

## Victorian Women, the Home Theatre, and the Cultural Potency of *A Doll's House*

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*Caroline (taking hold of [her husband's] hands). Your poor hands are icy; you are cold! (Putting him into the armchair on the left of the fireplace.) Place yourself there, near the fire (covering him with the sofa cushions). There, there; are you comfortable so? I will be a true wife, a drudge, a helpmate—anything but a silly romantic girl.*

*Spriggs (crying out). But you are stifling me! (The two doors open. [Caroline's parents] rush in.)*

J. Hatton, "Romantic Caroline" (16).

This scene in midst of home theatrical "Romantic Caroline" draws attention to Caroline's feelings of inadequacy as a wife—precisely speaking, how living as a "true wife" means being "a drudge, a helpmate" rather than a woman who indulges in romantic fantasies in which she is not trapped in marriage, as Caroline now is, to a confectioner husband named Spriggs with creaky boots and a passion only for biscuits. Her actions—smothering her husband with sofa cushions while placing him a bit too close to the heat—place her in a position of power while revealing she believes little in the bliss of playing "helpmate" to her husband. To the watching audience, to the actress playing Caroline, and perhaps especially to the suffocated actor portraying Spriggs, the message is that an imaginative wife can quite literally stifle or overwhelm a husband, but also that a wife is not herself (perhaps a bit of a "skylark" or perhaps a little crazy) when only her husband's servant. Yet when Caroline's parents intervene here, as they often do, they believe not that their daughter is the aggressor but that she is the innocent prey of Spriggs; her mother once bluntly concludes, seeing her daughter fainted, "he has been dragging her by the hair" (15). Caroline's melodramatic and sometimes hysterical act—such as her energetic tale of Spriggs mistreating a stray dog—convinces her parents

that she is a neglected wife, while in reality her husband is merely just too boring for her. In this, as in other parlour plays, female characters act to reveal the unsatisfying nature of a woman's position in marriage and take up a hysterical but also simultaneously rational type of acting to get others to behave as they want. In fact, as I will suggest, the popular practice of home theatre—through its original use and awareness of realistic domestic setting, and in its characteristically strong female roles— influenced the reception of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) in Victorian Britain. The home theatre, as a genre largely dominated by women, whether cushion-wielding or not, provided unparalleled opportunities for women to write, act, and watch their own versions of Nora in their own houses before Ibsen's play was performed on a public stage. A cultural phenomenon increasingly produced by the middle class, parlour plays often featured Nora-type characters, occupied with their positions as wives and mothers and trapped in their domestic situations and spaces, while the theatricals themselves were actually set and performed in the real-life parlour. While "Romantic Caroline" was not authored by a woman, this play exemplifies how, genre-wide, home theatre worked to provide provocative and energetic female roles, and on a grander scale, unprecedented opportunities for women to write theatre. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in return, highlights what is challenging and perhaps even radical in parlour plays by placing them in a tradition of both feminist thought and establishing the prevalence of realistic private drama before more realist public theatre. Home theatricals, the previously unstudied, ostensibly private activities of women, are actually part of a more public, political history of gender and representation.

By recovering the prolific yet unrecognized work of Victorian women for the home theatre, both as playwrights and actresses, scholars can begin new discussions about how gender, speech, and acting work in any culturally-potent space. The influence of private theatre on fin-de-siècle public drama illuminates the unique force of the parlour play; as part of what I will call a feminine counterpublic, the private theatre acts on a broad social level that expands to include what is seen as the more legitimate public theatre. In this context, the magnetism of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* for nineteenth-century British women can be understood on a previously unacknowledged continuum with parlour

plays of the later decades of the nineteenth century. Home theatre, like the women-dominated audiences of Ibsen's plays, brings about a woman-centric theatre space. Both *A Doll's House* and home theatre foreground a woman's position in the home and provide a forum in which women can evaluate that position. In both cases, this reflective and theatrical mirror provides an outlet otherwise unavailable in late nineteenth-century society. While Ibsen is usually credited with first placing the domestic under evaluative surveillance, within nineteenth-century British culture, I argue that women cultivated their own means of escaping or exiting the home pre-Ibsen. By acting in private theatricals, middle-class women used the acting process to suggest that acting itself could activate a more independent female identity and become an important means of revising social codes. More particularly, by analyzing the similarity of Ibsen's themes to those in home theatricals, one can more thoroughly understand how the parlour play sets the stage for Ibsen's championing by Victorian women. Ibsen and the home dramatists share a malleable view of social mores and use the not-so-rigid borders of self/body and parlour/stage to reconstruct a new order through theatrical realism. In this context, Nora's "door slam heard around the world" is a cumulative thunderclap of many previous exits by amateur actresses within their own homes (Weckwerth 134).

A primarily aristocratic entertainment in the 1700s, the parlour play evolved throughout the nineteenth-century into a form of social gathering essential to the middle class and dominated by women as both playwrights and actresses. As Sarah Annie Frost wrote in her own preface to her plays in 1868:

In the gay circles of fashionable society, amateur theatricals have, in a great measure, taken the place of the old routine of piano-forte music, singing, dancing and small talk, and are also superceding the old money-raising expedients of concerts, balls, and fairs for charitable purposes. (3)

Women made up a large contingent of the home theatrical market—both as writers and as important consumers of home theatre in the niche markets for all-female performers. Victorian women capitalized on the home theatre's reputation as an arena in which women could act and not

compromise feminine respectability or dignity by appearing on a public stage.<sup>1</sup> At the same time as home theatre offered a safe space in which to act, it created an arena in which a free and creative exchange of dialogue could occur between women on womanhood—in the passage from written to acted play and also quite literally in the creation of female characters on the parlour stage.

Likewise, Ibsen's plays, particularly *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), are associated with the overwhelming support of Victorian middle-class women in their translations of his work, enthusiastic support through acting and performance of his plays, and attendance of public productions, which greatly outnumbered men's. Though Ibsen himself stated that his plays were not explicitly or primarily feminist productions, there is little doubt that his play *A Doll's House*, in particular, found favor with female audiences. Earlier criticism has argued that Ibsen was unconcerned with gender politics, but as Margaret Stetz and others have more recently recognized, "to say Ibsen was a champion of nineteenth-century women should be the start, not the endpoint of discussion" (150). Sally Ledger emphasized Ibsen's phenomenal reception in Victorian England, noting that translations of Ibsen in Western Europe coincided with "remarkable accolades for his dramatic representation of women and womanhood" (79), which thus suggests that there was a special quality about Ibsen's work which appealed to these audiences in particular. Victorian scholarship—if widely hesitant to move beyond connecting women to the theatricality of the novel—has especially emphasized Ibsen's extraordinary reception among women in Victorian England.

However, few have noted the specific conditions of Ibsen's reception among the communities of women within which he found the most unequivocal support. Katherine Newey notes "it is rare for historians to comment that it was largely the work of three women which introduced Ibsen to English audiences ... it was the otherwise obscure writers Catherine Ray, and Henrietta Frances Lord ... who provided the first translations, and Eleanor Marx organized the first performance of an Ibsen play as a *home theatrical* in Britain, as well as providing early translations of several Ibsen plays" (127; my emphasis). While criticism has recognized that to the contemporaries of actress Elizabeth Robins, her life and work exemplified Ibsenite individualism (Diamond 7), this

scholarship has failed to trace a connection to home theatricals—easily made through Robins' close friendship with Florence Bell, one of the most productive parlour playwrights ever. Robins, an American-born London actress, was known for her commitment to women's rights throughout her life, especially as shown through her theatre-writing efforts: besides writing *Votes for Women!*, a 1907 suffrage play, she collaboratively wrote *Alan's Wife* (1893) with Bell, who penned perhaps more home theatricals than any other late Victorian. To generalize, the formation of collectives of women around Ibsen's work operates as a similar coalition to the type of female community formed around home theatre; just as women worked to translate, produce, and act in Ibsen's work, they collaborated in writing and producing home plays.

Both Ibsen and home theatre create a theatre in which women are spectators of themselves in society. Usefully among current criticism, Susan Torrey Barstow draws out the importance of the matinee performance of Ibsen's plays in forming a reflective female community, as "a space in which female spectators could reflect on their own situation. In public, in the company of other women, matinee spectators were able to observe domestic, middle-class femininity as it was performed and critiqued" (389). In doing so, she provides support to what I see as the shared mission of both home theatre and Ibsen in reworking the social bonds of women with one another and their respective spaces. This idea—that the matinee was above all a women-centered communal space built around women's own reflections on domesticity and also an entertaining reprieve from domesticity's potential banalities—is still stronger when applied to the case of the home theatricals' relationship to Ibsen and fin-de-siècle drama. Barstow's explanation of Ibsen's heroines' everydayness is profitably quoted at length here:

Their trials are the ordinary, familiar trials of pregnancy, childbirth, the double standard, sexual frustration, and, perhaps above all, boredom. . . . That matinee spectators encountered these new heroines not merely in books but in public theaters crowded with other women like themselves is itself significant. Matinee theaters . . . were among the few acceptable places in which unaccompanied bourgeois women could escape the

monotony and loneliness of a still rigidly domestic existence.  
(389)

Barstow's strongest claims are still stronger when applied to the case of the home theatricals' relationship to Ibsen and fin-de-siècle drama. While less potentially mob-like than the matinee, the more intimate and convenient nature of home performance works similarly to cultivate an environment in which theatre was an activity that hinged on the activity of women through their writing, performing, and spectating. (For instance, the heroine Alice in Bell's "The Reliquary" (1890) reinforces the women-only club of home performance; Alice explains that among the places where her suitor has trailed her, looking for an opportunity to propose, are "private theatricals, where he's had to stand on the landing all the evening, and look through the chink of the door—recitations in the afternoon, where he has sometimes been the only man in the room, poor dear, such was his devotion!" [249].) Not only did home theatre set up Ibsen's reception, but it made the large percentage of women at a matinee more familiar because this was not the first time women had been brought together for a theatrical attempt at shifting gender or domestic codes.

In this essay, I situate my own argument, that women home dramatists are closely tied to Ibsen, within the existing critical dialogue on his connection to the nineteenth-century woman. I then look at Eleanor Marx as an interesting case to demonstrate how both Ibsen and the home theatre can similarly affect a Victorian woman's life through manipulating the cultural and spatial conception of "the domestic." Marx showcases how theatrical realism's pinpointed focus on the blurring of real/fictional boundaries enables the social and personal revolution possible in both Ibsen's and the home dramatists' work. Throughout, I connect Ibsen and the parlour plays' blurring of fiction and reality with the larger Victorian captivation with authenticity. My examples are several theatricals reflecting the same independent and/or hysterical and articulate ideal as Ibsen's Nora. As these parlour plays demonstrate, this genre abounds with roles which provide the amateur performer with a means of cultivating a freeing sense of self—through acting as this independent and articulate female character, or, as "hysterical" to loosen or break free of social behavioral restrictions

altogether. By showing that Ibsen's Nora is entrenched in Victorian culture, reflected and preceded by many similar characters of the home theatre, I correct a larger lack of awareness about the home theatre's position in Victorian popular culture. That women clearly performed versions of Nora in their parlours both before and after *A Doll's House* changes how we understand the reception and initial impact of the play; for the women seeing Ibsen, the public staging of that play must have felt as though it was further legitimizing their many privately-acted Noras.

If the historicization of Ibsen's reception is generally lacking, a logical step towards remedying this scholarly gap is to historicize more thoroughly the women-centric theatre practices which preceded the late 1890s Ibsen explosion. The only well recognized connection of parlour plays to women's progressively more independent status at the turn-of-the-century is suffragette theatricals, though these plays tended to occur more frequently over the early 1900s, following Ibsen's emergence.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, scholarship has all but ignored the earlier but prolific pre-Ibsen door slamming that happened in women's own parlours in their own plays, which additionally made the subsequent suffragette plays a natural progression from established home theatre practices. Barstow demonstrates that Ibsen has been treated "biographically (was Ibsen a true feminist?), or thematically (what does Ibsen have to say about femininity?)" rather than "historically"; many historical approaches merely "read the plays as texts rather than performances" (390). I would add that a historical context for Ibsen must include the environment of women-centric theatre practices in that era.

In studying the plots of home theatricals, a few overwhelming trends emerge which highlight their revolutionary women-centric nature: these performances consciously developed and taught acting as a useful instrument for women while working within the domestic space, and place independent women—often women who either theatrically act or rationally collaborate—against the social codes of their time. The heroines of home theatre are versions of Nora. Most theatrical writers, whether progressive or not, are clearly very interested in using the parlour play to comment on appropriate social codes for women. Often, an exaggerated Angel-in-the-House type figure is pitted against a more independent woman; women could not only gain a sense of

empowerment from the acting process itself, but this acting was clearly oriented towards getting its performers to have a belief in the New Woman as an ideal which they should adopt post-curtain. What becomes especially interesting in comparing home theatricals to *A Doll's House* is the insistence of female home dramatists on using metatheatrical acting within their plays. In Ibsen's play, as Nora explains to Mrs. Linde, (speaking of herself in the third person) "little Nora isn't as stupid as everyone thinks" (9). Nora is a type of actress, going in and out of her character as Helmer's little spendthrift and "squirrel," secretly keeping her copying job from him, but also reaching a sort of hysteria, an out-of-bodily acting through her dancing of the tarantella just before the play's famous concluding scenes. It is almost as if the acting (especially in the release of the tarantella, an acting more controlled—or not controlled—by her rather than Helmer) is what enables the final, rational Nora to justify her exit from the home.

Similarly, in home theatricals, meta-acting occurs most often as characters within the play decide very clearly to put on an act as more aggressive and independent women in order to get what they want. Not only does meta-acting suggest something about the power of the most basic acting in any theatrical for Victorian women, it also posits acting as a usefully deployed tool outside of the theatre. For instance, in Sarah Annie Frost's play "A Young Amazon" (1868) the character Kate's cousin intends to marry her in order to secure a fortune as dictated by her uncle's will. To thwart this proposal, Kate strikes upon what she calls a "tip-top scheme!" and calls to Flora, her best friend, and Harry Graham, her true beloved, for "a black wig, some walnut dye, a pair of green spectacles for Flo, an immense riding whip, a pistol, a French horn" upon which Flora inquires as to her sanity:

Flora. (*Seizing KATE by the shoulders, and looking into her eyes.*)

Katherine Elliot, have you taken leave of your senses?

Kate. No, only scheming to take leave of my lover. (42)

While many theatricals have female characters who act in order to gain a husband, the character Kate's use of her devised drama for the opposite effect shows the versatility of acting as feminine weapon—especially as asserting her independent right of choice and action. Acting provides a

means of taking back control of the courtship situation, presented as an escape from a more docile domesticity here; when cousin Walter is less than enthusiastic about his hair being singed off by gun-toting Kate, Kate as the young Amazon does not allow her real lover Harry (disguised as her Irishman best friend) to stand up for her but again takes charge:

Harry. (*Fiercely.*) If you mean to cast any insinuation upon the skill of my pupil, sir, you will have to answer for it to *me*, to *me*, sir, the best pistol-shot in the country.

Walter. (*Nervously.*) I am sure, sir—you misunderstand me—I never meant—

Kate. (*Contemptuously.*) Let him alone, Pat! He is *afraid*. (45)

Kate's character is given the most assertive, intelligent, and aggressive lines; she clearly coordinates and directs the meta-play occurring to take back control from what otherwise would be the preordained match.

Nor are the Nora characters of home theatre limited to plays for adult women. While the 1917 American children's theatrical, Carleton Britton Case's *At Cross Purposes*, takes place after the initial wave of Ibsen fervor, this play shows the extent to which the home theatre as a genre consistently aimed towards a specific vision of womanhood—even in this later play for children, the heroine is of the Ibsenite type. *At Cross Purposes* is an illustrative display of feminine power when a misunderstanding arises between newlyweds: the bride Lucy sees a woman following her husband Edward and crying at her wedding ceremony. Lucy believes her husband has a lover—though the woman is really her future maid—and refuses to remain trapped in the confines of such a marriage. Slipping away unaided during their honeymoon travels, Lucy declares, "I'll get a divorce" (Case 63), and stays alone in a hotel awaiting a return home. Her husband Edward assumes she cannot have run off alone: "somebody has carried her off — she was simple and innocent — somebody has made her believe I sent him for her" (64). The confrontation scene, before the truth is discovered, emphasizes Lucy's independence. To Edward's suggestion that she meekly followed a stranger, she replies: "What? I follow? — are you crazy? ... No, sir — listen to me — It was I — myself — that left you — of my own free will" (66). Within home theatricals, the independent

woman replaces the submissive follower as the ideal wife. The home theatre's frequent use of reasoning and dialogue-oriented scenes which conclude in the New Woman's favor, as well as the use of meta-acting as an acceptable feminine tool, strengthen this genre's relationship to the Ibsenite drama. On a grander scale, not only did parlour plays influence the reception of Ibsen, Ibsen—whether explicitly referenced or not— influenced the content of the theatricals that occurred after him. While Ibsen's concluding dialogue and exit were unexpected by most of the Victorian audience, perhaps unsurprisingly home theatre dealt with the dilemmas of the domestic and feminine.

As a genre dominated by women, the parlour play almost inevitably engaged with women's issues and late nineteenth-century debates over New Womanhood. Characters in the plays reflected contemporary discussions about a woman's role in the home, family, and workplace. Putting these types of characters more precisely in a real domestic setting—so many parlour plays were conveniently set in parlours and waiting rooms—makes the comparison with Ibsen's newly realistic drama fairly straightforward. These theatricals, besides abounding with women who exhibit independent behavior in the face of their lovers and who take up acting (in ways either opposed or similar to Nora's initial "skylark act"), also more exactly direct, like the reception of *A Doll's House*, this discussion of womanhood among women. Besides the more overt conversation within the plays among female author, actresses, audience members, female characters speak lines which comment on proper treatment of one woman by another, often in cases in which society deems one of them somehow socially reprehensible. In other cases, as in S. Jennie Smith's "Not a Man in the House" (1897), women characters perform a sort of "reverse doll's house" in which men are blessedly and conspicuously absent from the home/play space.

For example, though Bell's most famous theatrical collaboration was *Alan's Wife* with Robins, within her theatricals, a similar collaboration is emphasized in discussions among female characters as to their own rights as women. One might imagine the dialogue of these home plays reflecting the sort of contemporary debate that occurred among real Victorian women, especially as Bell and Robins held opposing views on women's suffrage.<sup>3</sup> This attention to rational argument within drama in order to question society's laws is very obviously a shared agenda—and

part of the innovation—of *A Doll's House*. Bell's play "The Public Prosecutor" (1890), included in her *Chamber Comedies* collection, is one of many parlour plays which allow easy comparison to Ibsen and emphasize reasoned discussion over action in order to highlight the gender bias within the existing rules of the social order.<sup>4</sup>

"The Public Prosecutor" capitalizes on the boundaries created by space, status, and sex to relate a woman's role within her marriage to her ability to form her own ideas outside of public opinion. The plot of "The Public Prosecutor" builds, in an astonishingly constructed set of sensational twists, through the dialogue of the two female characters, the genteel Aline and the reformed Madame Larivière. These women, from different social ranks, are responsible for unveiling (through discussion) the evidence in the play's murder plot which escapes the male characters. However, their conclusions quickly become a conversation about the injustice done to a woman's reputation by society—this serves as the underlying, real plot within the theatrical, beneath the more apparent plot of the murder case. Meanwhile, the two male characters, Philip (Aline's husband) and Jean Darcy (Philip's uncle, also the detective or "public prosecutor" in love with Madame Larivière) come and go from the theatrical's parlour setting, instead excitedly rushing into what they view as the more relevant and masculine offstage world, where, however, their investigative search turns cold.

The women and men of "The Public Prosecutor," through their traits and interactions, create similarly gendered working connections as those found in *A Doll's House*. While the potential love interest between Madame Larivière and Darcy initially mirrors that of Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, the opening interactions between the married couple, Aline and Philip, parallel that of Nora and Helmer. The deceptively light-hearted bickering of Philip and Aline's opening dialogue immediately establishes a lack of understanding between men and women while setting up the main storyline:

*Al.* Well, what am I to do if you will go on reading? I can't sit silent for ever, can I?

*Ph.* Most certainly not, I should say from experience. (55)

Though Philip criticizes his wife's desire for activity and companionship, he admits to reading sensationalist coverage of the murder at the Opera House, being investigated by his uncle. Darcy, as Philip explains, is unfortunately behind in his investigation, and perhaps more unfortunately has been captivated by "the fascinating Madame Larivière" (56), whom he may be about to marry.<sup>5</sup> While both Aline and Philip agree that Darcy's love interest is undesirable, Philip uses this moment to belittle his wife:

*Al.* Well, I must say Madame Larivière does not altogether inspire me with confidence. She is too—too—

*Ph. (maliciously).* Too pretty?

*Al.* No, no Phillip—you always think women are jealous of each other. It isn't that at all. But she certainly seems to have a manner which—

*Ph.* Which men think delightful and women call bad style, eh? I know! Ha, ha! (56)

Philip's interruptions reveal the serious negotiation of power beneath the comic surface—especially as Aline views this scorn as less than amusing:

*Al.* You always laugh at me, Philip, as if I were so foolish. I know much more of the world than you think, I can tell you.

*Ph.* I've no doubt of it, my darling. But don't be too worldly and clever, please. I like you best as you are, simple, unworldly, and trustful—and, joking apart, I am quite ready to agree with you that perhaps your instinct about Madame Larivière is right. (56-57)

Philip echoes Helmer's repeated sentiments of the sort that he "wouldn't want my pretty little song-bird to be the least bit different from what she is now" (Ibsen 5), and Aline recalls Nora's telling Mrs. Linde, "[Wag[ging] her finger] little Nora isn't as stupid as everybody thinks" (9). Similarly to Helmer's projected self-sufficiency and importance, Philip continually hints at his desire and ability to help his uncle solve the murder case, though it becomes clear, if not through his disregard of his wife, then through the dialogue of Darcy—"no—you have no turn,

believe me, for criminal investigation" (Bell 62)—that Philip is no such detective. The audience, in both cases, gets the feeling both Helmer and Philip are compensating for something, using their relatively absolute power within the domestic for their feelings of inadequacy outside it.

Meanwhile, Aline and Madame Larivière grow collectively in a character trajectory similar to that of Nora and Mrs. Linde. Madame Larivière, just as Mrs. Linde does in her first talk with Nora, accuses Aline of being from a privileged background which prevents her from understanding her circumstances. But, if Aline initially appears to be this play's Nora, the viewer only now learns that Madame Larivière's first name is a noticeably similar "Dora." While one might argue that similar dramatic structures of both "*The Public Prosecutor*" and *A Doll's House* may simply derive from the prevailing social structure, the name similarities and the pivotal endings argue for a more direct Ibsen influence here. The preliminary lack of understanding between the pairs of women in both cases—Mrs. Linde insists Nora must have a man supplying her with money, and Dora confronts Aline about her prejudices—results in the plot's most important early revelations. Nora divulges she alone saved her husband through falsifying her father's signature, and Dora confesses in detail her accidental murder of Fanny, the victim from the case under investigation:

*Dora.* I had known Fanny Duval years ago, when I first came to Paris, but I had never liked her. The other day I at last met her again, when I was with your uncle. She advanced, smiling, to claim my acquaintance—I was foolish enough to receive her with marked coldness—foolish, inasmuch as I did not realise that I might be making a deadly enemy of her. She took her revenge! she wrote to me that evening, saying that she had found some letters of mine among the papers of a man we both knew, and that she would enclose them the next day to your dear uncle, Monsieur Darcy, unless I would go that same evening to the Opera, to beg them humbly from her myself. I went, in order that no trace of my past might remain to cast its shadow on my future . . . I humbled myself by asking her for the letters—she drew the packet from her cloak, and gave them to me with words of mocking congratulation—I started forward

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angrily—she drew back—as she did so she fell, I thought fainting—and I left her. (76)

Fanny, in her aggression towards Dora, has fallen upon her own knife.<sup>6</sup> This plot similarly depends on recovery of correspondence. Dora must retrieve her letters from Fanny in order to save her reputation, as she believes the revelation of her unscrupulous past will forever destroy any chance of happy union with Darcy, just as Nora believes Helmer's receiving Krogstad's letter will destroy her own marriage. Interestingly, Bell's innovation here is to emphasize the recurring pattern of women's unforgiving opinions of one another as influenced by social norms—Aline's initial dislike of Dora, Dora's initial contempt of Fanny, Fanny's blackmailing of Dora in retaliation—which lead to the actual “murder” of one woman. Lack of leniency towards other women is the true problem, not to be capped off by a dialogue between lovers: in the conclusion, Darcy, with only a vague understanding of Dora's connection to the murder, appears unforgiving. Rather than Nora's triumphant exit, Dora “goes sadly out. *As she reaches the door she says softly Good-bye—for ever!*” (79). While Bell's brief prefatory phrase notes she was inspired by a French opera, the noticeable similarities with *A Doll's House* argue that this play was foremost in the minds of her readers and of herself. In “The Public Prosecutor,” as sometimes in real life, the choice of exit is not quite the woman's own.

An exit from home drama parallels Nora's exit—both have an afterlife, as they permit the theatrical to seep into the real post-play world. In home theatre, exits emphasize the minimal separation between spectator and actor: the already established friendliness between actors and audience, who would almost certainly be friends or acquaintances, highlights a lack of distance. Second, while the offstage space in public theatre feels like a transitional zone between acting and non-acting moments, from distinct stage to distinct ordinary space, in the parlour play, this transition is largely undercut by the entire theatrical occurring within the home. Exiting in both Ibsen's drama and home drama is a part of their revolutionary aspect, but actually home theatre emphasizes all the supposed innovations of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Ordinarily, the standard critical response to Ibsen's play is that, as Terry Otten quips, “when Nora slams the door at the end of the play, she

announces the beginning of modern drama" (509). Much scholarly time is spent discussing, as Wendy Weckwerth explains, this "radical dramaturgical move by which Ibsen thwarted the well-made play's trademark tidy conclusion" (134) thus initiating the beginning of theatrical realism.<sup>7</sup> However, while many parlour plays end in a happy union between lovers, many others conclude with a woman storming offstage to escape oppression, either as Madame Larivière does, sadly, or in a more positive spirit in which she looks to a brighter future. (No matter what her attitude, she is nearly always escaping from the injustices of her society or its laws.) Weckwerth goes on to describe how, though Ibsen leaves room for and then thwarts the standard resolution, he also manipulates the basics of the well-made play structure: "he discarded exposition, limited cast size, emphasized middle-class settings" (136). In this manner, Ibsen's play parallels the home theatre's necessarily small casts and to-the-point plots, with which Victorian middle class women were at that point intimately familiar. The home theatre space itself necessitated these dramatic conditions, later marked as Ibsen's innovation, which can be grouped under perhaps the most important shared parallel between *A Doll's House* and real Victorian life (in home theatrics and otherwise): a blend of theatricality and authenticity, a blurring of the real/fictional border. This happens on many levels through Nora's "skylarking" and tarantella-dancing and through the home theatre's heroines meta-roles but is more grandly enabled by the particular qualities of the space of the home. The content of the parlour plays themselves acknowledges that outright acting—as opposed to the acting of social manners—is a useful tool for cultural transformation within an everyday space.

The home as a setting activates the potential of *A Doll's House*, which like the parlour play similarly conflates traditional separations of space. To Una Chaudhuri, the home is the site of both compulsion and difference; "this contradictory conditionality of the figure of the home—its status as both shelter and prison, security and entrapment—is crucial to its dramatic meaning" (8). Certainly this was a factor in home theatricals, whose dramatic signification was forced to shape itself around the home as a setting, which one could exit but yet not exit. When a character exits the "home" within the home play, the amateur actor was still confined to the actual home where the play was occurring.

This is quite unlike the stage, in which the "home" is confined and limited to the actual space on the stage. The home of the private stage, owing to an inherent lack of exit, thus presents ever new possibilities for redefining cultural norms to carry into the "real" home. This difference affects the relationship between the home theatrical setting and the stage on which Nora performs. Home theatre—in which actors could become regular spectators after the conclusion of their part—allowed middle class British women to bring this same mentality to *A Doll's House*, a parallel reinforced through the shared home setting. Nora does not leave the theatre of action but continues to be "out there" somewhere. The amateur actress's exit is also an entrance, or re-entrance, back into the parlour space, a space which, if not precisely her own parlour, has the intimate and social comfort of everyday life. This easy transition from stage to "real space" would unsurprisingly make residual aspects of character linger a little longer, especially for an amateur actress, however accustomed she may have been to other forms of recitation.

The actual staging of parlour plays becomes explicitly tied to Ibsen in the work of Eleanor Marx, certainly an advocate of social transformation and reform. Marx, the woman who in addition to Elizabeth Robin most maximized the effect of *A Doll's House* in Britain, began her engagement with the playwright through her own home theatrical, a staged reading of the Henrietta Frances Lord translation of *A Doll's House*, known as *Nora* (1890). Marx, interestingly, provides more support for the easy translation of home theatre into the real woman's life through the parallels between her life and Nora's, which play out even further following her acting of her home play. Eleanor Marx, best known as the beloved youngest daughter of Karl, fell in love with a man twice her age before spending most of her life in a free union with the political activist Edward Aveling; in many ways, Marx's position as woman bound and manipulated by her ties to men parallels that of Nora, who was also the pet of her father, is involved in an intrigue with the older Dr. Rank, and is in a less-than-mutual marriage to husband Helmer. Rather than this overestimating the importance of Ibsen's work within Marx's life, the exceptional nature of her commitment to his work in a life otherwise dominated by political causes, as well as the eventual end result of her unraveling relationship with Aveling, testify to Ibsen's heroine's capacity to relate to women and the extent to which the private

acting of his work (or work from a similar vein as in the home theatre) can entrench itself into a woman's real life.

Marx was so invested in Ibsen's message for the middle-class woman that she learned Norwegian and translated his work. In her only work of fiction, she co-wrote *A Doll's House Revisited* (1891) with Israel Zangwill.<sup>8</sup> This parody corrected *A Doll's House* based on the comments of the play's detractors, to show the true absurdity of a version in which his play "adhered to English commonsense" (Aveling Marx), but unlike the earlier well known *Breaking a Butterfly* (1884) by Henry Herman and Henry Arthur Jones, professed to stay true to Ibsen's intention. Unlike the Herman and Jones revision, which substitutes entirely new characters to change the play almost beyond recognition, Marx and Zangwill's play largely works by reversing the position of Nora and Helmer in their dialogue. Marx's *Revisited* Nora becomes more and more melodramatic when Helmer confronts her; she "*sobs more and more hysterically*," "*rises and stands with clasped hands*," and, reluctantly obeying her husband's command to stay away from her children, "*leans her head against door of the children's room, then rushes hurriedly into the study*." Helmer, meanwhile, pays off Krogstad to ensure his silence about the forgery, in a gesture of manliness ("we're men—not a couple of hysterical women"), and convinces Krogstad to subdue Mrs. Linde: "Of course I shall stop Christina working. I will make her my true helpmate by making her dependent upon me." When Krogstad reveals Nora's copying for money to her husband, she again reverts to the sensational and melodramatic, "*peeping in at the door*" to exclaim asides of "Saved!" or "Heavens! Lost!" Marx's reworking, one of many spawned from Ibsen's original, was published in the March 1891 edition of *Time*, a London socialist monthly, as well as sold separately as a pamphlet (Dukore 309). This version, so devoted to the juxtaposition of melodramatic and realistic, the passive housewife and independent woman, is presented similarly to the manner in which parlour plays were distributed, as small pamphlets in addition to volumes. Further, this adaptation uses the common tactic of the parlour play, the portrayal of the excessively domestic woman as comic counterpart to the working New Woman. Thus while *Revisited* demonstrates how closely *A Doll's House* sequels were to women's home theatre, Marx herself also

produced *A Doll's House* as a home theatrical in her own home eight years earlier.

Marx and her common-law husband Edward Aveling held a theatrical party in their home to perform *A Doll's House* in 1883, with invitees ranging among the most important social reformers of London (Dukore 309). To Newey, Marx's letter to Havelock Ellis inviting him to her production "is often cited as one of the defining moments of Ibsen's cultural translation into the English theatre" (131). In the home theatre production itself, Eleanor played Nora, Aveling played Helmer, William Morris's daughter May was Mrs. Linde, and George Bernard Shaw was Krogstad.<sup>9</sup> For Marx, the play had a very real reference to her own life. Newey has noted that Victorian "critics have commented on the irony of Marx and Aveling playing opposite each other, convinced that Ibsen's 'miracle of miracles' had already happened in their domestic Eden" (Newey 132). Yet, Branislav Jakovljevic, in his argument for the performative effect of Ibsen's play, realizes that a horrific door slamming follows this acting. The couple co-authored *The Woman Question* (1886), which denounces the hypocrisy of English marriages. Meanwhile, Aveling, still keeping up his free union with Marx, married an actress under his playwright pseudonym, a secret which he kept for two years. After receiving a letter exposing Aveling's secret life (again, the similarities with *A Doll's House* abound), Marx, according to Jakovlevic, "summoned him home, and a 'stormy interview' followed. He left. Eleanor did not drown: she had a bath, dressed in white, retired to bed, and drank chloroform mixed with prussic acid. Eleanor, the reversed Nora, left a note: 'Dear, it will soon all be over now. My last word to you is the same that I have said during all these long, sad years – love.'" (448). Eleanor's suicide becomes her own unexpected exit, a real revision to the theatrical which was her partnership with Aveling. On one level, the confusion of the dramatic and the real here is similar to the home theatre's ability to move from stage-parlour to real-parlour—to intervene in the Victorian woman's real social dilemmas. On another level, a woman taking her own life is much more real than the action staged in either home or public theatre. Still, the events of Marx's life—from that first reading in her home, to her relationship with Aveling, to her tragic end—attest to the intense effect of *A Doll's House* in relation to and as relevant to its audience's lives.

Parlour plays particularly manipulate the potential of realistic theatre—in the easy to relate to character and setting—in order to cultivate a shift in the cultural codes surrounding women. The most common setting within the scene of the parlour play is the parlour; the ease of spatially transitioning from the real to acting moments potentially enables more real-life carryover of lessons taught by the theatrical, as it makes the theatrical itself more likely to deal with issues that would actually arise in the social arena. This realistic setting is also crucial to Elin Diamond's argument that Ibsen's realism positions the spectator to verify the truths of the realistic drama: "*Hedda Gabler* produces a subject who sees, and reproduces, a real relation between the signifier-signified-referent" (7). However, these truths can only be confirmed in reference to the spectator's life; as Diamond quotes the actress Elizabeth Robins, "How should men understand Hedda when they didn't understand her in the person of their wives, their daughters, their woman friends. One lady of our acquaintance, married and not noticeably unhappy, said . . . 'Hedda is all of us'" (6). By permitting real middle-class women a chance to actually act as Heddas in their own plays, the parlour drama expands and deepens this feeling of theatrical reflection.

Perhaps the public's reluctance to let go of Ibsen's play after curtain is then even less surprising. Jakovljevic explains that "Ibsen's play was followed by an unshakable public conviction in the existence of a real Nora Helmer and a real doll's house" (441). Few if any plays have resulted in such an explosion of sequel writing as *A Doll's House*, including of course, Marx's, which reverses the roles of Helmer and Nora at the conclusion (ironically, making the plot more closely parallel her own later life). "The outcome of Nora's exit was repeatedly imagined and reimagined, corrected, reversed, and questioned" (Jakovljevic 443). The public's discovery that Ibsen's play was based on a real woman facilitated the shift to thinking about the action post door slam. Much like Marx, the life of Laura Kieler, the real Nora, turned into a sequel to Ibsen's play. Again, space is crucial to meaning here, as the conclusion's use of offstage space alters the dynamic between off/onstage. "Nora's final exit is not seen or reported. It comes as a noise. This sound is raw and inarticulate, and there is nothing designed or artificial about it" (Jakovljevic 443). Nora's exit is also, as Jaklojevic

and others have noticed, an entrance. Home theatre importantly restructures the ordinary movements of exit/entrance; any exit is reentrance back into the parlour, but the actress moves not into an inevitable, inescapable prison but a space where boundaries have potentially shifted and preexisting domestic associations can be reworked. Just as Nora's time spent in her all too real tarantella alters her reality, the actress taking up a parlour role may be taking part in a more controlled (or uncontrolled) hysteria which affects her real life behavior.

Home drama shared not just a living room setting with the emergent realism of public theatre but also its fascination with precise true-to-the-action details, often including meticulous costuming. Nora's tarantella is powered in part by her metamorphosis of dress; similarly, in home drama, an acted hysteria (or any non-self state) was evidently easier to reach with the help of costume. This bodily disguise was initially seen as one of the more powerful transformative effects of the home theatre. More so than the memorization and speeches of home plays, the real power and enjoyment is in the "almost Indian transformation" of the actor (Fitzgerald 444). Women seem especially susceptible to this type of change, as it removes them from the strict rules of propriety and dress required by their daily lives. As Percy Fitzgerald, a Victorian theatre critic and historian, wrote in a British periodical, "there is no exception" to the enthusiasm for transformation: "the worn-down matron, who has run in fashionable shafts till she is fit only for some social-knacker's yard, will make a desperate effort, have herself braced-up, her 'coat' well curried, her harness renewed, and come ambling in with all the air and bearing of a fresher and younger animal" (444).

However, as Fitzgerald's misogynistic horse-themed account makes clear, men—even if they professed otherwise—were not entirely comfortable with women acting in roles outside of those feminine ones which they were assigned. This is reinforced through Fitzgerald's description of an aunt playing the part of a male hero, who makes a spectacular appearance near a home theatrical's conclusion. By all indications, the aunt gives a successful, well-received performance in which she has had to don a cloak, mustache, and large hat, and is unrecognized as herself by her audience. However, Fitzgerald insists

that, at the moment in which Aunt cries out a pivotal line, she “falter[s] hysterically” and that the portrayal, while not at the moment, is upon later reflection, “grotesque” (447). Just as in *A Doll’s House*—whose male characters force a similar negative terminology on female characters—male spectators of the home theatre frequently insist upon applying the terminology of hysteria and abnormality to women acting outside what men perceive as their appropriate domain. In both home theatre and hysteria, the behavior of women often shares a label of “unacceptability” but also offers potential for catharsis.<sup>10</sup> Hysteria in nineteenth-century culture has always been connected with acting; this is true even among those women experiencing “medically diagnosed” hysteria, who use theatrical language in their diaries (Koch 59). According to Elin Diamond, “accusations of fakery (‘cases’ of nothing) were as common as the claim that women, prisoners of their uteruses, were by nature hysterical” (9). Diagnoses of hysteria in Western Europe peaked during the late nineteenth-century—in France, for example, they rose from 1% in 1840 to 20% of women in 1883 (Diamond 47)—but especially in Britain, they concurred with a culture centrally occupied with theatricality/authenticity, frustrated in arguments over woman’s proper position in the public domain, and, as I argue, with the rise of amateur acting among middle-class women.

The home theatre, like hysteria, disrupts traditional laws governing space and reality. As Chaudhuri explains, “early naturalists sought to erase the difference between the public nature of theatre and the private world of experience” (9). Home theatricals do exactly this. While accessible as an outlet for acting because occurring privately, this fact itself could not undo the inherent publicity of their acting itself. Yet private theatricals were also a private experience. This conflation of public and private in home theatre made it into a vehicle for shaping identity—just as hysteria is an explosion of the private into the public realm, and just as the domestic settings of the late nineteenth-century public theatre were a part of the “new” theatre with revolutionary potential. One may also relate hysteria, defined as private emerging into public, as working similarly to the movement of women’s themes from the content of private theatricals to the public stage. The parlour play imbues the parlour with cultural flexibility (it is not just social but theatrical and moldable space) which makes the public stage’s 1890s shift

to realism seem like the parlour play merely transplanted to more public venue. As Barstow suggests about the experience of an Ibsen production for the late Victorian audience, "Stripped of its social conviviality and devoid of glamorous spectacle, the public space of the theater became a strangely private place" (400). In other words, this newly realistic theatre is a lot like the parlour play. It is as if the public stage, tired of the layers of sensation and tidiness, is burst open from the inside with scenes which had been occurring in private theatre all along.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While some (mostly male) critics still protested about the respectability of the parlour play, popular opinion, especially by the late decades of the nineteenth-century, overwhelmingly supported the parlour play as a legitimate and safe form of entertainment fully in line with the rules of propriety. At a time during which the appearance of women on public stage was still viewed with suspicion, the private theatrical became an accepted and entrenched component of popular culture.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Robins' 1907 *Votes for Women!* is often thought of as inaugurating the age of suffragette theatre.

<sup>3</sup> See Joanne E. Gates (255). Gates describes the opposing viewpoints of Bell and Robins on women's suffrage. Bell supported other women's rights but was anti-suffrage.

<sup>4</sup> Bell notes under the title that her work is "suggested by Boisgobey's 'Crime de l'Opera'" (55). Bell was fluent in French, and most likely read Boisgobey in the original French; however, a large majority of his works were also translated to English and thus could have been familiar to the reader of her play volume.

<sup>5</sup> The use of "Darcy" as well as the interactions in which Philip reads and ignores his wife's conversation are also suggestive of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

<sup>6</sup> This subplot reads much like that in *Middlemarch*, in which the actress Laure stabs her husband while onstage during a play, killing him for real, and then faints herself.

<sup>7</sup> Though as Toril Moi has pointed out, the insistence of the realists on claiming Ibsen's work has helped perpetuate the belief that his plays are

"nothing but unselfconscious and boring realism" (261). Moi's work has recently drawn out the theatricality at the very center of *A Doll's House*. Additionally, while doctored versions of *A Doll's House* (with "corrected" endings) were performed in Britain, after the premiere of the first unbowdlerized version in 1889, even those who had not seen the true *A Doll's House* would have been inundated with newspaper reports of the play. In other words, the real version took over all celebrity.

<sup>8</sup> Marx produced countless political tracts. See Branislav Jakovljevic's "Shattered Back Wall: Performative Utterance of *A Doll's House*" for a thorough treatment of Marx's translations of Ibsen.

<sup>9</sup> The cast is mentioned in Ledger (80), Newey (131), and Jakovljevic (447).

<sup>10</sup> Hysteria's symptoms cover a broad range of possibilities, but could be generally summarized as an emotionally provoked or based physical display. See Amanda du Preez, one among the group of scholars who explains hysteria as a very physical manifestation—seen but not heard.

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