

# The Female Jouissance

## An Analysis of Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem*<sup>1</sup>

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WHEN *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll's House*] was published in 1879, the drama was immediately seen as a feminist firebrand. It kept its tag as a feminist drama in academic readings until the arrival of the New Critics, who with a conviction equal to that of their predecessors, argued that the play was not concerned with feminism but with the genesis of a *human being*. This is well expressed in the title of Sandra Saari's article "Female Become Human: Nora Transformed."

Joan Templeton ardently confronts the attempts to make *Et dukkehjem* anything but a feminist drama and Nora an androgynous human being:

The a priori dismissal of women's rights as the subject of *A Doll's House* is a gentlemanly backlash, a refusal to acknowledge the existence of a tiresome reality .... In Ibsen's timeless world of *Everyman*, questions of gender can only be tedious intrusions. (29)

Whether the play is seen as concerned with feminism or the genesis of a human being, the figure of Nora as a psychological character sketch has been seen as problematic. In the theater, Nora has a tendency to fall into two parts, and in academic readings, one has seen her decisiveness

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<sup>1</sup>The essay is based on my thesis "Frihetens dilemma, Ibsen with Lacan," published as *Frihetens dilemma: Ibsen lest med Lacan* (2001). The book contains textual analysis of *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *Hedda Gabler*. The analyses are centered about the theme freedom as an existential choice between an acceptance of the symbolic castration through settling for a limited freedom within the law, or pursuit of absolute freedom beyond the law; but absolute freedom leads to lack of freedom and to annihilation. Both men and women are thus caught in the primitive pre-Oedipal pleasure, or in an imaginary immutability where political action is politically and socially system-affirming, and on an individual plane functions as an imaginary defense.

in the third act as inexplicable on the background of her role as a seductive sky-lark in the first act.

The conceptions of Nora have also been colored by different ideological and feminist perspectives since in the first part of the drama, she exploits the whole register of femininity as the feminine traditionally has been perceived and in the last part of the drama emerges as highly articulate and moreover willing to leave her husband and three children. Much of the academic criticism is colored by an essentialist understanding of womanhood and how the feminine woman is to behave and speak. Nora is either not a moral woman, or she is not a woman at all, since she speaks like a man and appears to be Ibsen's mouthpiece for feminist opinions, as for example Else Høst sees it. Similarly, Erik Østerud has recently argued for the view that Nora experiences a transformation between the first to the final act, but claims this transformation is so complete that she is no longer a woman but a "man":

*I samme øyeblikk Nora fødes som individ og erverver seg bevissthet om de maskuline undertrykkelsesmekanismer i det borgerlige samfunn, er det som om hun erobrer sin intellektuelle modning med tap av kjønns spesifisitet.* (Østerud 182)

(In the same moment, Nora is born as an individual and gains consciousness of the masculine oppressive mechanisms in bourgeois society, it is as if she has won her intellectual maturity through a loss of gender specificity.)

From a non-essentialist perspective of the male-female opposition, Tone Selboe argues that Nora has taken a "male position" by borrowing money and forging a signature and that the child-woman role is a mask she uses to conceal these facts (92).

Regardless of whether Nora changes from a "female woman" to a "male woman," or from a "woman" to a "human being," the question is in either case how her transformation should be understood, and how a supposed transformation is reflected in the text.

Daniel Haakonsen was the first to connect the tarantella at the end of the second act with Nora's existential-psychological situation. However, Haakonsen sees the dance primarily as an expression of her living "‘ubevisst,’ lekende, ansvarslost" (274) [unconsciously, playfully, irresponsibly] and he draws no clear conclusions that suggest a direct link between her transformation as a human being and the dance. Later critics who comment on the dance have in the main either adhered to

Haakonsen's reading or seen it as a theatrical element (in the sense of non-authentic playing for effect). Accepting the latter premise, Raymond Williams views the tarantella as "a distinctly theatrical device; it adds nothing to the meaning of the play, but serves, in performance, to heighten a situation of which the audience has already, in direct terms, been made aware" (53).

Irving Deer argues for the point of view that Ibsen through his theatricality makes *Et dukkehjem* a metadrama. Through the tarantella, Nora discovers her own role-playing: "She sees herself as the romantic heroine of the types of plays from which Ibsen learned his craft, the Danish historical romances and the French melodramas he imitated and directed" (38).

In his monograph, *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*, Errol Durbach further develops the understanding of the tarantella proposed by Haakonsen and claims that the tarantella represents Nora's relinquishment of and her "death" to her doll-like existence and that it means an existential transformation into a "self-reliant, responsible free spirit ... the dancing of the self out of regressive darkness into the light of civilized existence" (53).<sup>2</sup>

My own interpretation of *Et dukkehjem* is a continuation in part of Irving Deer's focus on melodrama, in part of Errol Durbach's conception of the tarantella as the expression of Nora's psychological-existential transformation. I find that psychoanalysis and especially Jacques Lacan's theories of the subject offer a frame of understanding that can shed light on the psychological-existential drama in *Et dukkehjem*. In my reading, I refer especially to Lacan's analysis of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Like *Antigone*, Nora's forgery is motivated by considerations of family, father, and husband. They correspond to the reasons that *Antigone* gives for defying Creon's prohibition against burying Poly-nices. She also appeals to the laws of the blood tie: ὁμαιμος ἐκ μιᾶς τε καὶ τοῦτοῦ πατρός. ["my brother with the same mother and the same father"] (1.513). Hegel sees in *Antigone* the fundamental opposition between the law of the state and the law of the family. King Creon represents the law of the state and *Antigone* the law of the family, which is based on love between individuals within an ethical fellow-

<sup>2</sup> "Nora discovers, in her intense experience, the Sartrean life formula that 'existence precedes essence', that the willed decision and the action must anticipate the merely abstract idea of her personal significance and give it substance" (Durbach 11).

ship. We know that Ibsen was concerned with this issue when he was planning the writing of *Et dukkehjem* from his first, well-known note for the play, dated "Rom, 19. 10. 78.":

*Der er to slags åndelige love, to slags samvittigheder, en i manden og en ganske anden i kvinden. De forstår ikke hinanden; men kvinden dømmes i det praktiske liv efter mandens lov, som om hun ikke var en kvinde men en mand. Hustruen i stykket ved tilslut hverken ud eller ind i hvad der er ret eller uret; den naturlige følelse på den ene side og autoritetstroen på den anden bringer hende ganske i vildrede. (8:368)*

(There are two kinds of spiritual laws, two kinds of consciences, one in men and a completely different one in women. They do not understand each other; yet women are in practical life judged by men's law, as if she were not a woman, but a man. The wife in this play is in the end totally confused by questions of right or wrong; her natural feeling on the one hand, faith in authorities on the other, leave her completely bewildered.)

While in many ways influenced by Hegel, Lacan opposes Hegel's reading of *Antigone* and instead sees the opposition between Creon and Antigone as an opposition between the societal, patriarchal Law and *jouissance*. Entering into the symbolic order means accepting the patriarchal Law as the law of society and replacing *jouissance*—the absolute pleasure associated with the lost Object—with a desire in language. Transgressing the Law means entering into the territory of *le réel*, *the real*—of the Thing and *jouissance*.

*Jouissance* is described as the pleasure of transgressing the Law, of being in a critical-existential situation from which there is no given exit. *Jouissance* may end in the loss and death of the subject-position, or may be the point of departure for constitution as a subject. I regard the climax of *Et dukkehjem*—the tarantella—as a wordless, bodily representation of Nora's subjective-existential crisis and an expression of *jouissance*. It can, thus, ground the argument that in the third act Nora is not solely Ibsen's mouthpiece for a feminist program, but has undergone an existential-psychological transformation as a woman.

In Lacan's interpretation of the Oedipus complex, the premise upon which the constitution of the subject is based is that Oedipal figures do indeed function—the first other in the mother's position refers to *the second Other* in the father's position, thus, representing the unconscious structures of language. In my reading of the drama, I refer to André Green, who claims that the Oedipal structure is staged in masked form.

This masked theater Green calls "the other scene" with reference to Freud. Referring to the masked theater, I will focus on Mrs. Linde's continual presence in the first and second acts and the erotic interludes between Nora and Dr. Rank, which open the possibility that these two characters have necessary functions in Nora's transformation.

Even if the tarantella can be given a reasonable interpretation in the emergence of Nora's transformation, the problem of the two Noras and how her different identities in the first and third acts are to be understood remains. Is she in a "male position" both before and after the transformation (Selboe); is she "female" first and "male" afterwards (Høst; Østerud), or is she a woman with human "limitations" (Haa-konsen; Bull); or are there more important perspectives on Nora's identity? One possibility is that Nora is in a female position in both the first and third acts, but that there are different ways in which to be positioned as a woman. Lacanian theory stresses the possibility of taking different subject positions, different imaginary I-identifications. Nora's divergent personalities in the first and third acts represent a consistent female character in different positions with regard to the patriarchal social systems and her husband, Helmer. Finally I will—from a psychoanalytic-existential perspective—discuss the connection between the subjective and the social themes in *Et dukkehjem* and evaluate the play as a criticism of bourgeois society.

## THE MASQUERADE

The title *Et dukkehjem* introduces pretense and play as main themes in the drama, and it introduces the metaphor as the governing trope in the text. The unique quality of the metaphor as a trope is that it both hides a word and displays that which is hidden through another word: "un mot pour un autre" (*Écrits* 507) ["one word for another" (*Écrits: A Selection* 157)], as Lacan puts it. In the same way, the masquerade as the central metaphor in *Et dukkehjem* also involves both hiding and displaying something else, at the same time as the mask reveals that something is hidden. The duality of disguise and display, which is the structure of both the mask and the metaphor, is woven into the text at all levels and can be studied from different perspectives. It is found as the central motive in the drama, it is a structuring element in the plot, it is a central event in the action, and it is a textual theme.

Before Nora shows herself on stage, a scene takes place which is only referred to in the stage directions as a wordless, partly hidden, staged episode:

*Der ringes ude i forstuen; lidt efter hører man at der blir lukket op. Nora kommer fornøjet nynnende ind i stuen; hun er klædt i ydertøj og bærer en hel del pakker, som hun lægger fra sig på bordet tilhøjre. Hun lar døren til forstuen stå åben efter sig, og man ser derude et bybud. (8:273)*

(The front door-bell rings in the hall; a moment later, there is the sound of the front door being opened. NORA comes into the room, happily humming to herself. She is dressed in her outdoor things, and is carrying lots of parcels which she then puts down on the table, right. She leaves the door into the hall standing open; a PORTER can be seen outside. [*The Oxford Ibsen* 5:201])

During the first exchange between Nora and the porter, which takes place partly out of view in the entrance hall, attention is focused on the almost hidden play that is unfolding partly on the stage, partly off-stage and creates uncertainty about what is happening. As a spectator, one is also confused because no focal point is provided as the curtain rises. No clarification is provided until Nora enters the living room the second time. Then, the impression of an apparent middle-class idyll takes over, but a certain feeling of uneasiness remains suggesting that not everything is visible and revealed.

The act of concealment, of hiding away things, of playing hide-and-seek, is staged as the recurring motif in the exposition. First Nora sees to it that the Christmas tree is hidden, she surreptitiously eats of the forbidden macaroons and hides the bag in her pocket. She plays hide-and-seek with her husband, listening at his study door to find out whether he is at home. In the same way, the game of hide-and-seek also structures the central plot of the drama. For eight years Nora has kept the fact hidden that she borrowed money to save her husband's life, but gradually reveals the secret to Mrs. Linde during the first act. At the same time, she is still hiding parts of the truth: she borrowed the money from Krogstad, and she forged her father's signature.

Torvald Helmer is introduced without being present on stage, but his voice is heard from the adjoining study. This stage establishes a kind of puppet theater, and the interplay between the couple is dramatized as theater within the theater. Though not seen Torvald pulls the strings behind the scene while Nora, the marionette, performs on the puppet theater stage:

HELMER. ... *Er det lærkefuglen, som kvidrer derude? ... Er det ekornet, som rumsterer der? ... Når kom ekornet hjem?* (8:273)

(HELMER. ... Is that my little sky-lark chirruping out there? ... Is that my little squirrel frisking about? ... When did my little squirrel get home? [5:201-2])

Sky-lark and squirrel, Helmer's eroticizing metaphorical nicknames for Nora, function as a repressive code. While he behaves both flirtatiously and with paternal authority, Nora is seductive and infantile. He calls Nora "child," and she responds with the gestures of a child and the language of a child. She is seen "klapper i hænderne" (278) ["clapping her hands" (206)] like a child playing "patty-cake," and when she does not wish to hear what Torvald has to say, she uses the preventive gesture of a child, "lægger hånden på hans mund" (274) ["putting her hand over his mouth" (202)]. She lapses into childish diminutives and repetitions: "Bare en liden bitte smule" (274) ["Just a teeny-weeny bit" (202)], "at tjene mange, mange penge" (274) ["to earn lots and lots of money" (202)], and she defends herself with a child's denial of realities when Torvald suspects her of having bought confectioneries: "*Nej, hvor kan du nu falde på det ... Nej, jeg forsikrer dig, Torvald, ... Nej, aldeles ikke ... Nej, Torvald, jeg forsikrer dig virkelig—*" (277, emphasis added) ["No, I assure you, Torvald...! ... No, I really didn't ... No, Torvald, honestly, you must believe me...!" (205)].

Sky-lark, squirrel, and elf-child are Helmer's images of Nora as he wants her to be, and she coquettishly accepts her role as sky-lark and squirrel in the seductive masquerade in which Helmer wants to keep her. She refers to herself as a third person subject, as an animal or a pet, and a non-human subject: "*Lærkefuglen skulde kvidre i alle stuerne, både højt og lavt—*" (315) ["And the pretty little sky-lark would sing all day long..." (241)]. As the "human" grammatical subject "I" in the first person, she refers to herself as an elfin child, i.e. as a child and as a mythic, sexualized being: "*Jeg skulde lege alfepige og danse for dig i måneskinnet, Torvald*" (315) ["I'd pretend I was an elfin child and dance a moonlight dance for you, Torvald" (241)].

Such a "mirroring" between two individuals corresponds to what Lacan calls an imaginary identification, which can be related to a child's first awareness of being an "ego" (*moi*). The establishment of the "ego" (*le moi*) happens through the child's imaginary identification of herself with her image in the other (usually the mother). Since the "ego" (*le moi*) is a projected image, both illusion and alienation — *méconnaissance* — dominate

in the imaginary order. The imaginary "ego" (*moi*) hides the subject (*je*) at the same time as the "ego" (*le moi*) lets the subject reveal itself as hidden. As in the mother-child relation, Helmer through his pet names gives Nora new, imaginary, alienated "ego"-identities, from sky-lark and squirrel to "skælvende dejlighed" (346) ["trembling loveliness" (270)]. The imaginary order is in other words also a kind of masquerade, or a pretence because the individual in the imaginary order recognizes an image of herself in the "mask" offered her by the other.

As man and authority, Torvald Helmer rules the marital relation linked to the imaginary order. In a fatherly and didactic manner, he stays in control and explains things to Nora, the child who cannot handle money, and he flirts with her in a fatherly-authoritarian, physical manner by tugging her ear. While Torvald has the roles of both father and seducer for Nora, she finds herself in Helmer's mirror as a playful, chattering subject, as bird, squirrel, and seductress.

The imaginary or narcissistic relation has the mother-child configuration as its basic structure, and it persists beneath all subsequent love relations as a fundamental pattern. The game which is played out between Nora and Helmer in the first part of the drama can be seen as a paradigmatic structure of the relation between men and women in culture generally. In the same way as Lacan, Jean Baudrillard has described woman's act of seduction as a way in which to disappear (89). The woman makes herself appear as bait (*leurre*) and pretends to be what she is not. Nora too "disappears" behind the seductive mask. Through being theatricalized and presented as puppet, the masquerade between man and woman is visualized.

### *Det vidunderlige* [THE MIRACLE] AS IMAGINARY PHANTASM

The pleasure and enjoyment Nora displays when she plays hide-and-seek with her husband and children, eats sweets, and handles money can be understood in the same way as the pleasure or enjoyment (*plaisir*) that Lacan connects with the phantasmatic objects (or the *objects a*).<sup>3</sup> As the child is separated from the mother, *désir* [desire] arises, and the

<sup>3</sup> By the *objects a* Lacan refers to residues which remain of the lost object on entering language. The lost object which is represented in the *objects a* are connected to the bodily orifices and exist at the boundary line to the mother-object.



desire is bound to the phantasms. The subject is therefore always tied to the first object in the phantasm, and in an adult psychic structure, the phantasm represents the imaginary connection to the lost object. Through the phantasm, the subject gains a feeling of wholeness and completeness, and through the imaginary phantasms, desire can be maintained and serve as a barrier against *le réel* [the real], which always is a threat to the existence of the subject.<sup>4</sup> The phantasmatic objects represent frozen imaginary conceptions of *le bien* [the good], of material goods or of good acts, or of happiness and expectations for the future. Nora's "gaiety" and her "objects of pleasure" work as imaginary stabilizations of what in her existence is hidden and concealed but threatens to rise to the surface.

In the course of the first act, a development toward a breakdown in the imaginary stabilizations can be traced through the *Leitmotiv det vidunderlige*—the miraculous, marvellous. The first time *det vidunderlige* is used, the topic is money:

HELMER. *Ak, det er dog herligt at tænke på at man har fået en sikker, betrygget stilling; at man har sit rundelige udkomme. Ikke sandt; det er en stor nydelse at tænke på?*

NORA. *Å, det er vidunderligt!* (277–8, emphasis added)

(HELMER. Oh, what a glorious feeling it is, knowing you've got a nice, safe job, and a good fat income. Don't you agree? Isn't it wonderful, just thinking about it?)

NORA. Oh, it's marvellous! [206])

Nora here associates *det vidunderlige* with material goods, but in the same scene, her tentative reservation is suggested by a "really" (*riktignok*) when Torvald comforts her saying that they have seen the last of those lean times: "Ja, det er rigtignok vidunderligt" (278) ["Yes, really it's marvellous" (206)], and this uncertainty is maintained in her next line: "Å, hvor det er vidunderlig dejligt at høre!" (278) ["Oh, how marvellous it is to hear that!" (206)]. It is marvellous to *hear* that she does not have to work any more. *Det vidunderlige* is here not associated directly with "a good fat income," but with her "hearing" Torvald say something which indicates this.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan has developed the theories around the *object a* in a series of as yet unpublished seminars. In addition, there is hardly any concept which is seen from such a variety of perspectives. The *object a* is tied in with desire and is *la cause du désir*, i.e. the *matter* and *cause* of desire (*la cause* = matter, cause), and is associated with both the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real orders.

In the conversation between Mrs. Linde and Nora in the first act, Nora gives a specification of *det vidunderlige* as “at leve og være lykkelig!” (283) [“to be alive and to be happy” (210)]. This approaches a tautological statement that *det vidunderlige* is *det vidunderlige* and leaves the meaning of *det vidunderlige* open. The next time Nora uses *det vidunderlige* in her conversation with Mrs. Linde, it is in a mixture of all the senses in which she has used it in previously from living a materially comfortable life, to being without worries, and to the self-defining “det er rigtignok vidunderligt at leve og være lykkelig!” (289) [“When you’re happy, life is a wonderful thing!” (216)].

In the course of act two, the meaning of *det vidunderlige* is further destabilized. Nora wants Mrs. Linde as a witness that she alone has committed the forgery, yet simultaneously, the fantasy of salvation plays its part:

NORA. ... *Det er jo det vidunderlige, som nu vil ske.*

FRU LINDE. *Det vidunderlige?* (331)

(NORA. ... You see something miraculous is going to happen.

MRS. LINDE. Something miraculous? [256])

But the content of *det vidunderlige* becomes ambiguous:

NORA. *Ja, det vidunderlige. Men det er så forferdeligt, Kristine, — det må ikke ske, ikke for nogen pris i verden.* (331)

(NORA. Yes, a miracle. But something so terrible as well, Kristine — oh, it must *never* happen, not for anything. [256])

*Det vidunderlige* is on the one hand associated with the miracle that is going to happen “if somebody else wanted to take it all upon himself,” and it is associated with something terrible—that *det vidunderlige* might not happen.

In the first part of the play, *det vidunderlige* [the miraculous] expresses a condensation of the imaginary phantasms on which Nora builds her life, as well as with the imaginary identifications as she encounters them in Torvald’s speech. The meaning of *det vidunderlige* floats from one imaginary good to another. One imaginary stabilization is exchanged for the next in a persistent attempt to perpetuate an imaginary stability at the same time as what Lacan calls *méconnaissance* [false recognition] and alienation exists in the imaginary order and threatens to break down the stabilization.

### The *Name-of-the-Father* AND THE LAW

The fragile imaginary stabilizations collapse when Krogstad tries to make use of Nora's forgery to keep his position in the bank. Under Krogstad's pressure, Nora in her conversations with Mrs. Linde little-by-little admits that she has committed forgery in order to obtain the money for the trip that saved Torvald's life. To Torvald in the final act, she motivates her forgery by referring to considerations of family, of father, and husband: "En kvinde skal altså ikke ha'e ret til at skåne sin gamle, døende fader, eller til at redde sin mands liv! Sligt tror jeg ikke på" (360) ["Apparently a woman has no right to spare her old father on his death-bed, or to save her husband's life, even. I just don't believe it" (283)].

Although Nora in the climatic scene argues like Antigone and questions the absolute nature of society's laws, there is one conspicuous and problematic feature in her relationship to this law: she betrays pleasure in her transgression of it. While Helmer sermonizes on her prodigality with money, Nora is happy at the thought of "hvor mange udgifter vi lærker og ekerne har, Torvald" (276) ["how many expenses the likes of us sky-larks and squirrels have, Torvald" (204)]. The same happiness is expressed when Nora tells Mrs. Linde how she obtained the money for the trip they made in order to save Helmer's health. The scene tells of a Nora who is excited by what she has done; she hums and plays the coquette and seems to take great pleasure in her memories of the forged signature. She "kaster på nakken" (286) ["toss(es) her head" (214)] and "kaster sig tilbage i sofaen" ["throws herself back on the sofa"] in eroticized body language. In her imagination, her transgression of the law is associated with the experience of pleasure and with her obtaining money through an exploitation of her sex:

NORA. ... *Jeg kan jo have fået dem på andre måder.* (kaster sig tilbage i sofaen.) *Jeg kan jo have fået dem af en eller anden beundrer. Når man ser såvidt tiltrækkende ud som jeg —* (286, emphasis added)

(NORA. ... I haven't said I did borrow the money. I might have got it some other way. (*Throws herself back on the sofa.*) I might even have got it from some admirer. Anyone as reasonably attractive as I am... [214])

Nora's ambiguous behavior in relation to her transgression of the law can be seen as an expression of total ignorance of the guilt she has incurred, but not as an expression of a conscious choice of another ethical law than that of the state. In her imagination, sexualization, daring, and

prohibition are interwoven with the respectable motives of saving her husband and shielding her sick father.

When Nora signs her father's name in order to get money, she breaks with the social limitations of women in her time, and it can be interpreted as her taking on a masculine role (Selboe). However, Nora does not take on just any masculine role; she commits forgery. Additionally, she exploits her dead father's name. In an analysis of the play based on Lacan's theories, Ross Shideler claims that the forged signature can be seen as an attempt at, through her use of her dead father's name — invoking *Le Nom-du-Père* [Name-of-the-Father]. When she "takes" her father's name, she also takes upon herself her father's own prehistory, his "sins."

By forging the signature, Nora reproduces the inadequate patriarchy, but through her forgery she has simultaneously challenged the Law and the *Name-of-the-Father*. Her action can therefore be seen as both crime and indifference to the laws of society and as a rebellion. Her perception of the illicitness of her act can be seen from the fact that she "has not told a living soul about it before." Not even Doctor Rank has been told. Nora has told him about her childhood friend, Mrs. Linde, whom she has not seen for eight years, while Torvald has been told nothing of her. This "game of hide and seek" tells us both that Rank is Nora's close confidant and also that Mrs. Linde at one point must have been close to Nora.

## THE FIRST OTHER

In Ibsen's first draft of *Et dukkehjem*, Mrs. Linde is called "frk. Lind" [Miss Lind], and in much of the critical tradition, the explanation given for change to "Fru Linde" [Mrs. Linde] has been that she as a married woman is a mirror for Nora. The change may also make it possible that Mrs. Linde enters into the role of the older woman in their mutual relationship; this we find expressed quite plainly. When Nora comments that Mrs. Linde may have grown "lidt magrere" (279) ["a bit thinner" (207)], Mrs. Linde immediately notes: "Og meget, meget ældre, Nora" (279) ["And much, much older, Nora" (207)]. Later Mrs. Linde "stryger hende over håret" (280) ["strokes NORA's hair" (208)], and like a child, Nora seeks out Mrs. Linde's physical presence. She "sætter sig på en skammel tæt ved hende og lægger armene på hendes

knæ" (283) ["sits on a low stool near MRS. LINDE and lays her arms on her lap" (210)]. In her first scene with Mrs. Linde, Nora ushers her over to the stove where they are to sit: Mrs. Linde in the armchair, Nora in the rocking-chair. With Nora in the rocking, cradle-like chair and the older Mrs. Linde firmly placed in the armchair, Nora positions herself as the child in relation to the adult Mrs. Linde. Nora's nursemaid, Anne Marie, has in effect been her mother, but the nursemaid plays no such part in the psychological drama as Mrs. Linde seems to.

When Mrs. Linde arrives in the second act, Nora again seeks out Mrs. Linde's physical presence: "Lad oss sætte os her i sofaen" (311) ["Come and sit beside me on the sofa here" (237)]. And at Nora's request, Mrs. Linde accepts the job of repairing the torn costume. While Mrs. Linde as "the mother" is sewing "her daughter's" dress, and thus preparing and supporting Nora for the tarantella, masquerades and pretence are the recurring themes of their conversation. First, the costume ball is in focus; Nora is to go as a Neapolitan fisher lass and dance the tarantella, as Torvald has decided:

FRU LINDE. *Se, se; du skal give en hel forestilling?* (311)

(MRS. LINDE. Well, well! So you are going to do a party piece? [237])

And later:

FRU LINDE (sy). *Så du skal altså være forkleadt imorgen, Nora?* (311)

(MRS. LINDE. So you are going to be all dressed up tomorrow, Nora? [237])

Next, Mrs. Linde tries to expose the truth about Nora's relationship to Dr. Rank. "Forstil dig nu ikke, Nora" (313) ["Don't pretend, Nora" (239)] she repeats, and although Mrs. Linde's suspicion that Dr. Rank might be Nora's rich, old benefactor is groundless, Nora still hides the truth of both Krogstad and the forgery. "Nora, du skjuler noget for mig" (314) ["Nora, you are hiding something from me" (240)], Mrs. Linde says, and refuses to leave until the two of them have "talt oprigtigt sammen" (314) ["thrashed this thing out" (240)].

The two conversations between Mrs. Linde and Nora in the second act show similarities with a therapeutic conversation. Lacan claims that in the therapeutic conversation, a change takes place in the position of the analysand toward the phantasms, in that the conversation brings the analysand from an imaginary (two-sided) relationship, and toward

the position of standing forth as a subject who articulates her own responsibility by saying "I" and "I am responsible." Toward the end of their second conversation in act two, Nora for the first time pronounces the words "Jeg har skrevet et falsk navn—" (331) ["I forged a signature" (255)], and articulates her own responsibility for the transgression in a dialogue with Mrs. Linde. Through this therapeutic conversation, Mrs. Linde contributes to Nora gaining insight into the masquerade which hides both her own crime and the pretence of her life with Helmer. From her position as "mother"/maternal, Mrs. Linde seems to play the role of what Lacan calls "the first other" or the role of the mother figure who refers to the Other (the one in the Father's position representing the unconscious language structures) on Nora's path to awareness. The position of the first other is necessary to the establishment of the subject in the symbolic order.

### THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE REAL: DEATH, FEAR, MADNESS, EROTICISM

Nora slowly recognizes and becomes conscious of her transgression of the Law. Just as Nora the sky-lark is her father's and Helmer's image of her, so the image of her as a law-breaker is also created by Helmer. He describes how Krogstad with his lies brings infection and disease into his family and fills his children with evil germs. It would be even worse if this had been committed by a mother: "Næsten alle tidligt forvorpne mennesker har havt løgnagtige mødre" (307) ["Practically all juvenile delinquents come from homes where the mother is dishonest" (233)].

She is thrown into a state of harrowing fear when Krogstad conjures up visual images of death and actualizes death as bodily decomposition and putrefaction: "Under isen kanske? Ned i det kolde, kulsorte vand? Og så til våren flyde op, styg, ukendelig, med affaldet hår—" (329) ["Under the ice, maybe? Down in the cold, black water? Then being washed up in the spring, bloated, hairless, unrecognizable..." (254)]. The possibility of being arrested for forgery, means that Nora faces a ghost from her own youth when wicked people put nasty insinuations in the papers about her father. In the same way, Krogstad controls Nora's reputation:

KROGSTAD. *Glemmer De, at da er jeg rådig over Deres eftermæle?*

NORA. (står målløs og ser på ham).

KROGSTAD. *Ja, nu har jeg forberedt Dem.* (330)

(KROGSTAD. Aren't you forgetting that your reputation would then be entirely in my hands? [NORA *stands looking at him, speechless.*] Well, I've warned you. [254])

Based on *Antigone*, Lacan sees being denied a burial or an honorable posthumous reputation as the "symbolic death" or the "second death," i.e. as being removed from the symbolic order and thus ceasing to exist as a subject (7:325). Nora faces a similar threat when Krogstad mentions her reputation and renders her "speechless." To be expelled from the symbolic order can also be an encounter with madness, as Nora's fantasies of drowning are interwoven in the text with the fear of madness. From the beginning of the play, the word "galning" [madwoman/man] has a meaning that relates both to Nora's penchant for fun and to her transgression of boundaries. When Nora tells of her rich admirer who was going to will her money, Mrs. Linde's comment is "Du er en *galning*" (286, emphasis added), translated with the less expressive: "Don't be so silly!" (214). Later, it is Helmer who uses the expression: "Nå, nå, du lille *galning*" (315, emphasis added), translated "All right, you little rogue" (240). In her scene with Dr. Rank in the second act, Nora says "Jeg er så opsat på galskaber i dag" (321, emphasis added). Translated "I feel full of mischief today" (246), the original meaning of going mad is implicit, and Nora expresses it more directly when she begs Mrs. Linde to be her witness implying that she herself will choose death:

NORA. *Dersom jeg kommer til at gå fra forstanden, — og det kunde jo godt hende —*

FRU LINDE. *Nora!*

NORA. *Eller det skulde tilstøde mig noget andet — noget, således at jeg ikke kunde være tilstede her —* (331)

(NORA. If I should go mad ... which might easily happen...

MRS. LINDE. *Nora!*

NORA. Or if anything happened to me ... which meant I couldn't be here... [255])

Nora's fear of death and madness parallel her unrestrained erotic games with Dr. Rank. Dr. Rank is a problematic figure because he is so loosely connected to the central plot. In the critical tradition he has been seen almost exclusively as an atmospheric figure, or he is seen as Nora's potential savior. This last interpretation seems to be clearly rejected in the text. When Rank makes his entry in the second act, Torvald has just sent the letter in which he gives Krogstad his notice, and Nora is "forvildet af angst, står som fastnaglet, hvisker" (319) ["wild-eyed with

terror, stands as though transfixed" (244)]. But the thought of using Rank as a savior is rejected as soon as it occurs to her: "Redning—! En udvej— (*det ringer i forstuen.*) Doktor Rank—! Før alt andet! Fær alt, hvad det så skal være!" (319) ["Help? Some way out...? (*The door-bell rings in the hall*) Dr. Rank...! Anything but that, *anything!*" (244)].

Rank turns up in situations where Nora's anxiety drives her to the breaking point. "Rank" has in Norwegian the significance of being upright, straight—and also a doctor, yet he is dying and incapable of curing himself. The irony—in its classical rhetorical meaning as ambiguous speech—is thus tied to his name, to the signifier "Rank," and the same tendency recurs in his penchant for irony and ambiguity. The theme of death in the conversations between Nora and Rank gradually merge with undisguised erotic play, both verbal and physical. They uphold a formal distance through the use of the polite form "De" [You], yet Nora in act one goes beyond all conventional boundaries of intimacy by popping a macaroon in his mouth.

The erotic tension and the explicitly articulated death-theme is intensified through the encounter between Rank and Nora in the second act. Death and eroticism are both conversational topics and the reality which emerges through the exchanges between Nora and Rank. In the second act, he continues his use of biological metaphors from act one: "Inden en måned ligger jeg kanske og rådner oppe på kirkegården ... hvad tid opløsningen begynder" (320) ["Within a month I shall probably be lying rotting up there in the churchyard ... the final disintegration" (245)]. Nora strikes the frivolous erotic note in a metaphorical word-game. On the surface, the conversation deals with culinary dainties, but the erotic undertones are obvious. No attempt is made to tone down the sexual flavor when the Epicurean escapades end in the following exchange:

NORA. *Og så al den portvin og champagne til. Det er sørgeligt, at alle disse lækre ting skal slå sig på benraden.*

RANK. *Især at de skal slå sig på en ulykkelig benrad, som ikke har fået det mindste godt af dem.* (321)

(NORA. And all the port and champagne that goes with them. It does seem a pity all these delicious things should attack the spine.

RANK. Especially when they attack a poor spine that never had any fun out of them. [246])

As a high point in Rank and Nora's sexual play, Nora shows him her flesh-colored silk stockings and performs a verbal striptease: "Å jo, De kan såmæn gerne få se oventil også" (322) ["Oh well, you might as well



see a bit higher up, too" (247)]. And Rank's eyes move up the stockings, while he invites himself onwards, through his innocent reply to Nora's question of whether the stockings will fit: "Det kan jeg umuligt ha'e nogen begrundet formening om" (322) ["I couldn't possibly offer any informed opinion about that" (247)]. In an act of erotic double communication, Nora hits him lightly with the stockings: formally a rejection, in reality an affirming invitation.

The scene with the stockings is so daring and oversteps the limits of decency of the period to such a degree that the erotic element here points far beyond the idea of the seduction of Rank for the purpose of providing money. As an erotic transgression, the scene may of course be understood as a transgression of the Law that regulates sexuality and thus as an indication of Nora's position beyond the Law. The scene, however, takes place in a situation where Nora for the first time names suicide and death as a possibility. Her fear of death and madness is also intensified in the text as we approach the tarantella-dance at the end of the second act.

The themes of fear, death, and madness on the one hand and eroticism on the other are contrasts we find in Lacan's description of "the real." The real, as the third order besides "the imaginary" (concerning the image) and "the symbolic" order (concerning the language), is the mythical, unknown dimension in the psyche. Structurally, the real is the antithesis of the imaginary. Within the imaginary order, desire is maintained within the phantasms, but if desire moves beyond the phantasms toward *das Ding* [the Thing], this movement implies a rejection of the *Le Nom-du-Père* [Name-of-the-Father]. When Nora admits her break with the Law and her symbolic debt, she may be said to be beyond the Law, and this awakens a memory of the lost Object. Within Lacanian theory, the Object in "the real" implies *jouissance* and an encounter with death, but eroticism can "save desire" from the death urge. This gives us a background on which to read the scenes between Nora and Dr. Rank. Thus, one possible interpretation of the relation between them is to relate it to the connection between eroticism and death, between Eros and Thanatos.<sup>5</sup> Nora and Rank are both at the

<sup>5</sup> In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, Freud postulates the death urge in order to explain recurring phenomena that are inexplicable based on the pleasure principle. He anchors this urge in biology and claims it is an expression of a power in the body-cells that realizes the death of individual. The counterpart is Eros, the life urge, which is tied to the sex cells.

border of death—i.e. at the border where the desire to live, Eros, begins to yield, and the death urge, Thanatos, takes over. An interpretation of the erotic play would be that it is Rank's function to "have phallus," i.e. to be the object of Nora's sexual desire, as it is staged in the scene with the flesh-colored stockings. Through Rank and eroticism, desire can be saved from the self-destructive *jouissance* by the Thing, through being sexualized or phallified.

### THE BEAUTIFUL

Desire can also be saved through symbolification and "the beautiful," and Nora is intensely focused on beauty. When Krogstad threatens to have her convicted "according to the laws," Nora is knocked off balance. Frantically, she calls to have the Christmas tree brought into the living room and begins decorating it in a feverish manner:

NORA. (ifærd med at pynte juletræet). *Her skal lys—og her skal blomster. —Det afskyelige menneske! Snak, snak, snak! Der er ingen ting ivejen. Juletræet skal blive dejligt. Jeg vil gøre alt, hvad du har lyst til, Torvald; —jeg skal synge for dig, danse for dig—* (304)

(NORA. [*busy decorating the tree*]. Candles here ... and flowers here. —Revolted man! It's all nonsense! There's nothing to worry about. We'll have a lovely Christmas tree. And I'll do anything you want me to, Torvald; I'll sing for you, dance for you... [230])

Errol Durbach claims the Christmas tree works as a barometer for Nora's feelings (54). However, her preoccupation with decoration and beauty is maintained through the second act, a long time after the Christmas-tree stands there "plukket, forpusket og med nedbrændte lysestumper" (309) ["stripped, bedragged and with its candles burnt out" (235)]. Then her urge for beauty focuses on how she will make herself beautiful in the fancy-dress costume. Her fear relentlessly mounting, she repeats again and again that she is going to be so beautiful. To Anne Marie, the nursemaid, she says: "Imorgen skal du få se, hvor dejlig jeg skal bli" (310) ["Tomorrow I'll let you see how pretty I am going to look" (236)], and to Helmer "Du kan tro, jeg skal komme til at tage mig ud!" (314) ["I think it's going to look very nice!" (240)]. While Helmer is in his study and knocks on the door to the living room Nora exclaim: "Ja, ja; jeg prøver. Jeg blir så smuk, Torvald" (332) ["Yes, yes, I'm trying on. It looks so nice on me, Torvald" (256)].

The decoration and the way Nora clings to her own outward beauty as her fear of death increases point to completely different patterns of meaning in the text. While the imaginary protects desire from self-destruction, "the beautiful" is another type of protection that is closer to "the real."<sup>6</sup> Her beauty and her pursuit of beauty becomes stronger as the dance of death approaches. This may, perhaps, be read as an expression of the function that Lacan claims the beauty of Antigone has: being "the beautiful" which can soften the encounter with the real, and which can save desire and keep the subject from the final destruction.

*La vraie barrière qui arrête le sujet devant le champ innommable du désir radical pour autant qu'il est le champ de la destruction absolue, de la destruction au-delà de la putréfaction, c'est à proprement parler le phénomène esthétique pour autant qu'il est identifiable à l'expérience du beau—ce beau dans son rayonnement éclatant, ce beau dont on a dit qu'il est la splendeur du vrai. (7:256)*

(The true barrier that holds the subject back in front of the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction, of destruction beyond putrefaction, is properly speaking the aesthetic phenomenon where it is identified with the experience of beauty—beauty in all its shining radiance, beauty that has been called the splendor of truth. [7:216–7])

Lacan's interpretation of *Antigone* seems to be relevant in relation to *Et dukkehjem*. Nora's own beauty and her yearning for beauty as "the beautiful" in an imaginary sense has the same function as in art and sublimation. "The beautiful" is the form of the imaginary phallus, and since the phallus as signifier opens space for language and makes sublimation possible, a means for sublimation and the establishment of the subject in the symbolic order through the beautiful also exists.

## THE TARANTELLA: THE MASQUERADE OF THE SUBJECT

The tarantella as a dance of death is the climax of Nora's display of beauty. In a state of mounting fear bordering on madness, Nora at the end of

<sup>6</sup> Burial rites, one of the rituals retained in our society, are a good example of the similar role of the beautifying function "the beautiful" has in the encounter with death and "the real."

the second act wants to dance:<sup>7</sup> the scene is her attempt to postpone the crisis. She begs Torvald for “coaching,” while he wants to go to the letterbox to get the letter from Krogstad, which will expose her forgery. She entices Torvald by striking the first chords of the tarantella on the piano, and then she seizes the masquerade props, the tambourine and a long gaily-colored shawl, while Torvald accompanies her. Then Rank takes over the playing, while Helmer becomes “the coach” and in real terms is an audience to Nora’s dancing. The tempo increases and the intensity mounts:

Nora danser med stigende vildhed. ... hendes hår løsner og falder ud over skuldrene; hun ændser det ikke, men vedbliver at danse. (334)

(NORA *dances more and more wildly. ... Her hair comes undone and falls about her shoulders; she pays no attention and goes on dancing.* [259])

The tarantella gained its name from the Italian popular belief that the only way to purge the deadly poison of the tarantula was to dance it out of the body (Haakonsen 269). The tarantella is an expression of fear bordering to madness and a sensuous zest for life that also operates as a regenerative process.

Nora’s self-projecting, emotional expression, characterizes the tarantella scene as a melodramatic element. Peter Brooks claims that the task and “raison d’être” of the melodramatic genre is to be the “location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths” (15). In such a perspective, the dance as a musical, gestural, visual representation of meaning is a metaphor pointing to *jouissance* and to the sexual drive and physicality outside the symbolic order with no corresponding reference in the imaginary, stabilizing effect.

*Jouissance* as an encounter with the Thing in *le réel* is what Lacan in his analysis of *Antigone* refers to as being “l’entre-deux-mort” [in between the two deaths]. While biological death means being annihilated as

<sup>7</sup> Erik Østerud points to the connection of the Italian carnival to the popular theatrical tradition of Commedia dell’arte and a cult of fertility reaching back to antiquity, and claims that this can throw a light on the masquerade and the tarantella in *Et dukkehjem*. The carnival represents a human attempt to influence the powers that rule existence, and this influence is effected through the mimed representation of these powers by masks and performances. The function of the masquerade is to diminish fear in a world where humans feel subjected to powers beyond themselves (173–5). As should be evident from my analysis, I attribute a far more fundamental existential function to the tarantella than that of diminishing fear.

an organism, "the second death"—the symbolic death—means being annihilated as a subject in the symbolic order. As a consequence of symbolic death, the subject becomes antagonistic to or dissociates herself from the *Name-of-the-Father* and the Law, and *jouissance* transports the subject beyond the pleasure-principle toward a state where all tension is annulled. Being beyond the Law in the position of the Thing is to be dead in a symbolic sense. As a result of the symbolic death, the subject voluntarily steps out of the symbolic order or is expelled from the symbolic community. What the subject seeks in symbolic death is not the annihilation of the organism, but a fresh start from ground zero, *ex nihilo*.<sup>8</sup> From this position between the two deaths, the subject can re-process and reconstruct its own desire according to Lacan. If *jouissance* is a transgression of the Law, it is also through *jouissance* and the position with regard to the Thing that sublimation can take place:

*un domaine de création ex nihilo, pour autant qu'il introduit dans le monde naturel l'organisation du signifiant .... Ce champ que j'appelle celui de la Chose, ce champ où se projette quelque chose au-delà, à l'origine de la chaîne signifiante, lieu où est mis en cause tout ce qui est lieu de l'être, lieu élu où se produit la sublimation, dont Freud nous présente l'exemple le plus massif.* (7:253)

(a domain of creation *ex nihilo*, insofar as it introduces into the natural world the organization of the signifier ... This field that I call the field of the Thing, this field onto which is projected something beyond, something at the point of origin of the signifying chain, this place in which doubt is cast on all that is the place of being, on the chosen place in which sublimation occurs, of which Freud gives us the most massive example. [7:214])

<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of *Antigone*, Lacan writes of *jouissance* as a basis for creating something new: "Volonté de destruction. Volonté de recommencer à nouveaux frais. Volonté d'Autre-chose, pour autant que tout peut être mis en cause à partir de la fonction du signifiant .... Il est en effet exigible en ce point de la pensée de Freud que ce dont il s'agit soit articulé comme pulsion de destruction, pour autant qu'elle met en cause tout ce qui existe" (7:251) ["Will to destruction. Will to make a fresh start. Will for an Other-thing, given that everything can be challenged from the perspective of the function of the signifier ... Freud's thought in this matter requires that what is involved be articulated as a destruction drive, given that it challenges everything that exists. But it is also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again" (7:212)]. In the expression "Will for an Otherthing" lies the Lacanian ambiguity "a thing" associated with the Other, i.e. to the language rather than the Thing.

Nora is situated in this existentially marginal position that might end up "under the ice in the cold water" or with the constitution of the subject in the symbolic order.

In general, *jouissance* refers to the pleasure that has to be given up on entering language, but there is also a *jouissance* referred to by Lacan in the seminar *Encore* (1975) and that he claims is characteristic of the female position and of women:

*Il y a une jouissance, puisque nous nous en tenons à la jouissance, jouissance du corps, qui est, si je puis, m'exprimer ainsi — pourquoi pas en faire un titre de livre? C'est pour le prochain de la collection Galilée — au-delà du phallus. Ce serait mignon, ça. Et ça donnerait un autre consistence au MLE. Une jouissance au-delà du phallus.... (20:69)*

(There is a *jouissance*, since we are dealing with *jouissance*, a *jouissance* of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, *beyond the phallus*. That would be pretty good and it would give a different substance to the WLM [*Mouvement de libération des femmes*]. A *jouissance* beyond the phallus.... [*Feminine Sexuality* 145])

Female *jouissance* escapes the masculine restraints and is a *jouissance* that can be given a place within the symbolic order and be articulated. Through *jouissance* the language of the body can be bound to the signifier, as Juliet Flower MacCannell puts it in an analysis of the female *jouissance* (71). In the tarantella understood as *female jouissance* lies the same potential for Nora's existential transformation, a potential for knowing desire and becoming a speaking subject in the symbolic order.

As a dance performed by Nora for the other actors on the stage, the tarantella is a play within the play. Barbara Freedman who builds her analysis of theatricality on Lacan, argues that Theater's fundamental trick is the mask that appears as mask and thus announces that the "I" on stage is someone else. In the same way, the "mask" reveals to the other actors on stage the wild, dancing Nora, and while she exposes this I-mask (*le moi*), the subject (*je*), which is excluded from language, is hidden. At the same time, the subject is written into the language through the position the I takes as a "mask." The I thus implies both absence and presence, and the play-acting scene as a doubly theatrical interlude plays out and exposes the gap between *moi* and *je*, the I and the subject. In the tarantella, Nora's I is staged as an imaginary "I-mask," i.e. the I as the masquerade of the subject at the same time as it opens the way for the hidden subject which in the third act can speak for itself. Insisting on a false mask brings one closer to an authentic, subjective

position than taking one's mask off and exhibiting "our 'true self' hidden beneath it," says Slavoj Žižek (34).

Based on an understanding of the melodramatic tarantella scene as a metaphor for Nora's position between the two deaths, the tarantella is a scenic expression of her psychological-existential transformation. Abandoning herself to *jouissance* in the tarantella, she can either go on into madness and die a "symbolic death" or can be "transformed" through sublimation. Sublimation implies a symbolic processing of "the real." This possibility of sublimation arises from the pre-Oedipal mother's position and is her love-gift to the child. Mrs. Linde is in the position of what Lacan refers to as "the first other," which is necessary for Nora to be able to create herself *ex nihilo* (*Seminar* 7:279–80).

After Nora's dance in act two, Mrs. Linde decisively influences her course of action and serves as a midwife to the new Nora. She insists that Krogstad should not recall the letter in which he exposes Nora, and she forces her "to speak." Nora has nothing to fear from Krogstad, but "you must speak," Mrs. Linde says.

NORA. *Jeg taler ikke.*

FRU LINDE. *Så taler brevet.*

NORA. *Tak, Kristine; jeg ved nu, hvad der er at gøre. Hys—!* (343–4, emphasis added)

(NORA. I won't.)

MRS. LINDE. Then the letter will.

NORA. Thank you, Kristine. Now I know what's to be done. Hush...! [268])

As Helmer goes to fetch the letter, Nora resorts for the last time to the protection of Helmer's world of pretense and wraps herself in his cloak. Nora's observation "Jeg ved nu, hvad der er at gøre" (344) ["Now I know what's to be done" (268)] represents her moment of insight into her own history and her own fate, and it can be read as her knowledge (*savoir*) of how to integrate herself in the symbolic order. However, before the import of Nora's knowledge is revealed, two further scenes are decisive in revealing Nora's existential choices and development.

## THE PHANTASMATIC WORLD OF TORVALD HELMER

In contrast to the fear and death urge, which command and are expressed through Nora's dance at the rehearsal, Torvald Helmer presents his

overwrought description of her from his position as an onlooker at the masked ball at the home of the Stenborgs. He describes this later instance of her dancing "as if her life depended on it" in terms of a theatrical performance and play-acting. His theatrical and literary metaphors—"i foredrager" [the performance], "kunstens fordring" [from the artistic point of view], and "i romansproget" [as they say in novels] (267)—lend Nora's dance of death and encounter with "the real" a fictional character—a mask of theater, literature, and pretense. Whether Nora dances or dies, she remains in the masquerade, which is the mode of the imaginary mirrored relation between men and women.

Just as Torvald's account plainly reveals his male, voyeuristic gaze, it also plainly helps Nora to learn to know herself as an actress. Through Torvald's description in the third act, she can see herself from the outside: she becomes an onlooker at her own dance of death and the one who observes herself. Thus, Torvald indirectly contributes to her choice.

The last scene with significance for Nora's decision is Dr. Rank's third and final visit. Through their metaphorical play of language, Nora and Rank uncover the masquerade as a metaphor in the text. Unperceived by Helmer, Rank's certainty of his imminent death is communicated as Nora asks about Rank's scientific research. Nora accentuates the common fate of Rank and herself by asking "Hør her; hvad skal vi to være på den næste maskerade?" (348). ["Tell me, what shall we two go as next time?" (272)]. Through the cloak of invisibility Rank plans to put on, he continues his metaphorical dialogue with Nora, while to Helmer he uses unambiguous speech: "Lad din hustru møde, som hun står og går igennem verden—" (348) ["Your wife could simply go in her everyday clothes..." (272)]. As in the stocking scene in act two, a direct leap is made from death as a theme to a poorly-disguised erotic play as Rank stands there with his dark Havana and Nora conveys her final greeting: "Lad mig gi'e Dem ild" (348) ["Let me give you a light" (272)]. The erotic tension is preserved until the final line with Rank's veiled answer: "Og tak for ilden" (349) ["And thanks for the light" (273)].

While Nora and Helmer maintain the imaginary illusion, Nora and Rank's play with metaphors demonstrate that the imaginary illusion is broken. They hide their common awareness of the causes of Rank's disease behind the metaphorical mask. One word for another—"un mot pour un autre"—is the formula for the metaphor. They both know that there is a double code. The "creative spark" (*Pétinecelle créatrice*) of the metaphor is, according to Lacan, to link that which is present and that



which is absent, and in Nora and Rank's conversations that which is absent is elevated and invalidated by that which is present.<sup>9</sup>

The ambiguous conversation reveals the metaphorical level of language. It is a clear contrast to Helmer's earlier description of Nora in the tarantella in which he describes her as Nora-the-fiction. In a parallel, he describes Rank's death through repeated similes: "som om han meldte sit eget dødsfald ... gemmer han sig bort som et såret dyr ... gav ligesom en skyet baggrund for vor sollyse lykke" (350) ["as if he were announcing his own death ... hiding himself away like a wounded animal ... seemed almost to provide a background of dark cloud to the sunshine of our lives" (274)]. Helmer's pretended "as-if-world" in the imaginary order remains a contrast to Nora's and Rank's metaphors.

After having read the letter which exposes Nora's forgery, Torvald again demonstrates raw male dominance and shows that he is the master of his own house. He resolutely locks Nora up to perform his interrogation and forbids "play-acting," which in reality is the only means by which he can position himself. Punctuated by Nora's brief responses, he continues his pathetic self-revelation: "hun, som var min lyst og stolthed, — en hyklerske, en løgnerske, — værre, værre, — en forbryderske!" (352) ["this woman who was my pride and joy...a hypocrite, a liar, worse than that, a criminal!" (275)].

In the imaginary order, the subject-object relation is blurred, and in Helmer's use of moralizing language, he continues the depiction of himself as both subject and object, as savior and saved. Also, he refers to Nora in the third person, as an object: "Hun er jo derved ligesom i dobbelt forstand blevet hans ejendom; *han har* ligesom *sat hende* ind i verden påny; hun er på en måde bleven både hans hustru og *hans barn* tillige" (355, emphasis added) ["It's as though it made her his property in a double sense: he has, as it were, given her a new life, and she becomes in a way both his wife and at the same time his child" (278)].

<sup>9</sup> "L'étincelle créatrice de la métaphore ne jaillit pas de la mise en présence de deux images, c'est-à-dire de deux signifiants également actualisés. Elle jaillit entre deux signifiants dont l'un s'est substitué à l'autre en prenant sa place dans la chaîne signifiante, le signifiant occulté restant présent de sa connexion (métonymique) au reste de la chaîne" (*Écrits* 507) ["The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connection with the rest of the chain" (*Écrits: A Selection* 157)].

In this double perversion, where Helmer is savior and saved, and Nora is both wife and child, we find an intermingling of the incestuous and the religious. In a final attempt, Helmer tries with his animal metaphors to keep Nora captive within the empty, mirroring language:

HELMER. ... *du min lille forskræmte sangfugl. Hvil du dig trygt ud; jeg har brede vinger at dække dig med ... her skal jeg holde dig som en jaget due, jeg har fået reddet uskadt ud af høgens klør...* (355)

(HELMER. ... my frightened little song-bird. Have a good long sleep; you know you are safe and sound under my wing ... Here I shall hold you like a hunted dove I have rescued unscathed from the cruel talons of the hawk... [278])

When Helmer presents himself through bird metaphors, there is nothing to indicate that he, like Rank, is conscious of the ambiguity of his speech. On the contrary, Helmer is fully positioned within the phantasmatic order—in the masquerade.

The contrast between Helmer's lengthy monologues, where he talks himself into calmness, and Nora's short, one-line responses, through which she reaffirms her presence, underlines the lack of communication between them. Towards the end of the scene, however, there is an exchange of roles. There, Nora regains the power of speech and, according to some critical analyses, speaks like a man, while Torvald has no language for the reality that Nora tries to put into words.

## THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT

Dr. Rank's position in the drama is disguised, and it is expressed as disguised through his metaphorical, ambiguous speech. In relation to Nora's transformation, he assumes a position on the masked theater's "other stage," which makes possible a potential phallification of desire. When he then predicts his death in the third act, his role in the plot indicates that his death is of decisive significance to Nora's choosing a confrontation with Helmer.

Mysteries shroud Dr. Rank's farewell and exit. He leaves two visiting cards with a black cross. In the meeting between himself and Nora in the second act, Rank explicitly states that he will send her his visiting card to announce his death: "Så snart jeg har fået fuld visshed for det værste, sender jeg Dem mit visitkort med et sort kors på" (320) ["I'll send you my visiting card with a black cross on it" (245)]. As Torvald

brings the cards, Nora implicitly refers to two cards: "Ja. Når de kort kommer, så har han taget afsked med os. Han vil lukke sig inde og dø" (350) ["Yes. He said when these cards came, he would have taken his last leave of us. He was going to shut himself up and die" (274)].<sup>10</sup> A straightforward way of interpreting the two cards is to see one of them as meant for Nora and one for Helmer. They may then be seen as Rank's message to Nora that she should keep herself separate—separate from a two-sided narcissistic relationship to Helmer. Rank's message generates an immediate reaction on Nora's part. Shortly after Helmer has retrieved the two cards from the mailbox, Nora ("*river sig løs og siger stærkt og besluttet*): Nu skal du læse dine breve, Torvald" (350) ["(tears herself free and says firmly and decisively): Now you must read your letters, Torvald" (274)]. It thus seems reasonable to link Rank's death to Nora's existential process of transformation.

With the tarantella understood as *jouissance* and Nora's position between the two deaths, the symbolic order can be re-established. In this context Dr. Rank takes the position of the one who dies (the biological death) so that the symbolic order can be re-established in Nora's life. The justification of this reading is that the symbolic order has castration as a prerequisite. As a result of castration, the phallus becomes the signifier of desire, and the father metaphor—the *Name-of-the-Father* (*Le-Nom-du-Père*)—is given the role of a structuring element in the chain of signification. The establishment of the Law and of language thus presupposes the dead father. One possible interpretation of Rank's death is then that he fills the place of the dead father as symbolic father. Nora's own father with his dubious relation to the Law has not constituted the father-image which is necessary to re-establish the Law. Through Rank's death it, thus, is possible for Nora to establish herself as a subject.

The transformed Nora marks her new position by taking off her masquerade costume upon which follows the confrontation scene. A long tradition within Ibsen studies claims that Nora is "the author's mouthpiece," that she is a "man" and "desexed." That Nora is transformed is demonstrated by the fact that in the third act she no longer enters into her former imaginary relation with Helmer, where the pleasure (*plaisir*) and the phantasms of the "good life" dominate. She

<sup>10</sup> A number of critics have misread the text on this point and refer to the two cards as one card.

initiates her confrontation with a number of metalinguistic remarks, as an attempt to establish a channel for communication or an attempt to discuss the truth value of their own speech in order to break the imaginary illusion.

Although much has been made of Nora's speaking "like a man," no attention has been made of the fact that Torvald is given lines which nearly depict him as languageless. During the first part of the confrontation scene, the great majority of Helmer's lines focus on Nora's language as code. He does not understand her way of speaking: "Hvorledes mener du det? ... hvad vil det sige? ... Men, Nora, hvad er dette for ord? ... Hvad var det, du sagde?" (356-8) ["What do you mean? ... What's that? ... But, Nora, what's this you are saying? ... What did you say? (279-81)]. When he regains his self-control, Helmer's language demonstrates that he is unchanged. Pathetically, he utters his incantations. He refers to the norms of the patriarchy and to commandments which apply to women in the language of the religious-authoritarian regime.

Thus Nora emerges as a woman by being different from Helmer, and through exposing the rhetoric of the imaginary phantasms as they are staged by Helmer in the final act. The *Leitmotif* of *det vidunderlige*, initially refers to the phantasms of materialistic enjoyment and pleasure. In the confrontation scene, the meaning of *det vidunderlige* is expressed as a negation. When Helmer makes a final appeal to Nora for her to stay, she replies: "Det var iaften, da det vidunderlige ikke kom; for da så jeg, at du ikke var den mand, jeg havde tænkt mig" (361) ["It was tonight, when the miracle didn't happen. It was then I realized you weren't the man I thought you were" (284)]. And Nora no longer has any words for what *det vidunderlige* is, she neither believes in it nor can endow it with semantic content.

When Nora hesitantly gives Helmer a reply of sorts to his requests for an identification of *det vidunderlige*, it has the form of a tautology, a tautology that is to some extent lost in McFarlane's translation. "Where we could make a real marriage of our lives together" (286) conveys the denotative meaning of "At samliv mellem os to kunde bli'et ægteskab" (364), but the near synonymous identity between "samliv" [a union] and "ægteskab" [marriage] is not reproduced in the English version. Perhaps the two words "samliv" and "ægteskab" do have different meaning, and perhaps marriage had more positive connotations at the time of Ibsen. It is also possible that the two words have been chosen precisely because they are close to a tautology that Nora in the end can only ascertain that a marriage is a marriage, and a union is a union. How

the relation between man and woman should be, cannot be ascertained. In the first part of the play, Nora states her demands (*demandes*) for what this ought to involve. The metaphor, *det vidunderlige*, which Nora no longer understands and no longer believes in, can therefore be read as a signifier which has been assigned a position in the symbolic speech, which is marked by the metonymic dislocation of desire. Desire cannot be articulated as a demand for a specific object or a specific conduct, and in this way, Nora says that the inexpressible cannot be expressed. While Helmer is left asking for an imaginary phantasmatic specification of *det vidunderlige*, Nora has gained an insight in the deficiency in the symbolic order.

After a detour through Sophocles's *Antigone*, *Et dukkehjem* is concerned with the constitution of a subject in the symbolic order. In regard to the discussion of whether the drama is concerned with the development of a human being in general or a woman in particular, the answer from a Lacanian perspective has to be both. According to Lacan and the Lacanian tradition, sexual specification is an intrinsic part of being human. Lacan makes the phallus the symbol of the sexual difference, and there can be no gender-neutral existence in the symbolic order. The phallus, as the male symbol, cannot be inclusive for both sexes, and the phallic function can define male subjects, but not female ones. The question of who is a woman can only be decided in each individual case. Women are subjected to randomness and are determined socially by the man to which each one is partnered, the way Nora in the first act is determined by Helmer.

The question is then whether this phallogocentric determination of woman may be said to be undermined in the drama or whether the analysis unambiguously confirms the text as a male fantasy of woman as the other. A starting point for an alternative interpretation must be that Nora through the tarantella as *jouissance beyond the phallic* articulates a subjectivity which is not determined by Helmer and the patriarchal order. Nora resigns the stereotypical positions of a woman in the masquerade with the man and chooses to be a subject without the time-honored masks as a self-image.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the patriarchal determination of the female as the opposite of the male is undermined. *Et dukkehjem* may,

<sup>11</sup> The same conception is found in the Lacan-inspired analyses of the play by Hans H. Hiebel and Ross Shideler. In Shideler, we read: "Within a Foulcauldian context, Nora's final and famous gesture declares her separation from the fixed representation of a wife.... Nora insists on projecting herself away from Torvald's representational view of her as a stereotypical wife" (289-9).

therefore, be seen as a radical criticism of the patriarchal order through its being a reflection on the feminine as beyond the phallic (*au-delà du phallus*).

The ethical question of Nora leaving three children, is characterized by Helmer as blindness: "Å du forblindede, uerfarne skabning!" (359) ["Oh, you blind, inexperienced" (282)]. The Kantian precept, the principle of all of one's actions should be able of serving as universal norms suggests that Nora's emergence from the doll's house is not an ethical act. *Et dukkehjem* in this sense has a subversive function beyond being the expression of a social project of liberation. The play's radicalism lies in the fact that the transformation which is staged through Nora's *jouissance* is an expression of an almost Foucauldian transcendence of the order and norms of patriarchal society. In Nora's rebellion against and disregard of established norms for maternal morality, *Et dukkehjem* is a reflection on an alternative ethical system to the Oedipal and patriarchal.

*Translated by Kjetil Myskja*

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