

CHAPTER 1 PROLOGUE: BACKGROUND

‘There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one in woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by man’s law, as if she were not a woman but a man.’¹

With these words Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) in 1878 began the notes for what was to become one of the first truly realistic plays in world drama.² He called it *Et Dukkehjem*, a title which has traditionally been rendered in English as *A Doll’s House*. Although this rendering has recently been questioned, I shall adhere to the traditional title; the reasons for this will be given later.

It is a remarkable fact that ‘the father of modern drama’ was born and bred in one of the outskirts of Europe, far away from cultural centres and theatres of any significant standing. Born in the small town of Skien in southern Norway, Ibsen was the second son in a family of six children. His father, Knud Ibsen, for some time a wealthy merchant, lost nearly everything he possessed when Henrik was only seven. Socially humiliated, the family had to move out of town to a small country house, Venstøp. Having left school in 1843, Ibsen the year after became an apothecary’s assistant in the small coastal town of Grimstad. During his seven years there he wrote his first poems and his first play, *Catiline*, published under the pseudonym of Brynjolf Bjarme in 1850. He also fathered his first – illegitimate – son, by one of the maids. When he left Grimstad for Christiania, the capital later renamed Oslo, his intention was to study at the university. Although he failed in this, he was successful in having his second play, *The Warrior’s Barrow*, staged by the

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Danish-oriented Christiania Theatre in 1850. His literary talents were soon recognised by the virtuoso violinist Ole Bull who offered Ibsen a job as a stage manager and director at the National Theatre he had just founded in Bergen. Here Ibsen remained between 1851 and 1857, writing five plays, some of which he staged. In Bergen he became thoroughly familiar both with contemporary drama, notably the so-called well-made play, and with the problems involved in mounting plays for the stage. Having learnt the theatrical trade, he was in 1857 appointed artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania. The year after he married Suzannah Thoresen, who bore him a son, Sigurd. Seeing his plans for an ambitious repertoire thwarted, Ibsen gradually began to neglect his work. When the theatre in 1862 went bankrupt, he had to resign. Along with his wife and their little son he left his native country in 1864, utterly disappointed in Norwegian politics, not to return to it permanently until 1891. Most of his twenty-seven years of voluntary exile were spent in Italy and Germany. Back in Norway, he wrote his last four plays. In 1900 he suffered a stroke which left him unable to do any further writing until his death six years later.

When Ibsen composed *A Doll's House* he had already published fourteen plays, many of which are historical dramas. His breakthrough came with the masterly verse drama *Brand* (1865), two years later followed by the equally impressive *Peer Gynt*. Ibsen's inclination to compose his plays dialectically is already here fully apparent. After the idealist extremist *Brand* the compromising materialist *Peer Gynt* followed logically – just as later Nora in *A Doll's House*, who breaks up from an unsatisfactory marriage, was to be succeeded by Mrs Alving in *Ghosts*, who remains in such a marriage. As Ibsen succinctly put it: 'after Nora, Mrs Alving of necessity had to come'.³

The plot of *A Doll's House*, centred around the discovery of Nora's forgery, was based on an event in real life. In 1870 Laura Kieler (*née* Petersen) had sent Ibsen a sequel to *Brand*, which she called *Brand's Daughters*. The year after they met. Ibsen took an interest in the young, pretty and vivacious girl. He invited her to Dresden and for

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two months in the summer of 1872 'the lark', as he liked to call her, visited his home almost daily. A couple of years later she married. After a while, the husband fell ill. The doctor advised a long vacation in a warm climate, and Laura secretly borrowed money to finance the trip. In 1876 they set off for Switzerland and Italy. On their way home they stopped briefly in Munich, where Laura in confidence told Suzannah about the debt she had made for the trip and which she had kept secret. Ibsen later urged her to tell her husband about it so that he could help her. Afraid to do so, she tried instead to get the payment postponed. When this failed, she falsified a note.

The forgery was discovered, and the bank refused payment; whereupon she told her husband the whole story. He, regardless of the fact that she had done it purely for his sake ... told her she was unworthy to have charge of their children and ... had her committed to a public asylum ... and demanded a separation so that the children could be removed from her care. After a month she was discharged from the asylum and, for the children's sake, begged her husband to take her back, which he very grudgingly agreed to do.⁴

Although Nora's situation in *A Doll's House* is similar to Laura's, Ibsen reversed it when he had the wife divorce her husband rather than the other way around. He also deviated from the real-life model by refraining from a return on Nora's part.

The central theme of *A Doll's House* can be traced back to several of Ibsen's earlier plays. In *Brand* Agnes leaves Ejnar after discovering that he lacks the courage and strength to risk his life for another's salvation.⁵ Her Kierkegaardian ethics and her disillusioning discovery correspond to Nora's.

The doll motif is anticipated in *The League of Youth* (1869), where Ibsen depicts a kindred spirit to Nora in

Selma, 'the fairytale princess,' longing for the true fairytale, always kept on the outside and never permitted to make her contribution in the struggles of real life. She must always be protected from all that is

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ugly. Finally she cries out in anger: 'You dressed me like a doll; you played with me, as one plays with a child. I would have rejoiced to bear a burden; I longed with all my heart for everything that storms, that lifts up, exalts.'⁶

Again, in *Pillars of Society* (1877) Ibsen points to the discrimination against women. In one of the early drafts of this play Consul Bernick says: 'We don't notice women.' In the final version these words are handed over to Lona Hessel who, anticipating Nora, turns them against the men: 'You don't notice women.' Like Lona Hessel, Dina Dorf defies society and refuses to bow to 'all these intimidating considerations ... all this killing respectability'. In the first draft Ibsen went even further. Here Dina Dorf 'is willing to enter into an unconsecrated union with the man she loves; she would throw off all external bonds, even this hated thing of "betrothal", in order to be free, herself alone'.⁷

It was presumably after becoming acquainted with the Norwegian feminist writer Camilla Collett in 1871 that Ibsen became deeply concerned with questions pertaining to man–woman relations in contemporary society. Along with the decline of barter economy and the concomitant growth of industrialisation, the social position of women – especially women of the middle class – had become undermined. As mass-produced commodities had come to replace home-made ones, the division of labour between men and women, husbands and wives, characteristic of agrarian society, was replaced by a system where the husband, away from home, became the sole breadwinner, while at home the housekeeping was done largely by servants. (In *A Doll's House* there are significantly two maids caring for the Helmer household.) Prevented from higher education and from attractive social posts, the roles of married women were reduced to those of mother and sexual partner.

It was only natural that a number of writers should react against this state of things. In Sweden Carl Jonas Love Almqvist and Fredrika Bremer had been remarkable forerunners of the emancipa-

tion movement already in the 1830s. Camilla Collett, responsible for the first Norwegian problem novel, made her contribution to it in the 1850s. But it was not until the 1870s that there was a more general demand for emancipatory reforms. There can be little doubt that many of the fictional works dealing with man–woman relations, of marriage as a social institution, and so on, not only gave rise to a lively debate but actually helped to push these reforms. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) was immediately published in Danish, in a translation by Georg Brandes. Although Mill pleaded for equal rights between the sexes, he held the opinion that married women should be housewives and mothers.

As the leading critic in Scandinavia at the time, Brandes was very influential and his radical standpoint in the woman question, combined with his insistence that literature should above all debate current problems, had a strong impact on Scandinavian writers. If Brandes' *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature* (1872–90) may be said to have launched the first wave of discussion around these questions in the 1870s, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* (1881) initiated the second and much more extensive debate in the 1880s, a debate, centering on sexual morals, which at that time could hardly have taken place anywhere else.⁸

Ibsen's attitude to the women's rights movement has been a matter of some dispute.⁹ While many critics – mostly feminists – have been inclined to see the playwright as a fervent proponent of improved *women's* rights, others have found him more concerned with *human* rights.

Adherents of the first opinion will point not only to the preliminary notes for the play but also to the fact that Ibsen in January 1879

proposed to the Scandinavian Society that a woman librarian be hired. As a second measure he recommended that women be given the right to vote in the society ... He insisted that the present situation was a 'humiliation' to women who, he insisted, possessed along with young people and the true artist, 'the instinct of genius that unconsciously hits upon the truth'.¹⁰

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Adherents of the second opinion will quote from Ibsen's speech at the banquet offered in his honour by the Norwegian Society for Women's Rights on 26 May 1898. On this occasion he declared:

I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people generally tend to suppose. ... I must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights. And if you read my works carefully you will realise that. Of course it is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women [*sic*]; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings.¹¹

How valid is this statement made twenty years after *A Doll's House* was composed, in a period when Ibsen was little concerned with social problems? Not very, those would say who regard Ibsen as a playwright developing away from timely questions in the early social plays to more individual and universal problems in the late ones. Extremely relevant, those would claim who see a fundamental unity in his work, centred around more or less timeless ethical problems. Close examination of Ibsen's polyinterpretable play text has brought no definite solution to the problem. While one critic rejects male chauvinist attempts to 'save Ibsen from feminism',¹² another, comparing the first complete draft with the published version, suggests that the playwright while working on the play actually made Nora less feminine and more human.¹³

As Ibsen himself indicates in his speech, the distinction between 'women's rights' and 'human rights' seems somewhat academic. The two concepts were certainly exceedingly intertwined when he wrote *A Doll's House* – as Nora's conviction that she is 'first and foremost a human being' indicates, the connotation being that as a woman she fights for human rights. The distinction is nevertheless important when applied to the play, since the former concept suggests that *A Doll's House* is a problem drama, while the latter indicates that it is a tragedy.

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The genesis of *A Doll's House* can be traced mainly thanks to Ibsen's letters to his Copenhagen publisher, Frederik Hegel. Thus in a letter of 5 May 1878 he informs the publisher of a new 'drama of modern life' in four acts. As far as we know, this is the first reference to what was later to become *A Doll's House*.

In his highly interesting 'Notes for the Tragedy of Modern Times', dated Rome 19 October 1878, Ibsen gives a brief outline of the theme of the new play. After the initial paragraph, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the notes continue:

The wife in the play ends up quite bewildered and not knowing right from wrong; her natural instincts on the one side and her faith in authority on the other leave her completely confused.

A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view.

She has committed a crime, and she is proud of it; because she did it for love of her husband and to save his life. But the husband, with his conventional views of honour, stands on the side of the law and looks at the affair with male eyes.

Mental conflict. Depressed and confused by her faith in authority, she loses faith in her moral right and ability to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in contemporary society, just as certain insects go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race [*sic*]. Love of life, of home and husband and children and family. Now and then, woman-like, she shrugs off her thoughts. Sudden return of dread and terror. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, ineluctably, inevitably. Despair, resistance, defeat.¹⁴

What Ibsen had in mind, judging by these notes, was a play in which an ethical problem was related to a contemporary social situation. The protagonist of the intended play is 'a woman' and 'a mother', that is, a representative of all women, all mothers. What

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Ibsen wished to describe was not an individual situation, not even a typical one but an archetypal one. This explains why he called the planned drama 'the Tragedy of Modern Times'.

What the notes are concerned with is how feminine instinct (nature) is pitted against masculine regulative thinking (culture). The ethics of the suppressed female are opposed to those of the suppressing male. Male sense of identity is contrasted with female lack of the same. And the implication seems to be that once male society is abolished, a better society will arise, characterised by equality between the sexes and, as a result of this, more natural and human ethics.

Four months after the preliminary notes had been penned, on 18 February 1879, Ibsen writes the publisher that he is completely engrossed in the new work. While working on the play,

Ibsen was nervous and retiring and lived in a world alone, which gradually became peopled with his own imaginary characters. Once he suddenly remarked to his wife: 'Now I have seen Nora. She came right up to me and put her hand on my shoulder.' 'How was she dressed?' asked his wife. 'She had a simple blue cotton dress,' he replied without hesitation.¹⁵

Similarly, Ibsen's daughter-in-law has recalled how the playwright, while working on *A Doll's House*, could experience Nora as a real person whom he expected to meet.¹⁶

On 22 May 1879 Ibsen could inform Hegel that much of the playwriting had been done: 'The new work deals with modern life and is of a predominantly serious character. It is in three long acts ... I still want to think a little more about the title ...'¹⁷ By this time he had almost finished the final draft version of the first act, dated 2–24 May.

On 19 June, midway through the second act, Ibsen warned Hegel that the play might be somewhat delayed: 'in order to give the language and the dialogue generally the greatest possible perfection of form, I propose to write it out once more with

improvements, corrections and alterations before I eventually send you the final fair-copy'.¹⁸

The play was completed in Amalfi, where Ibsen had moved for the summer months. In mid-September it was sent off, in three instalments, to the publisher, one of them accompanied by the playwright's remark: 'So much is certain: I cannot remember any of my other books giving me greater satisfaction than this one whilst working out the details of it.'¹⁹

A comparison between the first complete draft and the published version reveals that Ibsen's 'improvements' concerned much significant stage business, such as Nora's eating of macaroons, her poking the stove, her offering Rank a light for his cigar, her practising the tarantella and her changing into everyday clothes at the end. Not until the final version does the Christmas tree become symbolically pregnant or does Ibsen manipulate the lighting.²⁰ Another striking change which no longer may seem an improvement, is that Helmer was turned into a narrow-minded male chauvinist.²¹

A Doll's House was published in Copenhagen on 4 December 1879 in an edition of 8,000 copies, an exceedingly large number for a Scandinavian play even today. This edition was sold out within two weeks. A second and third edition were brought out within three months.

Seventeen days after its publication, on 21 December, the play had its successful world première at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Ibsen, who rarely went to see his own plays, did not attend it. But when the first unbowdlerised German production of the play was launched in Munich on 3 March 1880, he was among the audience. The Norwegian novelist John Paulsen, who accompanied him, has recorded his reactions:

Ibsen had attended several rehearsals; the play was, to Paulsen's mind, well acted, and went down excellently with the public. After the premiere, Ibsen thanked everyone who had taken part in the production warmly. But afterwards, at home, he was full of criticism,

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not merely of the interpretation of the play and the various roles, but of details such as that Nora had the wrong-sized hands ... and that the colour of the wallpaper in the Helmers' apartment was wrong and conveyed a false atmosphere.²²

Withholding publicly his dissatisfaction with the performance, Ibsen apparently held the opinion that a playwright should not meddle with productions of his own plays. His work is finished when he hands his text over to the publisher. What he *can* do – and what Ibsen is doing to a much greater extent than earlier playwrights – is to ‘direct’ his own plays by providing them with ample stage- and acting-directions. In the following chapter, dealing with the drama text, we shall see how this is done.