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Burning Down the (Doll's) House

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The recent scandal that befell the household of incoming branch manager Torvald Helmer is well known among the gossip circles of the financial sector. Nora Helmer walking out on her husband was a horrifying tragedy, but one whose causes can be readily ascertained. It is Torvald's fault that his marriage was rotted out from the inside. This is because his matrimony falls quite short of our industrious class' ideal of marriage, which necessarily led to Nora's understandable, if not justifiable, rebellion. Torvald treated his wife as a child, not a woman, and encroached upon the private sphere, which rightfully ought to be Nora's domain. Torvald's encroachment put Nora in a situation quite like a cornered dog. In such a situation, one cannot reasonably be surprised when the dog bites back, so to speak.

The nature of bourgeois marriage is of two distinct and separate spheres. The role of the man is to dominate the public sphere. The man is to compete in the Darwinian jungle of industrial capitalism and secure a comfortable living to provide materially for his wife and family. The role of the woman is to tend to the private sphere. The hearth and home are her territories, and the rearing of children and defense of tradition her sacred duties. In the bourgeois marriage, authority is meant to be shared between the husband and wife, each leading in their respective area of expertise. However, in the case of the Helmers and many – perhaps most – bourgeois marriages, the man dominates both spheres, marginalizing the woman's power even in

her supposed domain. This is the fundamental root of the problems in the Helmer household.

Torvald was not sated to dominate the public sphere as a successful banker. He also extended his reach into the private sphere, which ought to have been Nora's world. He treated his wife not as a wife and not as a woman. Torvald regarded Nora much how one regards a small child or a dog. His pet-names might have been charming in another context, but not when one considers the degree to which he infantilized Nora. Mrs. Helmer is a grown adult woman, not a squirrel or a songbird, but Torvald failed to treat her as such. He referred to her with a worrisome degree of ownership – always *my* this and *my* that – that indicates that he viewed his wife as a piece of his property such as, for example, a little doll for him to marionette around. Torvald dictated how the home would be decorated, how Nora was to dance at a *soirée*, and even controlled Nora's dietary habits. Mrs. Helmer has a professed fondness for macaroons, a harmless and delectable confection, but Torvald Helmer had banned his wife – who is, it bears repeating, a full-grown adult person – from ingesting these little sweets. Torvald's influence has permeated the private sphere at every level. Nora can neither direct the home in large, meaningful ways, nor can she choose little pleasures for herself, such as what treats she eats. Perhaps the clearest example of Torvald's authoritarianism within the home is the case of the Helmer's mailbox. Only Torvald bears the key to the mailbox, leaving Nora without access to their household's correspondence. This is distressing, as the mailbox is the Victorian home's sole connection to the outside world. How can Nora reasonably run her household – her private sphere – if she is precluded from accessing the main channel of information exchange with the outside world? In this very foundational way, Torvald's overreach is like a great ball-and-chain attached to Nora's ankle, preventing her from competently executing her household duties.

Nora justifiably rebelled because Torvald encroached upon her sphere. Nora must be not only separate in her sphere, but sovereign. Nora was justified in rebellion, but not to the extent she took it. She was not justified by Torvald's encroachment to wholly abdicate her maternal and marital duties. The wider implications of Nora's rebellion will be felt primarily by her children. It is well known that the moral character of a child primarily reflects that of his mother. An absent mother can only lead to an absence of moral character. Due to her moral dereliction, Nora's children will necessarily be like the fruit of a poisonous tree and carry the same moral disease that infected their parents. Matters of the home – bearing and rearing children, protecting tradition, creating a safe haven from the chaotic world outside the front door – are the fundamental and distinctive functions of a woman in our society. Without performing these functions, a person is not performing womanhood. Nora is a turncoat. She has betrayed her husband, her children, her gender, and society at large. Her rebellion is disturbing because it represents a full rupture with the mores and values of the bourgeois family. Nora does not only challenge the structures that bind her – she throws them off entirely. None of the great moral philosophers would excuse Nora's actions. Aristotle would object to Nora abdicating the core, distinguishing function of her womanhood. She also violated the cardinal virtue of prudence in her overlarge reaction to her marginalization within her own sphere. Immanuel Kant, writing just across the Baltic Sea in the last century, would object to Nora's actions on the grounds that she violated a categorical imperative. Kant would hold that under no circumstances may we abdicate the vows of marriage and family. We also owe others respect as fellow rational beings, a respect Nora failed to show for her family or her society. Our English contemporary J.S. Mill and his theory of Utilitarianism complete the triune of opposition to Mrs. Helmer's foul actions. The suffering wrought by Nora in abandoning her husband and children – especially the degradation

of her children's moral character – grossly outweighs the happiness produced by fleeing to ‘find herself’ in utilitarian moral calculation.

The yuletide scandal that rocked the Helmer household has been discussed at length by water cooler pundits at banks across Norway. In these discussions, the allocation of blame must be prudently made. Neither Nora nor Torvald are without fault. Nora abandoned her sacred and fundamental duties as a wife and mother, an abdication that cannot reasonably be justified by Torvald's poor performance as a husband. Torvald, for his part, encroached greedily upon Nora's sphere, that of all women. This is quite troubling for an incoming branch manager at the bank. If Torvald cannot respect the basic social contract enshrined in the sacrament of marriage, how can he be expected to honor the business contracts that he draws up at the bank? If Torvald can so easily bring the public sphere into the private, who is to say he will not bring the private sphere into the public? The Darwinian jungle of the public sphere cannot abide the warmhearted softness of the private sphere any more than a gentle gazelle could survive amidst a pride of ravenous lions. The separateness of the spheres must be respected and maintained, lest such horrors as “Bring Your Child to Work Days” become commonplace in our hallowed halls of commerce. The editorial board of this publication extends our sympathies to Mrs. Helmer, but nonetheless offer a full-throated condemnation of the conduct of both Helmers in the deterioration of their marriage.