

CAMILLA COLLETT AND LAURA KIELER: THE WOMEN BEHIND NORA HELMER

Nora Helmer slamming the door on her husband and children at the end of *A Doll's House* has long been lauded as one of the key moments in the history of feminist theatre, and rightly so. Her realization that she as a woman has as much responsibility to herself as she does to the men and children in her life was shocking to contemporary audiences. This same idea would be central to the concept of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. Yet if Henrik Ibsen were alive today, I do not think he would identify as a feminist writer. In 1898, Ibsen made the following statement in a speech to the Norwegian Women's Rights League as part of a longer address:

I thank you for your toast but must disclaim the honor of having deliberately worked for women's rights. *I am not even sure what women's rights really are.* To me it has been a matter of human rights.

So if Ibsen was not primarily concerned with gender, then who can we look to for the overt feminism of *A Doll's House*? There are two women most often accredited with this, both of whom were close personal friends of Ibsen. The first is novelist Laura Kieler (1849-1942), whose life story parallels that of Nora. She borrowed money without her tubercular husband's consent in order to pay for a trip to Italy to improve his health and save his life. When she forged a check to try to repay the loan, she was discovered, and her husband committed her to a lunatic asylum in 1878. The following year saw the premiere of Ibsen's play.

The other woman has long been recognized as Norway's first feminist and first truly great writer: Camilla Collett (1813-1895). Collett did not fight for political reforms, but for equality between the sexes on an individual, social level. She believed that legal equality would mean nothing if women did not have the respect of men in day to day life. After ten years of marriage, Collett's husband passed away in 1851, leaving her to support their four sons. Over the following years, she published the novel *The Daughters of the County Magistrate*, in which she argues that the only reason to enter into a marriage should be the love of the woman for a man. Collett's experiences as a widow in Norway and in her travels alerted her to her country's rejection of unmarried women in social circles.

Though it was through her novel that she found fame, the majority of Collett's writing took the form of essays and articles (she apparently had a "contempt for fiction"). She expressed ideas markedly similar to those stated by Nora in the final scene of Ibsen's play. Collett believed that the minds of women and men were essentially the same, but that women were denied the education and self-respect needed to reach their full potential. They were instead taught to be emotional and to be ashamed of their emotion at once. This caused women to feel unqualified in "serious matters" handled by men and to become submissive and easily receptive of their husbands' views. She believed that false modesty was one of the most serious faults of the female sex.

Yet Collett also believed in the holiness of a woman's role as mother – and used it as an argument for the promotion of women's rights and education. She believed that, if women were to raise the next generation of citizens, they needed self-respect and education to best guide their children into becoming active and conscientious citizens. If a woman were widowed, they needed the skills necessary to support her children. It was a lack of such means that prompted her to send two of her own children to live with her brothers. Ibsen uses Collett's arguments to justify Nora leaving her children: "How am I fitted to bring up the children? ... I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself." Nora leaving her children is not a rejection of them – it is her attempt to do right by them. As Emmy states in *Hnath's* play, it worked.

Regardless of Ibsen's intentions and ideology, *A Doll's House* cannot escape its reputation as a feminist classic. Scholars may argue that Nora is a universalist "everyman," that she should not be used as a standard for women's independence, and that to do so would be an insult to the playwright. The vast majority of audiences would disagree. Nora can resonate with every audience member regardless of gender, but her role as woman is what prompts the conflict that drives the drama. If we are to pay proper homage to Ibsen's heroine, we ought to also pay homage to the real-life women whom she echoes.

NORA'S DILEMMA

What takes precedent: civic duty, or familial responsibility? This is one of many questions that Nora is faced with when she re-enters her home fifteen years later. Ibsen's original play was written at a time when feminist thought in Scandinavia saw no conflict between these obligations. Women argued that, if it was their duty to raise the next generation to be good citizens, they themselves must understand and be a part of the political machine. When Nora tells Torvald, in the final scene of Ibsen's play, that she cannot be a true parent to her children because she doesn't know herself, her argument is not a ditzzy new age notion. It is a serious political statement.

Or at least, it was when Ibsen wrote it. But Hnath's play delves deeper into what happens when someone breaks their family apart in the name of some moral good. Because that is what Hnath's Nora ultimately does: even when she has found her voice, she chooses not to come home to her family. She decides she is more obliged to further women's rights and freedoms as a whole than she is to tend to the household she left behind. Said household condemns her for her choice, and what they say has legitimacy. But if we break what Nora has done down to the barest bones, the narrative we have is this: there was a person who had a family and a responsibility to them, but felt like they had a responsibility to a wider group, and this latter sense of duty to the greater good had to take precedent.

This structure can be applied to any number of stories or myths in our history. The Greek hero Achilles chooses to fight in the Trojan War knowing that if he does, he will never return home to his father or son. The Buddha is said to have left his family because he felt that there was more to life than what he was experiencing. Every person who runs for public office brings their family under scrutiny – children of politicians are in many ways robbed of normal childhoods by a parent who chooses to serve their country. We can have respect for these figures – but in an era where the lines between private and public lives are becoming more and more blurred, this respect becomes muddled. That is what Hnath is showing us in *A Doll's House, Part 2*, and what Nora must reconcile in herself. She is proud of her accomplishments, but can this pride survive the anger of the people she left behind?

IGNORANCE OR MALEVOLENCE: WHAT MAKES A VILLAIN?

In Ibsen's *A Doll House*, Nora's husband Torvald is not the villain. In this 1879 work, Nora's antagonist is Krogstad, an employee of her husband who is able to blackmail her due to sexist laws regarding money-lending. Nora spends the play worrying not about the damage to her reputation, but about how knowledge of this scheme would hurt Torvald's pride and affect his love for her. She fails, and through this failure has a great epiphany about how playing the role of "wife" has damaged her. Torvald, then, is Ibsen's "damsel-in-distress" in a structural sense, whether he knows it or not. He may resent playing this role – the final scene sees him erupt in anger at being unable to save himself – but play it he does. He is condescending, he is clueless, but he is never cruel, at least as regards intentions. Few would then call him villainous: even as she has resolved to leave him, Nora calls him nothing but kind. She does not blame him, but the way things are, a status quo that she has only just begun to question. He is only ignorant, and to Ibsen, this does not make him a villain.

Hnath's play, however, does not share this stance. In Nora's book, written in the fifteen-year interim between the two plays, she writes that she lived in constant fear, feeling that her life was threatened by her husband. Torvald's doting on her, though well intended, ultimately has a harmful effect. Ibsen's Torvald is not a villain because, thanks to the magic of theatre, we get to see events unfold in beautifully specific detail. Hnath's Torvald, on the other hand, is worried about the future and his legacy, wherein he will become a villain to those who did not witness his marriage. Whether he was ignorant or whether he was malevolent will not matter to future generations – with only Nora's story told they will only see a marriage that we might now consider abusive. He will be the villain.

It's a question that we struggle with today: can the ignorant be blamed for poor choices? Increasingly the answer seems to be no. Hnath's play was written with the backdrop of the age of information, of the internet and widespread communication. There is less and less of an excuse to not know the facts, to not know what malevolent outcome your ignorance may bring. Torvald partially agrees that he was at fault, for which we should commend him; we need only go on the internet briefly to see how many people refuse to be wrong. But whether or not he can be forgiven is for each audience member to decide.