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DISEASE, CORRUPTION, AND CONTEMPT FOR WEAKNESS; REREADING A *DOLL'S* *HOUSE*

LISBETH P. WÆRP

1. INTRODUCTION

The reason why Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) went to the extent of forging her father's signature in order to take out a large loan was that her husband, Torvald Helmer, was "dangerously ill" (Ibsen 2016, 117, hereafter referred to by page numbers only) and needed a longer stay in the south in order to recover. And he recovers, is "[f]it as a fiddle," and has no relapses; he "hasn't had one hour of illness since" (118). But what did he suffer from? We get – as is often pointed out in the research literature – scant information about his illness beyond the fact that Nora says that he was "dangerously ill" and explains the illness as a type of work-related overexertion: "he exhausted himself dreadfully in that first year. He had to seek out all kinds of extra income [...] and to work from morning till night. But it was more than he could take, and he became dangerously ill" (117). However, the text also offers, as I will show here, completely different, but hitherto neglected, indications of what Helmer suffered from. In the following, I will argue that these indications and their interpretive consequences open up a new understanding of the status and function of not only Torvald Helmer, but also his doctor and close friend, Dr. Rank. This is, in so far as it foregrounds textual hints and allusions that are overlooked or not paid much attention to in the literature, a deliberately symptomatic reading that also sheds new light on the drama's social criticism. Part of what this reading shows is

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that this social criticism is not only directed at bourgeois society's view of marriage and women, or, more generally, at conservative and patriarchal bourgeois society; it is also directed at dishonesty, cynicism and corruption in society and the civil service state, as well as at some of the emerging ideas, values and ideals of the time. These include the cultivation of the strong and "pure", contempt for weakness, as well as the idea of the individual's responsibility for their own well-being.

2. *WHAT DID TORVALD HELMER SUFFER FROM?*

The already quoted passage where Nora tells Mrs. Linde that Torvald became "dangerously ill" is the closest we get to an explicit description of what Torvald Helmer suffered from. Here is a slightly longer excerpt from the same passage:

You know presumably that Torvald left the Department when we got married? There were no prospects for promotion in his office, and of course he needed to earn more money than before. But he exhausted himself dreadfully in that first year. He had to seek out all kinds of extra income, as you can imagine, and to work from morning till night. But it was more than he could take, and he became dangerously ill. (117)

What he suffered from was – as Nora puts it – work-related overexertion. Moreover, we learn that Mrs. Linde also suffers from overexertion. She explains to Nora that she has had to work hard after her husband died and left nothing for her to live on, and until now she has had to support not only herself, but also her mother and her younger brothers: "Well, then I had to struggle on with a little shop and a little school and whatever else I could think of. The last three years have been like one long, unremitting workday for me" (119). Her case is later commented on in a dialogue with doctor Rank, who has noticed Mrs. Linde's slow manner of walking:

RANK
[...] I believe I passed you on the stairs as I arrived.
MRS LINDE
Yes, I climb rather slowly; a bit too much for me to take.
RANK
Ah, a slight touch of the internal rots, eh?
MRS LINDE
More a cause of exhaustion actually.

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RANK

Nothing else? So, I take it you've come to town to unwind at our various festive gatherings.

MRS LINDE

I've come here to look for work.

RANK

That's supposed to be a proven remedy for exhaustion, is it?

MRS LINDE

We have to live, doctor. (125)

Back to Helmer. Through Nora's reply, it becomes clear that Helmer has had to take extra jobs and "work from morning till night". But we get a hint that what Helmer suffered from may be something more than overexertion due to a too heavy workload when the extra jobs are characterized as "all kinds of extra income".¹ The Norwegian word used to describe the extra jobs in the original text, *alskens*, is a negatively charged adjective. What this indicates becomes clearer in the light of one of Nora's earlier lines about Helmer and his relationship with the legal profession to which he belongs:

As a lawyer one's income is so unreliable, especially when one doesn't want to handle any affairs except those that are right and proper. (116)

Helmer is attributed here with an unusually strong reluctance to deal with, and thus become associated with, that which is socially and morally questionable. Having to do so, as Helmer has had to, must therefore have represented a burden beyond the heavy workload in itself. It is one thing for lawyers to be selective in what legal cases they take on, but it is usually income and prestige that govern the choices, not whether the cases are "right and proper"² or can be associated with that which is socially and morally questionable. And is it at all possible for a lawyer to opt out of all cases that have something socially and morally low, or "ugly", about them? Helmer appears to be, as many have highlighted, an idealistic aesthete who does not distinguish between aesthetics and ethics.³ But this is not where the problem lies. There is something paradoxical about this, not to say contradictory, which makes the image presented by Ibsen of Helmer as a lawyer and person striking. According to Nora, he never wanted to take on matters that were not "right and proper", but at the same time, as we learn from what she reveals a little later about his work ("all kinds of extra jobs"), he did just

that. Ibsen invites us to notice this. This again opens up the possibility that there may be something more underneath than just a bourgeois-idealistic preoccupation with keeping the social and moral facade in order. And, as I see it, both the refusal to deal with matters that are not “right and proper” and the question of illness also go deeper.

The question of why Torvald Helmer had to go all the way to Italy to get well remains unanswered. It is presented as absolutely crucial for his survival, as, for example when Nora explains “I was the one the doctors came to, saying that his life was at risk; that nothing could save him except a stay in the south” (121). Nevertheless, there is little to suggest that it was necessary for him to convalesce in the south. One might imagine that the same thing Nora suggests for Mrs. Linde – who also suffers from overexertion – namely a stay at a bath or sanatorium (in her home country), would be enough (119). Considering the circumstances, Helmer would probably need a longer stay than Mrs. Linde. But why so far away, why the south, and why Italy? Italy was also a very attractive travel destination in Ibsen’s time, and the trip to Italy can probably also be construed as a cosmopolitan motif (in an earlier version of the play from 1879, Nora wants to travel abroad again as soon as spring comes [Ibsen 2008]). Laura Kieler, who is considered the model for the Nora character, went with her husband to Italy for his recovery. This makes sense because he suffered from tuberculosis. But Torvald Helmer suffered not from tuberculosis, but from overexertion, according to Nora.

My suggestion is that the reason why Helmer had to go away, far away, and stay there for so long, also concerned something other than work-related overexertion. As I see it, it might also be due to the fact that something had to be hushed up, a situation that has so far been overlooked in previous analyses of the play. My claim is that, while employed in the Ministry, Torvald Helmer seems to have committed what must be characterized as a corrupt act and was therefore in danger of disclosure.⁴ The case is this: on assignment from the Ministry, Helmer was tasked with investigating Nora’s father, who was a civil servant and in the media spotlight for some kind of wrongdoings. We are not told what type of wrongdoings he was suspected of, but we do

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get hints that it may have been financial corruption (I will return to this later). However, everything indicates that it was a serious case, because Helmer reveals that Nora's father considered killing himself because of the investigation (178),⁵ and Nora says that she believes that he was about to be exposed and dismissed:

I think they would have got him dismissed, if the Department hadn't sent you over to look into it, and if you hadn't been so obliging and helpful to him. (147)

Moreover, what is implied through Nora's choice of words, "so obliging and helpful to him", is that Helmer subverted, or sabotaged, the investigation he was appointed to undertake on behalf of the Ministry by keeping the wrongdoings he found secret. This interpretation is supported by the way Helmer himself later refers to what he did – he refers to it with the euphemism of "turning a blind eye to him" (178).⁶ The Norwegian idiom used in this case, "se gjennom fingrene med", literally means holding your hand in front your eyes and looking at something between your fingers and metaphorically means "to see only what you want to see about something; fail to protest/reprimand/prosecute (something)" (*Norsk akademisk ordbok*, my transl.). And that is in my view what we might be dealing with in Helmer's case. He saw what he wanted to see and then failed to report and prosecute what he found. This means that Helmer deliberately did not investigate and/or deliberately overlooked the findings that his investigation of Nora's father resulted in, and produced a falsified report to the Ministry, and that he did so by virtue of his trusted position as a lawyer and civil servant working on behalf of the Ministry. In this way he cleared Nora's father of the suspicion, which directly benefited him because he could later marry the exonerated civil servant's daughter.⁷

Whether Helmer's sabotaging of the investigation was discovered or not is not addressed. What we learn, however, is, firstly, that he quit the Ministry when he married Nora, (allegedly) because he earned too little there and there were no prospects for promotion, and secondly, that he fell ill and had to go away for a long stay abroad. My interpretation suggests that the fear that his role in the investigation of Nora's father would be revealed also contributed to his decision to leave the Ministry, as

well as to his precarious condition and to the need for a longer stay far away. I will later argue that, in the present of the play, he is still driven by fear of disclosure and that it is this that leads to his dismissal of Krogstad as one of the first things he does as the new director of the Commercial Bank. But my main point here is that Helmer did not merely suffer from work-related overexertion.

As we have seen, what Helmer did is veiled in euphemistic terms in the dramatic dialogue. Admitting that he has done something wrong, Helmer himself in the final scene of the play calls Nora's crime a punishment for his own "helping" her father and refers to it as "turning a blind eye to him" (147), while Nora describes it as Helmer being "so obliging and helpful" to her father (178). Notably, the euphemistic way of referring to what Helmer did has been repeated and seems to have been cemented in the scholarly reception of the play. In the article "*Et dukkehjem og rettskulturen*" ("*A Doll's House and Legal Culture*"), for example, Bjarne Markussen claims that "[Helmer] har brukt sin departementale innflytelse til å redde Noras far ut av en knipe" ("[Helmer] has used his ministerial influence to save Nora's father from a predicament" (2006, 357, my transl.)). There is little doubt that Nora's father was in a difficult situation and that it was Helmer who helped him out of it. But in my reading of the play both the "predicament" Nora's father was in, and the "help" Helmer gave, seem to have been cases of corruption. Markussen rightly regards laws on marriage and Nora's violation of the penal code as central to the drama, and he convincingly argues that Ibsen's drama not only took up the current debate about Norwegian family and marriage policy, but also had an influence on Norwegian legislation (the new marriage law of 1888). Nonetheless, he – like so many others – overlooks the possibility that Ibsen's dramatic plot contains three similar crimes, not just two. In addition to Krogstad's forgeries and Nora's forged signature, Helmer's sabotaged investigation also represents a forgery. While it is not the forgery of a physical signature, it is a falsification of the facts in an official investigation regarding Nora's father's affairs.

As mentioned above, Ibsen provides no explicit information about what Nora's father was investigated for, but he was a civil

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servant (“*embetsmann*”) and corruption was widespread in the Norwegian civil service (“*embetsmannsverket*”) in the nineteenth century. Civil servants (“*embetsmenn*”, who were appointed by the king) dominated Norwegian politics and state life in the period 1814–1884, in what in the Norwegian context has therefore been called the civil servant state (“*embetsmannsstaten*”), and both Ola Teige, an historian specializing in the study of corruption, as well as Harald Espeli and Yngve Nilsen, who are the authors of *Riksrevisjonens historie 1816–2016* (2016; *The History of the Auditor General of Norway 1816–2016*), emphasize that various types of corruption, especially embezzlement and other financial fraud, were very widespread in nineteenth-century Norway until the authorities started investigating corruption more systematically. They note that it was not unusual for civil servants (“*embetsmenn*”) to mix private and public finances and “borrow” from the state. In one of Helmer’s retorts to Nora, information emerges that opens the door to the possibility that her father’s case may have involved financial fraud. Helmer claims that Nora has inherited her father’s completely irresponsible relationship with money and finances:

You’re a strange little one. Just as your father was. You’re forever on the lookout for ways to get money; but as soon as you get it, it’s as though it slips through your fingers; you never know what you’ve done with it. Well, we must take you as you are. It’s in the blood. Oh yes it is, these things are hereditary, Nora. (113)

Helmer’s claims about Nora’s lack of financial sense imply a condemnation of her father’s relationship with money. It suggests both that he had a great need for it but little control, and that he may have been suspected of financial corruption. This interpretation finds support in one of Ibsen’s manuscripts for the play, where Ibsen has Helmer criticize Nora’s father for lack of book-keeping in a way that also makes it highly unclear whether Helmer is referring to Nora’s father’s private or official accounts. Helmer criticizes him for being an unreliable civil servant who does not record all expenses, but the expenses in question are highly private, namely the money Helmer believes Nora’s father has lent Nora (Ibsen 2008, unpaginated).

Helmer’s own case of corruption is also serious, and what is essential for understanding the drama as a whole, is that it has

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significant consequences for the present of the drama in which Helmer, as I see it, is partly driven by the fear of being revealed. This has significant implications for the plot, given that the main reason he fires Krogstad is, as I will argue, his fear of being exposed. Ibsen suggests this fear of disclosure in other ways as well. Helmer does not admit that he has done something wrong until the end of the drama, even though everything suggests that Nora knows. He is also extremely concerned with maintaining an impeccable external facade.

The playacting and pretense of the protagonists are often emphasized in readings of *A Doll's House*. Unni Langås (2004) argues convincingly that Ibsen stages marriage, gender and family as theatre, and Toril Moi gives a strong interpretation of Helmer and Nora's play with idealistic roles and expectations in marriage as an expression that they "love each other as well as they can" (Moi 2006, 234). My claim is instead that for Helmer it is not just about maintaining an expected, ideal facade – be it in marriage or not – but that in his case, play and pretense also are necessary in order to hide the past crime, and that he must do all that is necessary at all times so that it is not disclosed.

We see Helmer pretending and denying what he has done in a confidential conversation with Nora, where he acts the part of an "unimpeachable public servant",⁸ even though what Nora says suggests that she knows what he did. This takes place during a scene in which Nora, in desperately attempting to dissuade Helmer from firing Krogstad, alludes to the fact that what Helmer did for her father might someday backfire on him:

NORA

[...] This person [Krogstad] writes in the foulest newspapers; you've said so yourself. He can do you such unutterable harm. I'm so deadly afraid of him –

HELMER

Aha, now I understand; old memories – that's what's putting you into this fearful flutter.

NORA

What do you mean?

HELMER

You're thinking of your father, of course.

NORA

Oh, yes, that's it, yes. Remember how those evil-minded people wrote in the newspapers about Daddy and slandered him so horribly. I think they would

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have got him dismissed, if the Department hadn't sent you over to look into it, and if you hadn't been so obliging and helpful to him.

HELMER

My little Nora, there is a significant difference between your father and myself. Your father wasn't an unimpeachable public servant. But I am and hope to remain so for as long as I am in my post. (147)

Helmer denies the subverted investigation when he refuses to listen to Nora and, on the contrary, characterizes himself as "unimpeachable public servant". That he "hopes to remain so" may immediately appear strange, not to say comical, but it can also be read as an expression of Helmer's awareness that the this is a mask that may have to fall.

Nora thus tries to scare Helmer from dismissing Krogstad by hinting that Helmer himself can be exposed because of what he has done, only to find that Helmer simply ignores the hint and flatly refuses to be persuaded to keep Krogstad in the Commercial Bank. The next question to explore is therefore why it is so important for Helmer to dismiss Krogstad. Previous scholarship usually emphasizes Helmer's contempt for Krogstad's unpunished crime, a contempt that often is explained, as in Moi's reading of the play, as a result of Helmer's "love for the good and the beautiful" (2006, 230). In Moi's case, this must, however, be understood in light of her overall view of the entangled relationship between play and authenticity in modernity. As mentioned previously, I argue that it is even more likely that he fires Krogstad in order to protect himself. This is what Helmer reveals about his view of Krogstad's crime:

NORA

[...] But tell me, is it really so bad, whatever it was this Krogstad was guilty of?

HELMER

Falsifying signatures. Have you any idea what that means?

NORA

Mightn't he have done it out of necessity?

HELMER

Indeed, or, as so many do, in a moment of imprudence. I'm not so heartless as to condemn a man categorically for the sake of one such isolated act.

NORA

No, isn't that so, Torvald!

HELMER

Many may rise and redeem themselves morally, if only they confess their misdeeds openly and take their punishment.

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NORA

Punishment →?

HELMER

But that wasn't the path Krogstad chose; he managed to slip away with tricks and manoeuvres; and that's what has eroded him morally. (138–139)

But that is not why Helmer goes to the extent of dismissing Krogstad. It is neither because Krogstad is redundant (he is immediately replaced by Mrs. Linde), nor because of his moral imperfection (which Helmer admits he can look past). The reason is that he is a former acquaintance, not to say a friend:

HELMER

I could, at a pinch, perhaps have overlooked his moral defects –

NORA

Yes, isn't that so, Torvald?

HELMER

And I hear that he's pretty good at his job too. But he's an acquaintance from my youth. It was one of those rash associations that one's so often embarrassed by later in life. Well, I may as well tell you straight: we're on first-name terms. And this tactless individual does nothing to hide it in the presence of others. Quite the contrary – he thinks it entitles him to take a familiar tone with me; so he constantly gets one over me with his "Torvald this" and "Torvald that." I assure you, it is highly embarrassing. He'd make my position at the bank intolerable. (148)

There must therefore be something about this past friendship that makes it so necessary to for Helmer to dismiss Krogstad. Helmer calls it an acquaintance, but what he goes on to say (that they are on familiar terms) suggests that it was a friendship. It must even have been a close friendship, since they are on familiar terms. Not only does he reduce the former friendship to an acquaintance, but he also presents it as "one of those rash associations". We do not, however, learn why it ever even came about.

Nora reacts to Helmer's desire to fire Krogstad just because he finds it embarrassing that they are on familiar terms as "petty" (148). Helmer is so offended by her remark ("petty") that he immediately sends Krogstad the letter of dismissal. The interpretation I present here suggests that it may be Helmer's anxiety about being exposed that lies behind the dismissal. It is precisely the proximity to Krogstad that makes Helmer fire him, or rather the fact that they have been close friends, the fact that Krogstad is someone who knows him and his past. We also learn that they

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have studied together and, that like Helmer, Krogstad is a lawyer. That Krogstad takes the liberty of addressing Helmer in the familiar form with others present at the bank is an unacceptable breach of etiquette. The commentary in *Henrik Ibsen's Skrifter* (*Henrik Ibsen's Writings*) point out that the rule was that in a workplace, in the presence of people whom you were not on familiar terms, you should never address people that you were close with, on familiar terms. In my opinion, this breach of etiquette implies that for the employees of the bank it not only shows that Helmer is in a close relationship with a former (unpunished) offender, but also reveals that this former offender has some form of power over Helmer, the director of the Commercial Bank.⁹

In my symptomatic reading of the play, the fact that they have studied together, been friends and share a profession makes it possible that Krogstad knows about Helmer's investigation of Nora's father. There is no textual evidence of this, however, only of Krogstad's proximity to Helmer. Krogstad expresses several times that he knows Helmer and his personal weaknesses. In the following examples, the first quote applies to Helmer as an easily influenced spouse and the other two to Helmer as a man without integrity and courage:

Oh, I've known your husband since our student days. I don't imagine our Mr Bank Director is any less biddable than other husbands. (132)

Well, no, I didn't actually think he did. It didn't seem the least bit like dear old Torvald Helmer to show that much manly courage – (156)

Now I've been chased out and I refuse to be content with merely being taken back into the fold. I want to rise in the world, I tell you. I want to be back in the Bank – in a higher position; your husband will create a position for me –
NORA

He'll never do that!

KROGSTAD

He will do it; I know him; he won't dare breathe a word. (158)

Krogstad's last point here – “he won't dare breathe a word” – is confirmed by Helmer's reaction when he finds out about Nora's forgery. Ibsen has even let him use exactly the same expression about himself as Krogstad – “I daren't breathe a word”:

You've wrecked my entire happiness now. You've gambled away my entire future for me. Oh, it's too terrible to contemplate. I'm in the power of a man without conscience; he can do whatever he wants with me, demand anything at all of me, order me about as he pleases – I daren't breathe a word. (178)

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I'll have to try to placate him in some way. This business must be hushed up at all costs. (179)

Taking into consideration that Helmer knows exactly what Krogstad wants, namely a position in the bank, what Helmer says here about both the need to keep things “hushed up at all costs” and Krogstad satisfied shows that Helmer is once again willing to use his entrusted position to achieve personal advantage.

Helmer's merciless characterization of Krogstad as the “impure” and “contagious” Other who has not acknowledged what he has done and taken his punishment, shows not only how strongly he condemns Krogstad, but also how completely blind Helmer is to his own errors:

Just imagine how such a guilt-ridden person has to lie and dissemble and pretend to all and sundry, has to wear a mask even for those closest to him, yes, even for his own wife and his own children. (139)
[...] such an atmosphere of lies brings contagion and disease into the very life of a home. Every breath the children take in such a house is filled with the germs of something ugly. (139)

In the logic of the text, as I have shown, the image he conjures up of Krogstad fits just as well for himself. Helmer too has committed an unadmitted, unpunished crime, is guilty, wears a mask, and “brings contagion and disease into the very life of a home”, namely the doll house that disintegrates when Nora chooses to leave it. The quote also clearly illustrates that illness is not only a physical or mental condition in the play, but also a crucial metaphor.

Helmer is referred to both in the drama and its reception on the one hand as selfish and petty and on the other as a sensitive idealist and aesthete. Markussen has sorted the various interpretations of the Helmer figure in the literature on the play into three groups: the morally indignant, which distances itself from him; the defensive, which, like the Swedish writer August Strindberg, defends him; and the structural, where he is more neutrally read into a structure as a representative of something (Markussen 2006, 357). Markussen himself interprets Helmer as playing the role of “patriarchal villain”, given that he is supposed to represent what Nora opposes (Markussen 2006, 358). I share this interpretation, but I would, however, add that Helmer is not only set to be a “patriarchal” villain, but also a moral villain, also in the state

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administration and in the rule of law. He is a corrupt lawyer who raises himself above the laws he is supposed to navigate by in order to achieve his own advantage. This makes him, as a civil servant, a negative and destructive force in the state administration as well as in the rule of law.

In her interpretation of Helmer, Moi refers to Herman Bang, who characterizes him as aesthete and egoist (“a completely aesthetic nature” and an “aesthetically inclined egoist” quoted in Moi 2006, 230). She adds that being an aesthete in Bang’s view means being an idealist, and that Bang and his contemporaries recognized the criticism of idealism that is expressed when the idealist is, like Helmer, clearly an egoist. She also shows that Helmer’s sense of beauty makes no distinction between aesthetics and ethics. But when she further claims that “His love for the good and the beautiful makes him despise people like Krogstad who have sinned against the ideal” I do not fully agree (Moi 2006, 230). My reading suggests that it is the fear of exposure and scandal that makes Helmer despise Krogstad, more than love of the good and beautiful. A love of the good and beautiful obviously is there, in one form or another, in Helmer’s worldview, not least because he wants to present an impeccable facade, but it is severely compromised by his past wrongdoing.

The reading I have presented here contributes to an understanding of Nora’s motivation for leaving by making it clearer why she has so totally lost faith in Helmer. She leaves not just because she no longer wants to be a doll in a doll’s house, or primarily a wife and mother, nor just because she wants to find out who is right, society or her, but also – and not least – because she no longer has confidence in Helmer. What she has experienced, is, as we have seen, that the Helmer who was “so obliging and helpful” towards her father, the Helmer that my reading suggests that she knows committed a crime, judges her mercilessly when he in turn finds out about her crime. He insists that she obeys the law, and even puts the law above ethics, but elevates himself above the same law. She also recognizes that Helmer, who blames Krogstad so emphatically for having had “to lie and dissemble and pretend to all and sundry” and “to wear a mask even for those closest to him”, now demands that she and Helmer, do the same (139). Patriarchal gender roles are clearly of

the greatest importance for understanding Nora's exit, but it is important to recognize the complicating factors that Ibsen has attached to the male protagonist; by this I mean not only selfishness, pettiness, vanity, sensitive idealism and aestheticism, but also dishonesty and corruption. Notably, Helmer not only contributes to the breakdown of the marriage with Nora; as a lawyer and civil servant who rises above the law, Ibsen also portrays him as a negative and destructive element in the state administration and in the rule of law.

The following may serve as a preliminary summary of why Helmer's past crime and the associated fear of disclosure and scandalization is so important for the plot: First, because it too must have contributed to the precarious condition Nora refers to as Torvald's fatal illness. An argument that supports this is that for all the other people in the drama who are threatened by exposure and scandalization – Nora's father, Krogstad and Nora herself – the fear of exposure and scandal is so strong that they become suicidal. Second, the past crime is important because it has major consequences in the present of the play, as it means that Helmer is not – and in the logic of the text can never be – (completely) rehabilitated. Ibsen has created a scenario in which Helmer will always – until he is revealed – have to fear the disclosure and the scandal and do everything he can to prevent the case from becoming known. Third, the past crime is important because Helmer's fear of disclosure and scandal is destructive not only for Helmer himself, but also for Nora, their marriage, family, and home, as well as for Krogstad and his small family. Krogstad is, however, saved by Mrs. Linde. Finally, Helmer's past crime also leads to a type of contempt for weakness (directed at Krogstad), which I in what follows will show also characterizes doctor Rank, and which with him becomes an ideology that sanctions the rights of the strong.

3. DISEASE, PROJECTED DISGUST, AND CONTEMPT FOR WEAKNESS

Helmer's underlying, persistent fear of being exposed leads to what from the ethical perspective of philosopher Martha

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Nussbaum, can be called projected disgust. This is a type of disgust that is destructive because it stigmatizes others. In *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (2004), Nussbaum's ethical-philosophical starting point is that emotions are not irrational, but always have a cognitive content, and that disgust as an emotion has a cognitive content that makes it unreliable and dangerous because it can become a source of prejudice and social stigma. The cognitive content of the feeling of disgust includes notions of contagion, decay and death. There are many examples of this in the illness discourse in *A Doll's House*. I suggest that the notion of projected disgust is relevant to the understanding of Ibsen's drama. Projected disgust is the social extension of the pathology of disgust. In the case of projected disgust, anxiety over – and/or rejection of – one's own weakness and vulnerability leads to the stigmatization and rejection of other, often less socially powerful, people, presented as the animal Other. According to Nussbaum, projected disgust poses a constant threat to democratic equality. In her book *Not for Profit* from 2010, she underlines the consequences of projected disgust in this way: "the bifurcation of the world into the 'pure' and the 'impure' – the construction of a 'we' who are without flaw and a 'they' who are dirty, evil, and contaminating" (Nussbaum 2010, 35).

The clearest case of projected disgust in *A Doll's House* is Helmer's anxiety over his own possibility of being exposed and his repeatedly stated disgust for Krogstad, as seen in the previously quoted passage where he describes what he believes to be Krogstad's destructive influence on his family as a contagious disease (139). Helmer's disgust for Krogstad is, however, generalized to apply to a large group people: "I literally feel physically ill in the proximity of such individuals" (140). In the drama as a whole, moreover, projected disgust appears as a dangerous and destructive force far beyond the individual character Torvald Helmer's relationship with "such individuals" in general and with Krogstad in particular, for as we shall see it also affects doctor Rank, and with him it is expanded into ideology and a social outlook characterized by contempt for weakness.

While Krogstad has all Helmer's antipathy, doctor Rank, referred to as "Torvald's best friend", has all Helmer's sympathy

(144). We can already guess that this was Ibsen's intention through the symbolism of the names. In Norwegian "rank" means *straight, upright (with a straight back), self-conscious, morally upright, honourable*, while "krog" in Krogstad is associated with the opposite *hook, crooked*, etc. Moreover, Krogstad refers to himself as a "hack lawyer" (157), in the Norwegian original as a "vinkelskriver" (311), a dubious lawyer who, so to speak, can only practice in the corners and not in courtrooms. In Krogstad's case, this is because he has been exposed for having forged signatures. In addition to Helmer's relationship with Krogstad, it is well worth taking a closer look at what doctor Rank, whom Helmer holds in such high esteem, really stands for, and whether he is as morally upright as his name suggests.

Rank is a doctor, a frequent type in literature, not least in realistic literature. As the commentary volume in *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter (Henrik Ibsen's Writings)* suggests, the doctor often represents "cynical sobriety and non-religious, theoretical scientificity" (309, my transl.). Here, reference is also made – via Gunnar Ahlström – to Georg Brandes' presentation in *Det moderne Gennembruds Men (The Men of the Modern Breakthrough)* of the doctor as 'the hero of the age' and as "an incarnation of the modern ideals of the age: theoretical scientificity in the assessment of true and false, practical humanity in the assessment of the relationship between happiness and suffering, i.e. a rational assessment of psychological and social contradictions" (309, my transl.). I want to show that through doctor Rank Ibsen criticizes and undermines the image of the doctor as the hero of the age, and that the problem is precisely the new emerging values and ideals.

Doctor Rank has a doctorate in medicine, which, according to the commentary volume to *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter (Henrik Ibsen's Writings)* was not common for doctors to have in Ibsen's time. One of the essential things about doctor Rank as a type is, as I see it, something that has not been taken account of in previous research, namely that he, as a doctor and representative of the ideas, ideals, and values of the time, questions human dignity and whether all kinds of life are necessary or worth living. This can perhaps (cynically) be characterized as "practical humanity in the assessment of the relationship between happiness and suffering", but is given a far greater and potentially more dangerous

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scope in the text, where it can be understood in the light of the age's preoccupation with Darwin's theory of evolution and selection and with related social Darwinist ideas.¹⁰ This comes through most clearly in a conversation between doctor Rank, Mrs. Linde and Nora where Rank questions whether all kinds of life are necessary or worth living or cherishing:

MRS LINDE

We have to live, doctor.

RANK

Yes, it is indeed a commonly held belief that such a thing is necessary.

NORA

Come, come, Dr Rank – you want very much to live too.

RANK

Yes, of course I do. However miserable I may be, I still prefer to be tormented for as long as is possible. And the same goes for all of my patients. As it does for the morally afflicted too. Right now, in fact, there's just such a moral invalid in there with Helmer –

MRS LINDE [*quietly*]:

Ah!

NORA

Who do you mean?

RANK

Oh, it's one Krogstad, an individual of whom you know nothing. Rotten right down to the roots of his character, Mrs Helmer. But even he started to talk as though it was of some magnificent import, about his having to *live*. (125–126)

Rank's problematization of human dignity and the value of life is inextricably linked with a contempt for weakness, including physical weakness ("all of my patients") as well as moral weakness ("the morally afflicted too"; "Rotten right down to the roots of his character").

This contempt for weakness and the problematization of human dignity and the value of life can be explained, firstly, by the fact that doctor Rank is a doctor with a doctorate in medicine who is influenced by the new natural science and the Darwinist and social Darwinist theories of the time. Secondly, it can be understood as a case of projected disgust. Doctor Rank's weakness is not that he himself has done something wrong that can be exposed as in Helmer's case, but that he is sick, "the most miserable of all my patients" (150). He is terminally ill, and not with just any disease, but a disease against which there was strong prejudice and moral condemnation, namely syphilis. The disease is referred to as "consumption of the spine" in the text

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and presented as inherited from the father (143). (In this way Rank anticipates Oswald in *Ghosts*. This is a rarely noticed fact, and the thematization of heredity has an even broader scope in the drama than this. Helmer presents, as we have seen, Nora's relationship to economy, religion, society and duties as inherited from her father (178)). In other words, Rank's spine, and with that his uprightness, is at risk. Rank expresses great bitterness over this: "My poor innocent spine has to suffer for my father's merry days as a lieutenant" (151). He has no external physical symptoms, but describes his body as "bankrupt" to Nora and cynically explains what lies ahead – death and the process of decay:

RANK

[...] I am the most miserable of all my patients, Mrs Helmer. In the last few days I've carried out a complete assessment of my internal status. Bankrupt. Before the month is out I'll be lying, perhaps, rotting up at the churchyard.

NORA

Shame on you, what an ugly way to talk.

RANK

Well, this thing is damned ugly. But the worst is that there'll be so much other ugliness to come beforehand. There's only one final investigation to be carried out now; when I'm finished with that, I'll know the approximate hour that the disintegration will set in. There is something I want to tell you. Helmer, with his fine sensibilities, has such a marked loathing for anything hideous. I don't want him in my sickroom –

NORA

Oh, but Dr Rank—

RANK

I don't want him there. Under any circumstance. I'm closing my door to him. – As soon as I'm fully informed of the worst, I shall send you my visiting-card with a black cross on it, and then you will know that the abominable process of destruction has begun. (150–151)

Rank is not presented as suicidal, but at this point in the plot – referring to Helmer's sensitive nature – retreats to die in solitude. When Rank goes into seclusion, Helmer comments that he "hide[s] away like a wounded animal" (176).

Langås reads Rank's dual relationship as doctor and patient as evidence that he is "den fremste bæreren av sykdomsdiskursen i stykket" (Langås 2004, 136; "the foremost bearer of the illness discourse of the drama"). Furthermore, she writes: "hans kyniske tale er et ytre tegn på en kropp i krise; han projiserer sin sykdom ut på karakteristikk av tidens moralske tilstander" (Langås

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2004, 136; “his cynical speech is an outward sign of a body in crisis; he projects his illness onto characteristics of the moral conditions of the time”). And, because the disease is inherited and not self-inflicted syphilis: “med denne sykdommen kan han vanskelig se på samfunnet rundt seg som annet enn pill råttent” (Langås 2004, 140; “with this disease, he can hardly see the society around him as anything other than completely rotten”) and the disease itself as “et tegn på en kultur i forfall” (Langås 2004, 141; “a sign of a culture in decay”, all my transl.). As I see it, however, doctor Rank operates with a distinction between the “sick” and “rotten” members of society/culture (explicitly represented by Krogstad whom he, as we have seen, refers to as “a moral invalid” and “[r]otten right down to the roots of his character”) and the (implied) “healthy” members (represented, among others, by Helmer). This distinction can be seen in the social outlook he promotes, which I will elaborate on in the following.

In Rank’s case, contempt for weakness can be explained both in light of the doctor’s own weakness (the deadly and highly stigmatized disease syphilis) and as ideology. It is, at the same time, an emotion with cognitive contents, and part of an ideology. This shows how potentially dangerous disgust is in a larger societal perspective. With him, the projected disgust and contempt for weakness is given a far greater and more dangerous reach than is the case with Helmer. We see this most clearly when, in a conversation with Nora and Mrs. Linde, it leads the doctor into a social analysis where he concludes critically and metaphorically that society is a hospital:

RANK

Yes, he’s [Krogstad] got some sort of a job down there [in the bank]. [*to Mrs Linde*] I don’t know if you also, over in your parts, have the kind of people who scamper breathlessly about sniffing for moral decay, only to get the individual admitted for observation in some favourable position or other. The healthy people just have to put up with being left outside.

MRS LINDE

But surely it’s the sick who most need to be brought into the fold.

RANK [*shrugs his shoulders*]

Yes, there we have it. It’s that attitude that turns society into an infirmary.¹¹ (126)

This is an important but somewhat cryptic passage, especially if one reads Rank neutrally or as a positive figure. Rank’s

conclusion has been understood as inconsistent (Langås 2004, 136). In my opinion, it is not inconsistent. Rank's point is, as I see it, that humanity and empathy for the physically, socially, and morally weak makes society a hospital, or in other words a society for the sick. Moreover, Rank seems to imply that it should not be like this; society should, in other words, be for the healthy. In this way, Ibsen allows doctor Rank to indirectly sanction Helmer's dismissal of Krogstad. This interpretation of doctor Rank's cynical view of society is strongly supported in one of the drafts for the drama where, as others also have pointed out (see for example Tjønneland 1998), the doctor is actually portrayed as a social Darwinist or eugenicist (Ibsen 2008). This can be seen in the following excerpt from the earlier draft of the same conversation:

THE DOCTOR

[...] But we do not need the [bad] specimens of the breed; we can do without them. Follow the natural sciences, ladies, and you will see how there is a universal law in everything. The stronger tree takes the living conditions from the weaker and leads them to benefit itself. Likewise between the animals; the bad individuals in a herd must give way to the better ones. It's just us And that's why nature is moving forward. It is just us humans who with violence and power hold back progress by taking care of the bad individuals. (Ibsen 2008, *unpaginated*, my transl.)

This is a clear example of Social Darwinism. In the same draft, Ibsen in fact leaves the doctor open to the idea of doctors' actively taking the lives of the "bad" specimens. At this point in the action of this earlier version of the play, the doctor must personally look after a patient who is seriously injured:

Mrs. Linde

Is that a bad specimen too, doctor?

The doctor

A drunken rascal, a miner, who in drunkenness has had his right hand cut off. If he survives it, he will now be completely useless.

Mrs. Linde

But then it would be best to exterminate him.

The doctor

Yes, you are absolutely right. It is a thought that often occurs to us doctors, especially when we go into caring for the poor. But who will undertake such a thing? Not me. I don't want to talk about it being punishable by law; but even

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if it wasn't –. No, madam, we haven't progressed that far yet. (Ibsen 2008, *unpaginated*, my transl.)

Taking the lives of patients instead of treating them involves a eugenic or extreme Social Darwinist idea as well as a gross violation of the Hippocratic oath of ethics for doctors. In my view, this passage expresses the same kind of paradoxical portrayal of a civil servant (i.e. in the stricter meaning of “*embetsmann*”) as in the case of Helmer (the lawyer who rises above the laws and commits corruption). Compared to the portrayal of the Doctor in these two extracts from the earlier draft, the Doctor's ideologically rooted contempt for weakness is greatly toned down in the final version of the drama. But it is the same in content, and in the end the question becomes what kind of status it – along with Helmer's contempt for weakness – has in the text as a whole.

More specifically, what doctor Rank says applies to Krogstad's case. But since it is also a societal view that he conveys, the range and perspective are greatly expanded. Several Ibsen scholars have discussed the possible influence of Darwin and other evolutionary theorists on Ibsen, including Ross Shideler (1997 and 1999), Eivind Tjønneland (1998), Asbjørn Aarseth (1999 and 2005), Tore Rem (2014), Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (2015), and Wærp (2020). A more recent addition here is Maria Løvland's doctoral dissertation (2023). It is particularly the theory of evolution and the consequences of the domestication of wild animals that have received attention in research, and Tjønneland, Aarseth, Rem and Shepherd-Barr all claim that in his application of the domestication motif, Ibsen deviates from evolutionary theory in that, unlike Darwin, he portrays the cultivation of nature and the domestication of wild animals, as something negative, more specifically as something that implies degeneration. Rem is more open to whether that is the case when he refers to it as “what seems a more negative perspective than Darwin's on domestication as a form of degeneration” (Rem 2014, 163), so is Tjønneland who rightly points out that Ibsen is ambiguous on this point. Tjønneland's argument is based on *An Enemy of the People*, where Ibsen allows doctor Stockmann to use the difference between cultivated and uncultivated dog breeds as an argument that common people are only raw material for cultivation.

Løvland supports my point of view as expressed in Wærp 2020, where, in a reading of *The Wild Duck*, I share Tjønneland's and Rem's reservations (Wærp 2020, 14) and argue, among other things, that the view of domestication as something degenerative is attributed to the idealist in the play, Gregers, and that the loft image rather visualizes the struggle for existence. A Darwinian motif as relevant as domestication is the related idea of the stronger, or rather, the more adaptable, and the ability to survive. My point here, in this article on *A Doll's House*, is that this applies also to *A Doll's House*: In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen has Helmer not only rise above the law to obtain personal benefit, but also attempt to destroy the weaker Krogstad in order to save himself. In addition, Ibsen allows Rank, the cynical doctor, through his small but not unimportant social analysis, to sanction the right of the stronger (the more "adaptable") to get ahead in the world at the expense of the weak. In my view, this is how Ibsen problematizes not only the literary type (the doctor) that Brandes regarded as the "hero of the age", but also emerging new ideals and ideas, not least, as should be clear from the foregoing, Social Darwinist theories of society.

4. CONCLUSION

Ibsen formulates his dramatic reflections in character constellations and he positions Nora as a counterpoint to the cynical doctor and the corrupt lawyer. Her critical attitude toward laws that do not take consideration of humanity and toward people who are governed by selfishness and undue concern with maintaining a social and moral facade stands in contrast to the contempt for weakness and belief in the rights of the stronger espoused by Helmer and Rank.

Through the placement of the figure of Nora within this constellation of protagonists, Ibsen provides a corrective both to the contempt for weakness and to the related view of society. Ibsen thus not only shines a critical spotlight on bourgeois society's view of marriage and women or, more generally, on the conservative and patriarchal society of his age, but also on dishonesty, cynicism and corruption in society and in the civil service and

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(thereby) on some of the dangerous ideas, values and attitudes that were emerging at the time. These include contempt for weakness, the cultivation of the strong and the “pure”, as well as the idea of the individual’s responsibility for their own well-being.

Previous scholarship on *A Doll’s House* has – all though their different perspectives – rightly primarily focused on Nora, on the gender and liberation themes in the drama, and on how the doll’s house cracks and collapses (for example, Durbach 1991; Templeton 1997; Moi 2006; Sandberg 2015; Holledge et al. 2016). The play strongly supports this perspective: Nora and her problems are the main focus of the play and are probably what has made and still makes the strongest impression on readers and spectators of the drama. The problem is, however, as I see it, that Helmer and Rank’s status and function within the play, as well as other aspects of of the constellation of characters as a whole, have remained in shadow.

If we read the drama with a focus on Nora, the doll metaphor Ibsen allows her to use becomes essential. If we read with a focus on Helmer and doctor Rank, as I have tried to show, their illnesses and the illness metaphors they use can add other important, but previously underemphasized points to the interpretation. And much speaks for such a supplementary reading, not least the very concrete fact that there are strikingly many sick, terminally ill and suicidal people in *A Doll’s House*.¹²

Ibsen reminds readers that Helmer’s corruption is a significant plot element at the end of the drama when Helmer learns about Nora’s large loan and false signature. Here Ibsen has him say that she is punishing him instead of being grateful for what he once did for her (his sabotaging of the investigation into her father). This is exactly the same thing that, in Nora’s eyes, he does to her; instead of being grateful that she saved his life when he was terminally ill, he punishes her by accusing her of having committed a crime and letting her know what he will do with her. This symmetry in the plot is in itself evidence that the Helmer figure is far more important in the drama than previously thought. Equally important is, as I hope to have brought out, how the Helmer-Rank-Nora constellation shows what more can be said to be at stake in Ibsen’s international breakthrough drama than women’s liberation.¹³

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTES

1. In the original Norwegian text: «alskens bifortjeneste» (Ibsen 2008, 228).
2. In the Norwegian original the adjectives used are “fine og smukke” (Ibsen 2008, 227), “nice and beautiful”, in the context denoting something that is aesthetically and ethically good at the same time.
3. Among others Toril Moi, who is also the one who has written most comprehensively, widely and profound about Ibsen’s relationship to idealism (Moi 2006).
4. There are many different, partly overlapping definitions of corruption. I rely here on Ola Teige’s definition of corruption as presented in an article on corruption in the Norwegian and Danish civil service after 1814. He proposes a relatively broad definition of corruption in order to better capture the many different contexts and types of corruption during this period: “abuse of public position for personal gain” (Teige 2015, 194–195, my transl.). The definition overlaps with Transparency International’s current definition: “abuse of power in trusted positions for personal gain” (Transparency International 2024).
5. The fact that Nora is considering, and Krogstad has considered suicide is often mentioned in the research. That Nora’s father also became suicidal because of his problems is not so often observed, but is revealed in the third act:
“NORA.
When I’m out of this world, you’ll be free.
HELMER.
Oh, spare the gestures. Your father always had such phrases ready to hand too. What use would it be to me if you were out of the world, as you put it?” (178).
6. In the Norwegian original text: “så igennem fingre med ham” (359).
7. In the following passage we see that Helmer helped Nora’s father for Nora’s sake and thus most likely out of self-interest, in order to achieve something for himself, namely Nora, whom he married after her father was in the clear.
HELMER.
[...] I did it for your sake; and this is how you repay me.
NORA.
Yes, this is how. (178) Also, in the Norwegian text we more clearly see that he considers Nora’s a punishment for what he did, as here the verb *punish* (straffe) is used, not *repay*.(359)

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8. In the original Norwegian text: «uangribelig embetsmand» (Ibsen 2008, 291).
9. In the manuscript/draft entitled “Arbeidsmanuskript/udkast 1879”, Ibsen has the Doctor complain about this type of employment (Krogstad’s allegedly dubious employment in the Commercial Bank) and claim that they ruin the shareholders: “Now, and who is it, this goes beyond again? Yes, it is the shareholders, me and many other decent men. It is us who are plundered by the incompetence and disorder and laxity, so we never see a dime of our deposited money” (Ibsen 2008, *unpaginated*, my transl.).
10. The influence of Charles Darwin’s scientific ideas on Ibsen’s plays has been addressed by several Ibsen scholars (among others Shideler 1997 and 1999; Tjønneland 1998; Aarseth 2005; Rem 2014; Shepherd-Barr 2015; Wærp 2020; Løvland 2023). These ideas were widely known from the time of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) and Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Biology* (1864), and were widely discussed. Moreover, and more specifically, Aarseth (2005) argues that Ibsen had read parts of *On the Origin of the Species* (the chapter on domestication and variation) from a Danish 1872 translation, whereas Tjønneland (1998) argues that Ibsen had read Høffding’s 1875 article on Spencer’s philosophy in *Det nittende Aarhundrede* (*The Nineteenth Century*).
11. In the Norwegian original text: «et sygehus» (Ibsen 2008, 246) “a hospital”).
12. Compared to the doll and disease/contagion metaphors, the drama’s house and home metaphor becomes an overarching metaphor. An in-depth study of the house and home metaphor, and the architecture metaphor both in Ibsen’s authorship and in its reception, is presented in Mark Sandberg’s brilliant book *Ibsen’s Houses. Architectural Metaphor and the Modern Uncanny* (2015).
13. There is a consensus in today’s Ibsen research that *A Doll’s House* thematizes gender and liberation in a conservative and patriarchal society, and this is a view that is not difficult to agree with. But as pointed out by several, most clarifyingly by Toril Moi, this of course does not limit the scope of the drama: “a woman can represent the universal (the human) just as much or just as well as a man” (Moi 2006, 243–244). In Wærp (2022) I argue – through a comparative reading of *A Doll’s House* and *An Enemy of the People* – that the protagonist in *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann, is designed as a male version of Nora.

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