

canon as designating a body of authors whose acquaintance should be urged on those aspiring to be “educated persons” will become ludicrous. Again, the problem is less with the process than with the nomenclature (and perhaps with unrealistic expectations for the reception of the newly “canonized” authors). Should we not perhaps speak of “canons” (rather than of “a canon”), classical, traditional, revised, expanded, possibly schematized by rings in concentric circles to demarcate amplifications?

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Ibsen and Feminism

To the Editor:

In an age of mandarin critical theory, Joan Templeton ignores the basic principle of literary discussion: keep your eye on the text. In her essay on *A Doll House* (“The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen,” 104 [1989]: 28–40), she tells us much about Ibsen and his critics but little about his play. She should have followed, at the very least, the advice she enjoins on others and examined “the hierarchical oppositions on which . . . [the work] relies” (34). Since “the moral center of *A Doll House*” in her view is the “conflict . . . between masculine and feminine,” Templeton should herself have “risen to . . . [the] challenge” (35, 34) and explained the many forms that the conflict takes.

The conflict is not confined, as Templeton believes it is, to the marriage of Torvald and Nora. It envelops the entire play, from the sad story of the nurse, a seduced and abandoned servant, to the checkered relationships of Mrs. Linde. Mrs. Linde has a particularly crucial role in the drama, for she, far more than Torvald, is “Nora’s foil” (34). According to Templeton, the rebuttal of Nora’s final position must be sought, if anywhere, in “the dialogue . . . [of the] husband” (34), where paradoxically it cannot be found: nothing “deconstruct[s]” Nora’s position. Templeton notwithstanding, the rebuttal of Nora’s final position must be sought and found in the actions of Mrs. Linde. As the voice of the playwright, Mrs. Linde opposes to conventional marriage not the credo of “early modern feminism” but a wise and loving heart. When she gives up her independent life to marry Krogstad and to care for his children, she experiences “the miracle” of which Nora has only dreamed, a sense of self-fulfillment in love:

Mrs. Linde: How different! How different! Someone to work for, to live for—a home to build.

Mrs. Linde’s decision resolves the battle of the sexes. For its results are no less miraculous to Krogstad (“I can’t be-

lieve it; I’ve never been so happy”), and it saves them both from that “Despair” which attends Nora’s departure—according to Ibsen’s working notes for the play (*The Oxford Ibsen*, ed. James Walter McFarlane, 5: 437). In Mrs. Linde we find embodied that same romantic principle which Ibsen felt, late in life, he had better teach the Norwegian Women’s Rights League:

I am not a member of the Women’s Rights League. . . . I am not even quite clear as to just what this women’s rights movement really is. . . . It is the women who shall solve the human problem. As mothers they shall solve it. And only in that capacity can they solve it.

(*Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn, 337–38)

Templeton may complain that, in my objections, I mistake her purpose, which is not so much to discuss *A Doll House* as to assault its critics. Even assuming she can overturn other people’s interpretations without setting forth her own, how reliable is her method? That many critics believe the play is “not really about women” hardly supports her thesis of a “gentlemanly backlash”: many gentlemen interpret the play as narrowly as she does—for example, Hans Heiberg (*Ibsen: A Portrait*) and Theodore Joergenson (*Henrik Ibsen: A Study*), as well as Francis Fergusson (*The Idea of a Theater*), the popularist William Benét (*The Reader’s Encyclopedia*), and, among others, John Gassner (*Masters of the Drama*). Although she thinks her views are boldly revisionist, Templeton argues a commonplace. She should have allowed her coadjutors some notice. Their absence makes one wonder about her fair-mindedness and candor.

And one must wonder about much else. To prove her special case, that Ibsen was a dedicated feminist, she points to *Pillars of Society*, the subject of which is not “the New Woman” but the confrontation between the trolls of modern respectability and a Norse goddess in modern dress, and she ignores *Hedda Gabler*, the subject of which is the New Woman, but as *femme fatale*. She warns us not to infer Ibsen’s “intention” in *A Doll House* from the pronouncements of “the aging playwright”; nevertheless, from a pronouncement of the aging playwright—he was pleased his infant granddaughter was to be christened Eleanora—she infers that he cherished the name Nora, a common diminutive for Eleanora, and therefore that he had from the beginning “admired, even adored, Nora Helmer” (34). She invents an excuse for his repudiation of the Women’s Rights League (“he was primarily interested in young women and annoyed by the elderly feminists who surrounded him”) and then finds in his support for the female members of the Scandinavian Club in Rome proof of “his passionate support for the [feminist] movement” but not of his “pathetic longing for young girls” (37, 36).

Besides her slipshod handling of evidence, there is the treatment of her key term: *feminism* (or *feminist*). Not

only does she fail to provide a precise definition of the word but in practice she allows the meaning to shift from page to page, even from sentence to sentence. In its narrowest sense, her “feminism” is identified with either nineteenth- or twentieth-century conceptions of “women’s rights” or “the women’s movement.” In its looser sense, feminism signifies that men and women are in essence the same (“woman . . . [is] neither more nor less than man . . .” [32]) or, oddly enough, that men and women are fundamentally different (“the self . . . [never] obliterates . . . biological and social determinations” [31]). Finally, in its loosest sense, feminism almost ceases to have any meaning and suggests merely a decent respect for women (“women’s feelings matter . . .”). The advantage to Templeton of keeping the term in such an uncertain state is obvious. Her carelessness, whether deliberate or not, allows her to assert, dogmatically and without evidence, that Ibsen is indeed a nineteenth-century feminist, while she implies, insistently and without evidence, that ahead of his time he is also a twentieth-century feminist.

In the dollhouse of Torvald and Nora, both husband and wife suffer from arrested development, which neither may eventually outgrow. In any event, there probably is a sense in which Ibsen is a feminist; but in that sense, Saint Augustine, Dante, and John Paul II are feminists as well: all four celebrate the moral dignity of womankind.

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Reply:

Having weathered many a “barbaric outrage,” as he called the first rewriting of *A Doll House*, Ibsen doubtless did not turn over in his grave at the news that in 1989 another angry man is crusading to make Nora relive Torvald. Still, his eyes must have sparkled with their celebrated mischief to see his defenseless spirit forced into the same holy procession with a Catholic poet, a saint, and a pope, all four of them solemnly decrying feminism as they hymn “the moral dignity of womankind.” And if the inventor of this happy, ahistorical quartet thinks that on the subject of women he can place with impunity the great Italian poet alongside the father of the Church, I suggest that he read Joan Ferrante’s *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* and then take a look at *De Civitate Dei*, where, in what Elaine Pagels has called “the politics of paradise,” Augustine makes Genesis the proof of God’s “placing divine sanction upon the social, legal, and economic machinery of male domination” (*Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*), the demeaning doctrine that John Paul II, the fourth member of this motley unit, would continue to force on the world’s women. The “moral dignity of womankind” indeed.

To make an honest argument against “*The Doll House Backlash*,” one would have to prove some of the following: (1) that there exists no widespread attempt to rescue Ibsen from feminism; (2) that Nora Helmer has not been repeatedly attacked as silly, neurotic, immoral, insufficiently feminine, or too female; (3) that I have proposed a logically faulty analysis in arguing that the universalist position that feminism is too limited to be the stuff of literature rests on a tautology; (4) that gender has no place in *A Doll House*, that is, that Nora’s story is not specifically a woman’s; (5) that the play’s text does not summarize everything nineteenth-century feminism denounced about woman’s state; (6) that my examination of the text fails to show that the attacks on Nora merely repeat those of her husband; (7) that I have made an erroneous analysis in contending that serious critical problems arise if we do not take the play’s protagonist seriously; (8) that my research is flawed: that Ibsen did not admire Nora Helmer; that *Pillars of Society* is not a directly feminist play; that Ibsen did not mean what he said about women’s rights when he vociferously argued for them; that Brandes misrepresented Ibsen’s position on feminism.

My detractor attempts none of the above. Contemptuously dismissing my evidence, he mounts an attack on my integrity, falsely accusing me of not acknowledging other critics’ work. Not one of the five people my denigrator mentions has written, or attempted to write, anything at all faintly resembling “*The Doll House Backlash*,” and neither has anyone else. The charge against me, in fact, is not only base but disingenuous, for the major point of the heavily documented first part of my essay is not that no one has ever maintained that *A Doll House* is feminist, but, *on the contrary*, that in spite of its status, to use Elaine Baruch’s phrase, as “feminist play *par excellence*,” a great number of Norwegian, English, and American scholars and critics, including world-renowned experts on Ibsen, have gone to great lengths in greatly respected publications to rescue *A Doll House* from what they consider the contamination of feminism. My detractor uses logic as lamentable as his professional ethics; for at the same time that I lack “candor” and “fair-mindedness” by not citing like-minded (nonexistent) scholars, I believe that my views are “revisionist.” Similarly, he claims that I myself have no interpretation of the play and in the next sentence that my interpretation is “commonplace.” My use of biography is called “slipshod,” when in fact I have tried to be scrupulous. Unlike the critics I argue against, who grasp the old playwright’s irritated response at a banquet as the only and last word on the subject of Ibsen and feminism, I put this remark both in its own context and in the context of other statements and other deeds that show, indisputably, that Ibsen was a feminist in earlier days. Nor do I “infer” that because Ibsen liked the name Nora he admired Nora Helmer, an extraordinary confusion of three distinct passages, one on Ibsen’s absorption with Nora, one on his admiration of her courage, and