



## OFFENSIVE WOMEN AND DEFENSIVE MEN IN IBSEN'S PLAYS

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### ABSTRACT

Henrik Ibsen's plays are used a sample of the nineteenth century society and culture. They present women as the victims of suppression and oppression by the dominating male, brother, father or husband. This paper highlights the unjust treatment to women and their attempt to fight male-domination. The women who fight against men are the real victims because they are unable to deal with the circumstances and eventually take their own way out of it. Ibsen portays realistically those offensive women amidst defensive men in his plays.

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### INTRODUCTION

Most people today still believe the myth that the victorian era was a period of a universally accepted value system; that most women lived leisurely, inactive lives, and that husbands and wives remained serenely together, both serving their separate functions in making life pleasant and meaningful. Such, however, was not the case, as recent scholarship has shown. The 1800's were traditional years in the struggle for individual democratic human rights. As Walter Houghton has argued so forcefully in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, the victorian period could best be characteristic by the word "doubts"? The controversy surrounding the women question is but one example of the shifting sands underlying the so-called firm foundation of the period's attitude toward faith, morality, and "every assertion met with a counter-

assertion". Some wanted the preservation of society's traditional values, some wanted reform, and some wanted a radical break with old customs and institutions. The debate over the women question, what roles and jobs should be within society, provided a forum for every shade of victorian opinion on faith and mortality. Respectability was the watchword for conventional victorian men and women.

The conventional view that coloured most middle class thinking was that women were physiologically, psychologically, and emotionally different from – if not inferior to – men. Therefore, women, because of these constitutional differences, could not be accorded equal opportunity with men in the world outside the home. Women were intended by nature to be mothers. That was their chief and almost exclusive occupation. Anything that

interfered with this domestic sphere was suspect. Women, according to conventional morality of the time, should be put on pedestals to protect them from the taint of worldly economic pursuits. If women were allowed to participate in the country's political and industrial activities, they would undoubtedly be tarnished by being pulled down to the "brutish" level men were forced to live on. The respectable women did not interest herself in their husband's business; she regarded it as unlady like to show any knowledge of or interest in areas of life that were outside her domestic duties. She preferred – and was encouraged by her minister, her husband, her father, her friends, her reading, in short, by her entire society-to spend money rather than to make it. The respectable man was exposed to the evil in the world, but he was expected to resist it; the respectable women, however, was protected from all appearance of evil. On the one hand, a woman was believed to be weak and frail, unable to handle the complexities of property or public life. On the other hand, a woman unfortunate enough to have a child out of wedlock was supposed to resist male advances, but if she was physically over-powered, she was still to blame. Even a lower class woman who had, perhaps, worked in the fields for twelve hours was expected to take charge of hearth and home. The cultists of domesticity often castigated the poor women, required to work by economic pressure, because her poor husband, who was also exhausted from physical labours, was forced to sit and wait for his dinner. The unmarried women, the poor women, the widow, or even the women whose husband was incapacitated for some reason was simply ignored by the philosophical ideas publicly propagated and practiced by conventional middle class Victorians.

They believed there were two spheres of influence in human affairs; the woman's situation in the home and the man's in the public area. The woman's God-given function was to be an angel in her house. She was to provide a loving, relaxed environment that would give shelter and comfort to her tired, frustrated husband who had spend his days struggling to provide her with material wants. The man and woman could find happiness as long as they remembered. "That man's role as authority

figure was, of course, never questioned. He could, in essence, behave however he chose, but the good wife managed to get around him by making certain that nothing in the home would ruffle or upset him. She was to soothe him out of his moods and remove any obstacles or conflicts that might have caused his displeasure. No matter how her husband treated her, the woman was willing to forgive. Thus, in the conventional piety the woman's role was a sacred one. The "perfect" relationship could be built only on the recognition that men and women had totally separate roles in life, predicated in differences in function.

Publicly, the goal of a traditional woman in the nineteenth century was to be married to a man of means, to have children, and to be protected from the vicissitudes of life by her husband. Only the lower class women could be unrefined; the middle-class woman was supposed to avoid work outside the home unless there was extreme economic necessity. The test of any occupation for women was "uselessness". Women were "decoratively futile"; they were to "cultivate fragility" because their very leisure was a sign of the financial prosperity of the family. Of course, the irony of this public standard for female behaviour was that it offered no "position" for the woman who was unable to find a husband who could support her in the accepted manner, and it offered no succor to the working class woman who was forced to spend her days in hard physical labour just to have enough food on the table to meet the survival needs of her family-even if she had a husband who was working also. Ibsen was a leader in the campaign for a modern radical and realistic literature in the cultural life of Scandinavia of this age, and challenged the values of middle-class society and formulated the basic rights and liberties of the individual. (Brandes 871).

Ibsen's plays attack the ideology of woman as the servicing sex through direct satire, through disparaging portrayals of men who regard women's servitude as part of the natural relation between the sexes, through the woman's victimization in the plays of the female-centered triangle, and through the valorization of the autonomous woman over the subservient woman in the plays of the male-center

triangle. The patterns often inter-connect, appearing together in the same play. The simplest example of Ibsen's refusal of dichotomous gender is the number of androgynous, adventurous, ambitious, analytical, decisive, knowledgeable, physical, self-confident, sexual, strong, successful, worldly; to be feminine is to be cooperative, expressive, focused on home and family, gentle, helpful, intuitive, native, nurturing, sensitive, sympathetic, tender, weak. Ibsen's androgynous characters reflect his challenge to the sexual polarization that has characterized patriarchy since its inception. Gender Lerner summarizes patriarchy's major assumption about gender. Men are 'naturally' superior, stronger and more rational, therefore designed to be dominant. From this follows that men are political citizens and responsible for and representing the policy. Women are 'naturally' weaker, inferior in intellect and rational capacities, unstable emotionally and therefore incapable of political participation. They stand outside of the polity. Men, by their rational minds, explain and order the world. Women by their nurturing function sustain daily life and the continuity of the species. While both functions are essential, that of men is superior to that of women. Ibsen's reoccurring paradigm of a woman's conflict between her prescribed, gendered identity and her individual autonomy-what society tells her she must be and what she is free to become-embodies what Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson have called the "two faces, positive and negative, of the modern as the anti-traditional: freedom and deprivation, a living present and a dead past".

The struggles of the rebellious female protagonist of Ibsen's early plays prefigure those of Ibsen's later, more well-known female rebels. James Huneker noted: "From the start, certain conceptions of woman took root in mind and reappear in nearly all his dramas. One is the eternal womanly, the others the descriptive feminine principle, woman the conqueror" (Granville 195). Ibsen's women neatly belong to one of two types: "the self-reliant, aggressive and often destructive on the one hand, and her devoted, self-sacrificing opposite" Ibsen's first fully developed protagonist is a woman called upon to act like a man. Driven to distraction by

keeping up the pretense of a happy marriage, feeling such disgust for their husbands that any allusion to sexual intimacy is unbearable, the women are pushed to violent acts by the return of the "other man".

Because the psychology of permanently unequal relations demands that the subordinates develop character traits pleasing to the dominant group-submissiveness, passivity, lack of initiative-the subordinates are forced to act in hidden or indirect ways. In *A Doll's House*, Nora plays the fool and saves her husband's life without his knowing it, in *Ghosts*, closet business woman Mrs. Alving runs her husband's estate, in *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda plays the satisfied bourgeois and plots secretly to bring some meaning into her life. As long as the subordinates adapt or seem to adapt to the dominants' view, they are considered well adjusted; when they do not, and rebel, they are considered abnormal: the judgement of Torvald on Nora's leaving her family in *A Doll's House*, and of Manders on Mrs. Alving's leaving her husband in *Ghosts*. Subordinates often know more about the dominants than vice versa: Nora knows how to manage Torvald by flattering his ego, Mrs. Alving recognizes the insidiousness of Pastor Mander's moral universe, Hedda recognizes the pettiness of the Tesmans. Torvald does not know his resourceful wife; Manders is shocked when Mrs. Alving confronts him with her liberal notions, and the dominant than themselves, for if one's fate depends on pleasing others, there is little reason to know one's self; what Nora has ignored, but wants to discover, what Mrs. Alving has refused to face, what Hedda has tried to repress. Implicit in the notion of woman's permanent inequality is that she is instrumental rather than autonomous, that her purpose is not to be but to serve. George Bernard Shaw once stated that "Ibsen insists that there is no golden rule; that conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal." The Ibsenian male individualist revolts against a prevailing order, but his autonomous is a given. While Ibsen's male strives to fulfill their masculine role, his female strives to struggle against their feminine one. And in this, the female individual in Ibsen's drama is a modern figure in a way that the male individual is not. Part of Ibsen's genius is in

how extensively and complexly he developed his characterization of women in terms of sexual identity. Ibsen's refusal of woman allowed him to discover the socialization of sexual identity we now call "gender" and to investigate women as full moral beings struggling against the cultural norms that define and limit them.

The women are very good at rebelling against the norms. In *A Doll's House*, Nora and Kristine both do things that they know would be "wrong" according to their society, their religion, and how they were raised but rather than comply, these women use their intelligence and their wits to hide the things that they have done in order to keep things appearing above board. Both of these women are strong and defy all those cultural norms in order to keep going and to survive in the world. Nora forges her father's signature and borrows money in order to save her husband's life, then she works secretly behind his back in order to make back the money that she thinks that he will claim responsibility and pay off the loan himself. Thereby protecting her. When she sees what he really does, she is shocked into reality. The reality of what her marriage is and the things she is thinking and feeling upset and confuse her. She realize that she must be on her own for a while at least to figure out who she is, what she believes, and hoe she should go on with her life knowing what she knows. This epiphany, in itself, is against the rules of society.

Nora was expected to act in a certain way and fulfill her role as wife and mother. Her reputation and what other people think and feel about her are extremely important to her and to her husband. Because she has lived a fantasy for so long, she never even gets to know her husband. In fact, she is only her true self with Dr. Rank. With him she has honest, open, intelligent conversation and lets him get to know who she really is. She lets him get to know her in a way that her husband never could because of the structure placed on her head, she realizes that she can't stay with him anymore. She realizes that he is a stranger to her and suddenly she comprehends the magnitude of what society has done to her and millions if women in her shoes.

Money is used in the Victorian society to keep women oppressed. Of course it was just the

way of things then. Nora uses and abuses the rules where it comes to money. How dare she take out a loan? How perfect of her to spend and spend and keep asking for more. She lets her husband think that she is totally relying on him monetarily, which is the "correct" way of this period but she is also hiding the truth about the money situation. She pretends to be too stupid to understand a budget or monetary concerns but in reality, she is fully aware and in charge in her own way. She manipulates the situation to keep up the appearance of being naive and stupid when it comes to money. She knows her role well

The women lets the man decide because he is the man. Even when the woman knows better she simply backs off due to propriety. Today we find that stunning and insulting but in Victorian times it simply was the norm. Ibsen does show us that the women in his plays aren't quite so willing to be dominated though. They have a tendency to rebel as seen above. Helmer tends to try to act as Nora's master. He feels that his word is law and it is his right and even duty to demand what and Nora complies of course, if only outwardly.

The women are quite smart and instead of being open and proud of that fact, they use these characteristics as subterfuge and manipulate to get their way instead of being proud and openly intelligent. They work tirelessly to keep up a façade so that these qualities are hidden and all will still appear "proper" to society at large. It is quite sad. Helmer even makes reference to Nora's lack of intelligence on numerous occasions and steps in to "help". Helmer treats Nora as his property in the some way that a small domesticated animal or a doll is a person's property. He calls her little pet names and spends time trying to coax her into doing his bidding. He thinks of himself as the master and her as his to do with what he chooses.

The character of Torvald the husband, being a controlling and possessive man, is but a product of society from the time during which the play was written. Torvald's use of "my," "me," "mine," and "I" used throughout the play displays his position of control. In dealing with his wife like a child, by promoting her childish behaviors and binding her to demeaning rules and actions, Torvald

displays his domineering attitude. After her secret is revealed and he regains composure he tries to pretend that everything is back to normal and feels that he is generously returning her to her status as wife and mother. After he patronizes her again, she tries to stand up for herself and he, authoritatively replies, "You're insane! You've no right! I forbid you"(Ibsen Vol I 110).

Early in the scene Torvald expresses his possessiveness with his assertive words and his asinine pet names, "my little lark" and "my squirrel" and are used repeatedly throughout. All through the play he refers to his wife, as an object of his possession: "Can't I look at my richest treasure? At all that beauty that's mine, and mine alone-completely and utterly" (Ibsen Vol. I 94). His words are demeaning in reference to her as her own being. After Torvald has discovered her blunder and realizes that he will not suffer any repercussions for Nora's actions; he calmly covets her in a possessive fashion. Torvald fails to realize that Nora is her own person; that can think for her self and has her own needs and wants.

To the defense of Helmer (not signifying that he is correct, but) one must consider the time, social structure and statement made by William Archer in his critical review, "If Helmer helped to make Nora a doll, Nora helped to make Helmer a prig." In looking at the entire situation the reader might see how Nora could be slightly at fault for allowing it to have gone this far and not having stood up for herself sooner. It might be easier to consume Torvald's fit of rage as more of a justifiable reaction considering that Nora had just ruined his social stature, one in which he had worked long and hard for. If a person were to put themselves in that same situation during the same time of such social roles, one might deem that his reaction was not so horrible. Also as critic Harold Clurman highlights in his critical analysis of the play that Torvald's remarks about a mother of bad temperament having negative effects on her children, is a statement that is indeed true in its nature. Torvald was just stating what is believed to be factual and true, even today. Children learn bad habits from examples of parenting. For every undesirable trait that Torvald displays, one can find an underlying excuse for his

disposition through looking at his society.Society's strongholds on character and his natural possessive and controlling nature establish Torvald's character, which in the end causes him to lose control completely, as his wife leaves him.

Rebellion was the most prevalent issue in the play *Ghosts*. Regina and Mrs.Alving are most extremely rebellion toward the men in this story. Mrs.Alving does rebel quietly and not publicly for the most part. She has spent her whole life pretending that her husband had integrity and was helpful in business and the community when in actuality she was behind it all. She simply let everyone believe it was her husband so as not to cause scandal and unrest among her peers. She didn't take any credit for all of her accomplishments. She was a smart, sophisticated, businesswoman who doesn't believe as she's been raised to. She makes up her own mind and isn't judgemental of the way other people live their lives. But she is not a proper Victorian lady and that is why Manders and her clash quite a bit.

Reverend Manders is the primary offender. He believes that he is in charge because Mrs.Alving is only a woman so he comes in and makes all sorts of decisions, like insurance, and because he is a bumbling idiot ruins everything for her. He even sends Regina to live with Engstrand, which will be her ruin. Mrs.Alving has never had a moment of happiness because of the dominance of the men in her life. She stayed with a husband she abhorred the man she loved, Mrs.Manders, sent her back to him. She stayed only to find out that her son is dying of the same STD that his father died of. Because she left the men dominate her life and her decisions, she ended up losing everything that she held dear and had worked so hard for.

Mr.Manders calls her my dear sweet.... And other little pet names several times throughout the piece and she also knows that she was bought and paid for by her husband just like property. That is why she used her cunning business sense to save up the exact amount of her dowry to give to the orphanage. She was in essence bullying herself back and trying to make sure Oswald was free from anything his father might have left him. She wanted to be the only person that he inherited anything

from. Even after all of the cunning and intelligence into question. This is rather ironic since the men in the story are rather lacking in this area. Mrs. Alving simply question things they all consider to be absolute truths.

There are few occasions in the play where either Regina or Mrs. Alving expresses their desires. The truth is, they said that men who ultimately took over charge of their lives thwarted both of them in their efforts. When left to their own devices, they were, although, secretly, both getting what they wanted. Regina worked out of necessity but Mrs. Alving provided a safe environment for her. Mrs. Alving may have started out working as a matter of necessity but became a master and she kept it all a secret. She was a cunning businesswoman who didn't draw attention to the fact that she took care of the finances, the business, and everything else.

Ibsen is said to have written Mrs. Alving with the idea of what would have happened if Nora had returned home instead of leaving her husband and children. The fact that Mrs. Alving takes charge of the family, the finances, the business, and even goes so far as to send her son away shows that she is rebelling against what society expects of her. She has her own ideas of right and wrong but still worries about society at large and her reputation as well as that of her family. The fact that she left her husband to go seek the man that she really loved shows great strength and character as well as her rebellion. Because she was turned away, she went home and tried to make the best of a bad situation.

Rebellion was the most prevalent issue in the play *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda was constantly making retorts to the men who surrounded her as well as to the women who tried to behave as expected of them. She is a fiery, aggressive, dominant female and although she tries to hide it, her remarks often pinpoint those behaviours. Hedda dominated the men and made demands of them. She is the most dominant character in this piece and if she were a man there would be an ungodly number of occurrences in this category. The men do dominate a bit through. Judge Brack and Eilert try on several occasions to get Hedda to conform but there are a few instances of George being assertive and telling

someone to do something menial like put on their hat. Judge Brack is harsh in his demands while George is docile.

Hedda can't bring herself to acknowledge that she is pregnant much less talk about it. Julie knows and is thrilled but Hedda is extremely unhappy about it. This is yet another example of how Hedda is different than other women. She is disgusted with the idea of motherhood and children just as most men typically are. Ibsen again gives the male view to Hedda and makes her try and deal with that in the world she lives in. Hedda expresses her desire for vitality in her life and is bored but cannot act on her true desires because of the scandal it would cause. She desires a goal to work toward without being an outcast. She desires the impossible and the forbidden. She wants to live but her terms are impossible.

Ibsen gives many dominant characteristics to Hedda and many feminism traits to her husband. She wants so badly to live the life of a man in her generation that it drives her to insanity. She is bored with the role that she is expected to play and lashes out at others in her frustration and contempt. All of the women around her do their duty with pleasure and inferiority and even seem to rejoice in the servitude. The one thing that Hedda can't seem to do though is to outright defy society and do what she wants. She is so concerned with appearances and staying away from scandal that she sacrifices herself and her sanity.

In the privacy of her own home, we see her gun toting, horse riding, sexual, intelligent, woman with interests in politics, money, and society at large. But she keeps all of those things hidden as best she can. She is trying to conform to something that she hates. She even hates the idea of having children and according to society, that is a woman's most sacred job. She is expected to love this aspect of marriage and in reality she cannot even accept that she is pregnant. She doesn't want to be a mother. She isn't motherly. She even says herself that she doesn't have the courage to do what she really wants to do. Ibsen shows her pain and suffering and the slow methodical losing of her mind before her suicide. He is trying to point out that all women are not the same; they have different

interests and goals and that it is alright for women to choose what they want to do for themselves without society or men telling them what they should be interested in doing.

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