known since our marriage" [10]). She exclaims in passionate language the joy of happy living (10). What is clearly discernible in Nora's character early on in the play is emotional abundance. She expresses sympathy for her widowed, unemployed childhood friend (11), plays with the children (19), discusses with the nurse her unhappy past (30) and shows sincere concern for the dying Dr. Rank. Torvald's epithet, "my skylark," in effect, beautifully describes her personality.¹¹

A Doll's House is about the disappearance of this "femininity" and the appearance of something new. As events and the tension arising from them press on, Nora begins to strip herself of her feminine difference. She becomes increasingly preoccupied, as Kiberd notes, with a "masculine" code of work and behavior (65). Her spontaneous versatility gradually gives way to rational single-mindedness. To Ibsen, this entropy in Nora's character signals the advent of a "new civilization." He wrote effusively about this phenomenon, "In becoming civilized, man undergoes the same change as when a child grows up. Instinct weakens, but powers of logical thought are developed" (McFarlane 95). *A Doll's House* postulates that the prescription for civilizing women remains the same as for children. Through a process of change they both ought to discard their "innate intuitiveness," best expressed in spontaneity, and develop a strenuously singular logical thought. Ibsen's observation about the separateness of the sexes (McFarlane

90, 97) was also an observation about the hierarchy of the sexes. One was seen as dominating the other. If Ibsen was pained by the sore fact of history that man unduly dominated woman, he had the solution to the malaise at hand. The way to rid society of the unequal relationship was to obliterate the difference between the sexes and let a new sexual role delete the former ones. This new ideal, alas, was no improvement. Acquisition of rational neutrality with regard to human interests—we may recall Marx and Weber—was the ideological *raison d'être* capitalism advocated. *A Doll's House* to a large extent proves the truth of the remark. It shows that the idea of the "instinctive feminine woman" cannot survive in an altered culture and hence prescribes the absolute rationality of a "civilized" individual as the remedy (McFarlane 97). To be civilized then is the unavoidable destiny of a woman. It is hardly surprising that at the end Nora coolly decides to be a reasonable human being like Torvald ("Just as you are" [65]) abandoning her instincts, home and "little ones" (67).

A Doll's House acts out patriarchy in its relentless repression of Nora's personality and through the marginalization of female sexuality in its discourse. As suggested, it is not without meaning that Nora leaves Torvald's home for Mrs. Linde's. For it is the same ideology Mrs. Linde subscribes to that overwhelms her. Nora not only convinces herself of the worthlessness of "small household cares and that sort of thing!" (11), she wants to become as desensitized a wage earner as Mrs. Linde is. Nora may not become emotionally sterile like Mrs. Linde but can certainly stifle her former identity.¹²

Symptomatic of nineteenth-century realism, *A Doll's House* puts forth, within the binarism between the apparent (the infantile) and the desirable (the "civilized"), a scale of inferior/superior orders. With the inferior is associated childish imprudence, with the superior the wisdom of the adult. Mrs. Linde, the adult, is able to describe her relationships with others (parent, siblings, deceased husband) in purely utilitarian terms and can identify herself unemotionally with money. In Act One, Mrs. Linde condescendingly calls Nora "a child" and is regarded by Nora as superior (11). Financial inferiority in the play never ceases to be a metaphor for infantile instinctiveness. When at the end Nora describes herself as an impoverished woman who has been living "from hand to mouth" (from what we have seen of her character, however, we suspect the tone), she also, by using consistent rhetoric, frees herself from the "vices" that Ibsen thought were inalienable from her former self. She assumes the persona of

an argumentative, solipsistic and *non*-dependent woman. She becomes a copy of Mrs. Linde: a calculating person who has known money as the only determiner of living. (One only has to recall, for example, Krogstad's remark to Mrs. Linde, after she has told him the reason why she abandoned her impecunious lover [Krogstad] to marry a rich man: "So that was it. And this—only for the sake of money!" [50].)

The latent patriarchy becomes palpable in Nora's denial of her sexual identity in the last scene. While "settling the accounts," she instantly considers her past life as a protracted period of mindless prostitution and breeding (67). Throughout the play, Nora has been aware of her multifaceted femininity characterized by the partly obligatory, partly self-motivated, sexual behavior of a wife with Torvald and the spontaneous sexual response of a woman to Dr. Rank. She herself makes it clear in her conversation with Dr. Rank (40-41) that Torvald is a reminder of paternal duty and the doctor of natural delight. Many times in the play has she taken pride in her female body. ("Thank Heaven, any clothes look well on me" [14], "You will see how charming I look" [30], the fond desire to dance the tarantella [31], "I look so nice, Torvald" [45]). It is to her irresistible sexuality that Dr. Rank knowingly and passively submits (40), and towards which Torvald frantically rushes ("When I watched the seductive figures of the Tarantella, my blood was on fire" [55]).

In order to change Nora, her recalcitrant sexuality must first be disposed of. This need is emphasized in Mrs. Linde's scorn and ridicule for Nora's spontaneity, her "femininity." To the invitation to come and enjoy Nora's costume for the tarantella, Mrs. Linde sarcastically replies that she will see Nora in her "fine feathers" (31). A seemingly passionless woman older than Nora who never loved her dead husband becomes suspicious at Nora's playful reference to the man who has supposedly bequeathed her some money (14), thinks Dr. Rank the provider of the loan and asks her bluntly to make an "end of it" with Dr. Rank (32). Why is the person so keen on making others find out about the "truth" in their relationship so fidgety about a possible relationship, probably reciprocal and hence based on "understanding," between an unfulfilled homemaker and a solitary friend? Why is there so much fear of Nora's sexuality, especially on the part of the character claiming to be the most clear-sighted in the play and who presumably understands the heroine best? Is it Ibsen's frightened puritanical prudery and affronted patriarchy that give Mrs. Linde the authority to define the future Nora? Has the patriarch put on the costume of an *asexual* and,

therefore, rational woman to lead the dazed woman out of her utter confusion? To Krogstad Mrs. Linde remarks that she is devoid of "a woman's overstrained sense of generosity" (51) and could not endure life without work (51). Work in the play always means the ability to earn money. She is proud that work, experience (32), age (32) and bitter necessity (50) have stripped her of emotions and kindness. She is prudent (50) and free: an ideal adult in Nora's juvenile world. In the hands of a director sensitive to the ideological ramifications of the play, Mrs. Linde's role might take on a far deeper meaning than it usually does. When it is only Mrs. Linde who can feel the need of "a complete understanding" (52) between the Helmers, the political intent of the play becomes too conspicuous to be overlooked.¹³ As the play moves towards crisis (a truly Aristotelian anagnorisis), Mrs. Linde binds her life with Krogstad's, though she will not give up Krogstad's job at the bank. Her imminent new marriage will be, like the former one, a marriage of convenience: a drab ceremony of expediency based on needs (11). She embodies the unemotional wisdom the play underlines. By the end Nora too becomes a "free individual" and a "worker." And, the image of the worker in the play is, we may recall, unequivocally male. Earning money, Nora says ecstatically, "is just like *being a man*" (14).

The controversy, misconception and euphoria that surrounded *A Doll's House* at the time of its original performances, and after, have more often than not given way to an incomplete if not erroneous interpretation of the play. One cannot agree with Michael Meyer that the play is not about the problem of women's rights (457). The "gentlemanly" voice in his comment can be scarcely ignored. However, Ibsen's political agenda, it is ironic to note, would have reinforced Meyer's statement. For the purpose of Ibsen's dramaturgy was to introduce and welcome a new age that he thought was late in coming to Scandinavia, not to advance the rights of women. "I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is" (*Speeches* 65), he said at a convention. His task had been "to advance our country and give the people a higher standard" (65). At the end of the above speech outlining his objectives delivered at the Norwegian Women's Rights League on May 26, 1898, he raised his glass and proposed a toast to the mothers who "by strenuous and sustained labour" would "awaken a conscious feeling and culture and discipline" (66). Evidently, it was not Nora but rather the Victorian icon of the mother that was on Ibsen's mind.

The social problems that needed to be solved must be solved, according to Ibsen, by women as mothers (66).

Contrary to the opinion of Ibsen's protégés, friends and reviewers, a conscious reader is forced to say that *A Doll's House* is not quite what it has been said to be about. It is certainly not simply "a play about the emancipation of women," as James Joyce remarked (quoted by Kiberd 64). Ibsen may have been perceptive enough to observe that his society was graven with ruthless double standards ("In matters of practical living, the woman is judged by man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man" [McFarlane 90]), but the play never presents any vision as to how that unjust dualism in the moral and legal system could have been dispensed with. It does not propose any rearrangement of the male-dominated structures of society Ibsen apparently abhorred. Instead, it rationalizes the extinction of female identity. By suggesting that the wage earner is the only reasonable person in society (65) and earning money the most significant activity an intelligent social being can engage in, the play seeks in the end to transform women into exchange chips (a role man was already attaching to himself). Ibsen may have believed that "an age is impending where the political and social concepts will cease to exist in their present forms," and that the new civilization would break down "all existing things" into "new categories" (McFarlane 108, 98) but, ironically, the new liberty was conceived only within the framework of industrial capitalism and prehistoric patriarchy. When the sham family, and the reified concepts attached to it, disintegrate in the play one only hopes for a new affirmation of "the maintenance and reproduction of human life" (Marx-Engels, *Basic Writings* 22) which never occurs.¹⁴ Finally, he refuses categorically to accommodate the female "inheritance," and presents the female exclusively through the prism of male consciousness. The masculinist prejudice that man alone is capable of understanding woman is explicit in the remark Joyce made about Ibsen's treatment of women. According to him, Ibsen seemed "to know them [women] better than they knew themselves" (Joyce, quoted by Kiberd 63).

In a recent article, Joan Templeton has attempted to retrieve *A Doll's House* for feminists. Critics like those who come under Templeton's fire have observed that *A Doll's House* stemmed from "the inhibitions set upon individual freedom and self-realization by social and institutional forces" (McFarlane, *Plays* xi). The fallacy bourgeois capitalism spread about the independent individual is at work in such criticism. The play clearly deconstructs this opinion. In reality, it is the "social and institutional forces"

in the beginning as well as in the end that have moulded Torvald's and Nora's actions. If Nora has freed herself from the constraints of Torvald's forces, she has also subjected herself to a new set of social and institutional forces. These new forces concentrate more on individual isolation, wage earning and abstract rationalization than on communality, interdependence and recognition of sexuality.

In his notes on the character of the heroine, Ibsen writes: "Everything must be borne alone" (McFarlane 90)—by men and women alike. Such statements not only glorify the isolation of the individual, they make isolation the necessary precondition of a glorified existence. In times of crisis, therefore, like those Nora encounters, the individual must negate his/her human relations and must fall back on his/her rationality and selfhood. What has passed for rationality in history, sociologists, historians and feminist critics tell us, has often masked "oppression based on unexplored assumptions of hierarchical difference" (Adelman 78). The concept of rational individualism advanced in the play, on hindsight we perceive, was exclusively determined by the politics of the time.

Solipsistic selfishness, it has been said, is integral with "the male values of work" (Kiberd 65). Ibsen, by subscribing to such an image (Nora "only" knows what is "necessary for me" [64]) attempts to transform woman into such a worker. By allowing a human to appear significant only in relation to the cash nexus, *A Doll's House* endorses the ideology of bourgeois capitalism. By identifying the individual worker with the self-absorbed and expedient man, it demonstrates a deep-lying patriarchy in Ibsen's dramaturgy.¹⁵ One of the playwright's purposes was to write a play debunking the romantic delusion of chivalry. It is thus not surprising that, as Raymond Williams points out, he was welcomed primarily by people who were looking for a leader with a moral/political ideology (Williams 48). Some of these critics detected, with considerable accuracy, the decomposition of feudalism in the play but failed to discern the insidious blending of patriarchy and capitalism in its discourse.

NOTES

1. Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House in Four Plays*, tr. R. Farquharson Sharp (Toronto, New York: Bantam Books, 1981). Other translations have been consulted for comparison,

but all references to the text are from this edition. Although Rolf Fjelde's translation of *Et dukkehjem* is *A Doll House* without the possessive, the conventional translation handed down by William Archer, Michael Meyer, James McFarlane and others, and the English title used in the Memorial Edition of Ibsen's plays published by Norwegian State Publications, has been *A Doll's House*. The present writers have, therefore, adhered to the generally used title.

2. Throughout his career Ibsen demonstrated, as probably all artists do, contradictions, possibilities, uncertainty and anxiety, and could hardly be described as a monomaniac writer as ventured by Shaw. Critics now agree that the brilliance of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is that of a skilled rhetorician, burning with a fury to pronounce that plays are "illustrations of a thesis," or "messages," rather than "imaginative creations" (McFarlane 64-65). A contemporary reader will benefit from Barthes's remark that writing signifies "something other than [meaning besides] its content" (*Writing Degree Zero* 16) and the post-structuralist tenet that a literary text is never able to denote absolute signification. Ibsen was truly perceptive when he wrote that modern society was "merely a society of males" (McFarlane 95); he never failed to realize that to write [*at digte*] was "to see in such a way that what is seen comes into the possession of the beholder as the poet saw it" (McFarlane 85, our emphasis). In other words, he knew that a text was inextricably bound to the author's viewpoint. And a viewpoint is forever in flux, because the "conscience" that gives shape to it is "not a stable thing" (McFarlane 98). Ibsen himself may have been aware of the chasm between his apparent intent and the incurably male prescriptive position he was historically conditioned to take when he wrote: "To wish and to will. Our worst faults are the consequences of confusing the two things" (McFarlane 98).
3. Both Meredith and Ibsen sensationalize their heroines' actions to fit their interpretations of a woman's mind and actions. What is intriguing is that Laura Keiler, the woman on whom Nora Helmer was based, did not slam the door and leave in "perfect understanding"; nor did Caroline Norton, the woman on whom Diana Warwick is based, marry "in the end" for wealth. Keiler put up with her marriage; Norton supported herself. In nineteenth-century art—as in life—the woman who leaves may shock and disrupt the established social order, but in art, at least, she is always returned to a "safe" or manageable place by cash.
4. Interestingly enough, the same issue of *PMLA* (January 1989) which carried Joan Templeton's article on the "gentlemanly backlash" against feminist interpretations of Ibsen also printed a letter outlining the basic issues of feminist criticism. The letter, written by Janet Adelman, Catherine Belsey, Gayle Greene, Lisa Jardine and Coppelia Kahn, among others, was a rebuttal of Richard Levin's "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy" (*PMLA* 103 [Dec. 1988]: 125-138). A brilliant exposition of contemporary feminist concerns, the letter warned against the critical hazard of "presenting snippets of decontextualized quotations" "in isolation from characters or structure or culture." Unfortunately, the thrust of Joan Templeton's article relied on just such decontextualized snippets of *A Doll's House*. See Janet Adelman *et al.*, "Feminist Criticism" in the members' "Forum" (*PMLA* [January 1989]: 77-78).
5. Henrietta Frances Lord, Michael Meyer and Rolf Fjelde translate *et menneske* as "a human being" whereas McFarlane translates the phrase as "an individual." See Ibsen, *Four Major Plays*, tr. James McFarlane, 82. By "individual," Marx and Engels wrote, was meant "no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle class owner of property" (*Basic Writings* 23). In the same place, they also say:

From the moment when labor can no longer be converted into capital, money, or rent, into a social power capable of being monopolized, i.e., from the moment

when individual property can no longer be transformed into bourgeois property, into capital, from that moment, you say, individuality vanishes (23).

6. Nevertheless, Shaw must certainly have noticed the great importance of money in *A Doll's House*. In 1886 he read the part of Krogstad in a private performance of the play at Eleanor Marx's flat. Marx herself read the part of Nora (Wisenthal 5-6).
7. As well, Ibsen specifically objected to being called a socialist. During an interview with the Berlin correspondent of the London *Daily Chronicle* in August 1890, Ibsen "declared he never was nor ever would be a Social Democrat" ("Ibsen and Socialism" *Daily Chronicle* 13 August 1890; quoted by Wisenthal 11-12).
8. See Lionel Trilling, "Introduction," in Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* xiv.
9. See Max Weber, "Protestant Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," in Weber, *Selections in Translations*, ed. W. G. Runciman, 138-173. Also see Marx's comments on the individual's preoccupation with his/her private purpose apart from social connectedness in the *Grundrisse* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker 222-223. The obsessive personal acquisitiveness of the individual has been the subject of many social historians and sociologists. One pertinent early onslaught on such an abstraction as humanity as only emotion or the embodiment of pure reason, not living beings of both combined, came from Lukacs and his friend, Andor Gabor, during the debates between Brecht and Lukacs in 1931-33. To fail to present man as he loves and lives, Gabor pointed out in his support of Lukacs, was suitable only for bourgeois idealists. See Andor Gabor, "Zwei Buhnenereignisse" 18, 24.
10. That money was the irreplaceable agent of the Great Socialization of the nineteenth century and that the formation of the modern individual was the making of financial acquisitiveness have been often suggested (Moretti, "The Moment of Truth" 44). In *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx discusses at length how in a capitalist society the worker and her/his human functions are reduced to the cash value of *earnings*. The worker's "own life-activity, the manifestation of his own life" (*Marx-Engels Reader* 204-205) becomes the exercise of labor and earning of wages. Two major aspects, rationalization of the world and rationalization of human action, according to Marx, characterize the flourishing of capitalism. The bourgeoisie, write Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, divested human life and interhuman conduct of "religious fervour," "chivalrous enthusiasm" and "philistine sentimentalism," and substituted for them "the icy water of egotistical calculation" (*Basic Writings* 9). The demystifying effect the ideology of money had on culture led Marx to call capitalism the "practical asceticism." Marx's critique is based on the thesis that capitalism generates a culture of renunciation of life and human needs (Avineri 110). In 1844, disagreeing with Hegel's position on property and ownership, Marx wrote in *Manuscripts* that since money "reduces all human qualities to quantitative, interchangeable values, it eliminates man's real capacity for externalization and self-expression" (see Avineri 116). The desire to be free, autonomous and self-understanding was, Marx argued, an irredeemable fallacy perpetuated by capitalism for its own interest. "The selfish misconception that induces a [bourgeois] to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason the social forms springing from [the] present mode of production and form of property," write Marx and Engels, is a misconception the bourgeois shared with every preceding ruling class (*Basic Writings* 24).
11. Nora may live under the horror of Torvald's domination yet is capable of retaining her unique "inheritance" (Woolf) and difference. She may thus be quite rightly compared with the mother-figure, "the omnipotent and generous dispenser of love, nourishment and plenitude," Hélène Cixous admires (Moi 115). Nora's early action in the play is always tinged with what Cixous calls the "typically female gesture," the libidinally

determined trait that brings about and celebrates the vivacity of life (*New Feminist* 365). In Cixous's terms, Nora's denial of her loving nature may be construed as a denial of her sex. In this way, Nora rejects the subjection of woman but repudiates her own sexuality as well.

12. The marginalization of female sexuality is evident in Mrs. Linde and in her suspicions concerning Nora's connection to Dr. Rank. Mrs. Linde had long ago married for money, and she now mistakenly suspects Nora of doing likewise: exchanging her sexual favors for Dr. Rank's financial security. The power of female sexuality as a purchasing agent—abhorrent as it may have been by the 1880s (see Lorna Sage's Introduction to *Diana of the Crossways* [Virago 1980])—was, apart from money itself, a socially acceptable power available to nineteenth-century women in the marriage marketplace. But beyond the marriage market, a sexually aware female became a dangerous threat to the social order: Nora might ruin her home by having an affair with Dr. Rank, Diana Warwick could bring down the government because of her sexual response to Percy Dacier. In both cases, female sexuality is reduced to a cash value then controlled either through denial or by being channelled into a new marriage.
13. It is interesting to note the resemblance between what Mrs. Linde says to Nora and what Ibsen wrote to his "skylark," Laura Keiler, about the need of understanding between husband and wife. He wrote:

It is unthinkable that your husband knows everything, so you must tell him; . . . confide all your troubles to your husband. He is the one who should bear them.
(Meyer 443-44)

14. Brecht seems to have recognized the limitations of Nora's new liberty in his *Messingkauf Dialogues*. The actress in the *Dialogues* is apparently speaking of the role of Nora when she says:

For fifty nights I played a bank director's wife who's treated as a toy by her husband. I stood up for women being allowed to have professions too, and take part in the great rat-race, as hunter or hunted or both. At the end I was having to drink myself silly in order to be able to get such stuff past my lips. (29)

15. The unconscious masculinity of the play may however be allayed to a degree by the fact that *A Doll's House* is, first and foremost, a play text, and as such, filled with equally valid strands of different meanings. By demonstrating its unbridgeable rifts and conflicting contexts (Torvald discovers "an abyss" between them while Nora discovers "perfect freedom" on both sides [67]), *A Doll's House* in the first instance only offers pure theatrical situations and obliquely undermines its claim to any immutable truth. In his study of the predominant modern literary genre, Mikhail Bakhtin mentions that the influence of the novel on modern literature is ineradicable (*The Dialogic Imagination*). He particularly mentions Ibsen (5). The influence of the novel on *A Doll's House* is not only discernible in its narrativity—already noted by William Archer (see Williams 48)—it is evident in the conflict of the socio-political ideologies it dramatizes.

This conflict is manifest in the play's unknowing undermining of the apology for stark rationalism. Though Mrs. Linde appears to bear the wisdom of the new age, the text unwittingly undercuts her position. While on the surface the play upholds her unemotional speeches, it also brings into focus the unreliability of her pretension to rationality. In her most important moment in the play, it is dream, imagination and passionate lyricism, all clothed in a rhetorical trope, that overwhelm everything else. Let us quote the section in full:

Mrs. Linde. I have learnt to act prudently. Life, and hard, bitter necessity have taught me that.
Krogstad. And life has taught me *not to believe in fine speeches*.

- Mrs. Linde. Then life has taught you something very *reasonable*. But *deeds* you must believe in?
- Krogstad. What do you mean by that?
- Mrs. Linde. You said you were *like a shipwrecked man clinging to some wreckage*.
- Krogstad. I had good reason to say so.
- Mrs. Linde. Well, *I am like a shipwrecked woman* clinging to some wreckage—no one to mourn for, no one to care for.
- Krogstad. It was your own choice.

And, then, she employs her rhetorical trick, "Nils, *how would it be if we two shipwrecked people could join forces?*" to which Krogstad whisperingly exclaims, "Christine!" (50-51 our emphasis).

This interchange inadvertently asserts what it does not acknowledge on the surface. The conversation that expresses a disdain for "fine speeches" becomes reliant on a metaphor. It also reveals the failure of the writer to attach a definitive direction to his text. By encoding aporias, differences and paradoxes within its essence, the play in a reverse way denies one single ideology (despite the author's reiterative efforts to the contrary) to stabilize itself.

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