Ibsen's A DOLL HOUSE

Various critics have commented upon the preponderance of symbols in Henrik Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem; A Doll House.* Emblems such as Helmer's Christmas tree, Nora's tarantella, the several doors in the Helmer household, and especially the house itself have, time and again, been duly noted and explicated.[1] One symbol, however, has received scant attention: the hide-and-seek game Nora plays with her children near the middle of Act I. Granted, a detailed exegesis of this game initially appears unnecessary, for it quite obviously represents both Nora's occasional childishness and, more significantly, the pecuniary secret she has concealed from her husband Torvald for the better part of their marriage, as well as her fear of its disclosure. Still, when one considers where Ibsen's original Dano-Norwegian stage-directions, which scholars generally regard as more complete and literary than those of playwrights who preceded him (Downs 122), call for Nora to ensconce herself "under bordet" (46) this game unquestionably becomes as complex and formidable a symbol as any of those previously mentioned.

In English—like both Danish and Norwegian, a Germanic language—the phrase "under bordet" translates, not surprisingly, to "under board."[2] According to *The Oxford English Dictionary,* Second Edition, since at least 1603 the expression "under board"[3] has signified secretiveness or deceptiveness.[4]. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs,* Third Edition, cites an even earlier date for the literary debut of this phrase: 1546.[5] This same book additionally indicates that by 1558 the trope "under board" had already become associated with surreptitious economic dealings.[6] All of this, of course, directly reflects the plot of Ibsen's drama (first published, incidentally, over three hundred years after the expression first appeared in English[7]), as Nora must continually play a desperate game of hide-and-seek with Torvald to prevent him from discovering that she did not, in fact, receive the money for his convalescence from her father, but rather "under bordet" from Nils Krogstad.

It is entirely possible that Nora's symbolic gesture of hiding "under bordet" is simply another in a series of fiscal allusions—most implying transactions of some sort—which, as Bernard F. Dukore observes, appear throughout the play, even when money itself is not the focus of a scene (4). Torvald, for instance, refers to Nora as "min dyreste ejendom" (124); "my dearest property," and at social events send her stjålent øjekast" (125); "stolen glances." Furthermore, because he is unsure of Kristina's motives, Nils inquires whether her sudden kindness is genuine or only an illustration that she would save Nora "for enhver pris'' (117); ''at any price,'' to which she replies, ''Krogstad; den, som *en* gang har solgt sig selv for andres skyld, gør det ikke om igen'' (117); ''Krogstad, she who has *once* sold herself for another's sake does not do it again.'' And finally, Dr. Rank, when discussing his own deteriorating health with Nora, reveals: ''I disse dage har jeg foretaget et generalopgør af min indre status. Bankerot'' (83); ''These last few days I have undertaken a general computation of my internal balance sheet. Bankrupt.'' Rank, having ''inherited'' syphilis from his father, declares it unjust that he has ''at bøde . . . gengaeldelse'' (84); ''to pay . . . retribution'' for his father's youthful debauchery, while he himself had led a comparatively chaste life.

It is only appropriate that Nils, and not the children, uncovers Nora in her beneath board hiding place, for he is, as Torvald rightly affirms, familiar with ''kneb og kunstgreb'' (63); ''subterfuge and tricks.'' But more than this, he is the gamemaster, forcing Nora to participate in such a game, determining its rules, and terminating the play when he sees fit, which he does both here and when he later makes good in his threats by sending his incriminating letter to Torvald in Act II.

It his evocative article ''*A Doll's House* Revisited,'' Austin E. Quigley maintains that despite the diversity of symbols in Ibsen's play, all such symbols work collectively to constitute a coherent and extensive ''image network . . . a series of verbal and visual motifs that function not just as supporting elements but as contributing components'' (587) to the drama. Quigley, who amazingly enough does not address Nora's hide-and-seek game, moreover argues that none of these verbal/visual motifs is inherently negative, but that they instead represent both good and ill at different points in the play (601). Nevertheless, I believe that the overwhelming impression left by this network of verbal/visual images—from the concealed Christmas tree at the beginning of the play to the masquerade party near its close—is that of a symbolic web of deceit in which the Helmers have long been ensnared. Just as Nora's game is clearly one thick-spun thread in such a pernicious web, her crawling out from ''under bordet'' unmistakably prefigures her ultimate extrication from deception, as she leaves Torvald still hopelessly trapped within his doll's house.

—DAVID B. DRAKE, *University of South Florida.*

NOTES

1. See, for example, John Northam, *Ibsen's Dramatic Method: A Study of the Prose Dramas* (London: Faber, 1953) 19–21; Errol Durbach, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of*

Transformation (Boston: Twayne, 1991) 40-55; Brian Johnston, "Three Stages of *A Doll House*," *Comparative Drama* 25 (1991): 311-28; and, particularly, Austin E. Quigley, "*A Doll's House* Revisited," *Modern Drama* 27 (1984): 584-603.

2. To avoid mistaking, in the words of Durbach, "the tip of a translation's iceberg for the totality of the play's submerged meanings" (36), I have not relied on any existing translation for the quotations referred to in this essay; I have chosen instead to translate the passages in question myself, attempting to be as literal as possible.

3. In our century, this expression has been modified somewhat to "under the table," without, however, altering the original meaning.

4. The phrase is included under the entry "Board."

5. See entry "Under the rose."

6. See entry "Play underboard, To."

7. This phrase is readily found in any number of contemporary Danish and Norwegian dictionaries, also indicating furtiveness.

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Twain's A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT

Mark Twain's attitude toward technology in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1989) has been the most debated feature of the book.[1] Henry Nash Smith, for example, argues that Twain's attitude toward technology soured even as he wrote the book, so that what began as a "dream of himself in armor"ultimately became "a nightmare" (66). Critics often cite the "Battle of the Sandbelt," in which 25,000 knights are electrocuted, as the ultimate example of Twain's changed attitude. But Twain also reveals his view of technology as alternating dream and nightmare through references to the recently invented telephone. Specifically, Twain included his early comic invention, the one-ended telephone conversation, that reveals in a homelier way his extremely jaundiced view of technology and its limitations.

In his 1880 sketch, "A Telephonic Conversation," Twain describes a scene in which a husband listens to his wife on the telephone and hears "a conversation with only one end to it" (*Sketches* 738).