

THE HEROINE IN NORWEGIAN LITERATURE



**FAITH INGWERSEN AND HARALD NAESS
EDITORS**



**WITS II, NUMBER 6
1994**

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“The Hero in Scandinavian Literature” was the title of a symposium, held at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1972 and later made available in book form in 1975. Inspired by that title, the University of Wisconsin Scandinavian Department invited a group of scholars to Madison to speak about “The Heroine in Norwegian Literature.” The Wisconsin symposium was held in Madison from April 26 to May 1, 1991, and supported by the University’s Anonymous Fund. The publication of the papers presented has now been made possible by a grant from the Norwegian Information Office in New York. We wish to thank Consul General John Bjørnebye for his ready support of this and other cultural projects within the field of Scandinavian Studies.

We would also like to thank Einar Haugen for his kind permission to use on our cover an illustration of Eric the Red’s fearless daughter: *Freydis Defies the Skraelings*. The woodcut, by Frederick Trench Chapman, appeared on page 73 in Einar Haugen’s *Voyages to Vinland: The First American Saga* (New York: Knopf, 1942).

Faith Ingwersen
Harald Naess

CONTENTS

Introduction

vii

Egil Törnqvist:

Exit Nora: The Ending of *A Doll's House*

1

Mary Kay Norseng:

Rediviva: The Female Hero, Dagny Juel Przybyszewska

17

Otto Hageberg:

Olav Duun's Women

41

Jorunn Hareide:

Aksel Sandemose's Felicia and Herbjørg Wassmo's Dina:

A Comparison

57

The Contributors

75

INTRODUCTION

Gro Harlem Brundtland (b. 1939), social democrat of Norway, is her country's prime minister. Other nations—Shri Lanka, Israel, England, Iceland, Pakistan, Ireland—have or have had women prime ministers/presidents, but the situation in Norway is special. In that country the leader of each of the three largest political parties has been a woman, and these parties subscribe to the so-called forty percent rule, which provides that, among nominees for political election, either gender should be represented by no less than forty percent. Today women hold 65 of the 165 seats in the Norwegian Storting, and of Gro Harlem Brundtland's 19 ministers, 8 are women. By contrast, President Bill Clinton—whose concerns for women's rights have been proven on many occasions—has only 3 women in his cabinet of 14.

It would be natural to ask whether certain conditions in Norwegian society have produced this special situation, and, if so, whether this situation has been reflected in Norwegian literature over the years. It is not so much a question of finding original types of women there, but rather of seeing what common types are most frequently celebrated as literary heroines. Such Biblical types as Suzannah, Joachim's mild-mannered, beautiful, and loyal wife, or the enterprising Judith, who cut the head off Holofernes and saved her people from the enemy, are perennial types of heroines, judging by the millions of modern women who still carry their names, and—judging by such naming customs—a similar dichotomy may have existed among Germanic tribes, in which

one group of names emphasizes love (Ást-) and beauty (-fríðr), as in Astrid, while another group displays a Valkyria-like aggression (-gunn- or -hild-), as in Gunnhild or Hildigunn.

In most of the medieval Icelandic sagas women are prominent, from being central in certain memorable scenes (Frøydis, who singlehandedly repels an attack by Native Americans in the *Saga of Eric the Red*) to influencing the total narrative (*Gudrun in Laxdæla saga*). Unlike the idealized women of medieval hagiography, most of the saga heroines are good and bad at the same time, and to a twentieth-century sensibility they appear human, realistic, and remarkably modern.

In the 30-odd plays by the Dano-Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), women are seen as opting for "the natural"—love, sex, everyday small talk—instead of the high and often ludicrous idealism of the male hero. But in these plays, women—thanks to their superior intelligence—often outdo the men, and Holberg in his other works asked why women should not enjoy the same privileges as men, that is, education, inheritance rights, and positions of importance within the state. In Holberg's utopian novel *Niels Kliim* (1741), the finance minister of the republic of Potu is a woman, whose husband, "though well versed in the state of finances, yet was entirely ruled by the counsels and authority of his wife."

In the work of Henrik Ibsen, the subtle psychology of the Icelandic sagas mixes with the irony and tutorial spirit of Holberg, whom Ibsen always admired. The Astrid/Gunnhild dichotomy is strikingly present right from the beginning of Ibsen's production: the pair Aurelia/Furia from his first play, *Catilina* (1850), returns with appropriate variations up to Maja and Irene of his last play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). In a chapter called "The Womanly Woman" (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891), G. B. Shaw claims that "unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself." The typical Ibsen play, he says, is one "in which the leading lady is an unwomanly woman." In a review of Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm* (1886), Shaw describes Ibsen's unwomanly woman in somewhat different

(1886), Shaw describes Ibsen's unwomanly woman in somewhat different terms: ". . . Rebecca's passion is the cold passion of the North—that essentially human passion which embodies itself in objective purposes and interests on behalf of others—that fruitful, contained, governed, instinctively utilized passion which makes nations and individuals great, as distinguished from the explosive, hysterical, wasteful passion, which makes nothing but a scene." Shaw seems to be saying that, though women must repudiate all "duties," it does not mean that they cannot—for the sake of their personal development—entertain "objective purposes and interests on behalf of others." In *Rosmersholm* Rebecca drives her rival Beate to her death in the millrace, but, Shaw implies, she does so in order to make it possible for Rosmer to carry out his social reform program.

Shaw is right in pointing out Ibsen's interest in the "unwomanly woman." Nora counterfeits a check, Mrs. Alving denies her son his "visiting rights," Rebecca is guilty of a variety of crimes, Ellida Wangel loves and abets a murderer, Hedda Gabler burns a valuable manuscript and provokes a suicide, Hilde Wangel drives her lover to his death, Irene is a former striptease artist with the death of more than one lover on her conscience—yet all these women are also "heroines," in the sense of having certain "heroic" qualities, and Ibsen's special understanding of these "unwomanly" women is found equally among twentieth-century Norwegian writers: the literary protagonists treated in the following pages have all committed crimes, and the discussions of them will center on whether and how they are also heroines.

EXIT NORA THE ENDINGS OF A *DOLL'S HOUSE*

Egil Törnqvist
Amsterdam University

Rarely, if ever, has a play ending aroused so much consternation as that of Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem* (1879), traditionally entitled *A Doll's House* in English.¹ As Michael Meyer puts it in his Ibsen biography,

The terrible offstage slamming of that front door which brings down the curtain resounded through more apartments than Torvald Helmer's. No play had ever before contributed so momentously to that social debate, or been so widely and furiously discussed among people who were not normally interested in theatrical or even artistic matters. (454)

It is evident, in fact, that many people still find it very hard to accept Nora's leaving her children. In that sense the play seems as provocative as ever.

As most readers of this article will recall, the play deals with a woman (Nora) who becomes indebted and who forges the signature of her father in order to receive money for a trip to the south to save her husband's (Torvald Helmer's) life. Many years later the creditor (Krogstad) risks losing his position in the bank where Nora's husband has just been promoted manager. Krogstad's revelation of the forgery

leads to a conflict between husband and wife, resulting in her leaving the marriage and the children. Dramaturgically, the plot can be described as follows:

Act I Question 1: Will the forgery be revealed?

Attack: Krogstad threatens Nora.

Act II Question 2: Can Nora find an escape?

Complications:

- a. She tries to persuade Helmer to let Krogstad stay in the bank.
- b. She contemplates borrowing money from Rank.
- c. She tries to prevent Krogstad from revealing anything.

All attempts fail.

Act III Question 3: What will happen when the forgery is revealed?

Crisis: Helmer reads Krogstad's first letter.

Peripety: Helmer reads Krogstad's second letter.

Question 4: What will Nora do when Helmer's true nature is revealed?

Resolution: Nora leaves Helmer and the children.

The resolution, I would suggest, constitutes the end of the play. But where does the end begin? And where does it end?

"An end," Aristotle says—and what he means is a proper end—"is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it" (quoted by Butcher 31). As Butcher remarks (282), the purpose of this definition is to exclude endings that do not really conclude the action. The plays of Sophocles, of course, served as Aristotle's chief source when he penned his ideas about tragedy in the *Poetics*. A clear spelling-out of his view on this point we find in the First Preface of Racine's *Britannicus*:

For my part, I have always understood that tragedy being the imitation of a complete action, in which several persons take part, this action is not ended until one

knows what situation it leaves these same persons.
This is Sophocles' practice almost throughout. (290)

With regard to the end of *A Doll's House* we are faced with two questions: (1) is the end of the play complete or incomplete? (2) is the Aristotelian idea of completeness still valid? The word "completeness" raises new questions: Complete in what sense? How? To whom?

Ibsen was himself aware of the significance of the concluding part of the play: "I might almost say that it is precisely on account of the final scene that the whole play was written" (*Oxford Ibsen* 455). Bernard Shaw, similarly, declared that, whereas you formerly in drama had exposition in Act I, situation in Act II, and unraveling in Act III, in *A Doll's House* the last was replaced by discussion: "The discussion conquered Europe in Ibsen's *Doll's House*" (Shaw 135).

By "the last scene" Ibsen undoubtedly meant the part beginning with Nora's asking her husband to sit down and ending with her departure, that is, the part containing the discussion Shaw speaks of. Nora's demand at this point certainly signifies a crucial change in the development of the play and perhaps also in her character. But it does not provide an answer to the major question we ask ourselves in the final act: will Nora leave her husband and children? It could be that she wants to change the relationship without actually divorcing her husband. Not until we see her in her outdoor wear—in the middle of the night—and with her traveling bag next to her is an answer, albeit inconclusive, provided.

Within this larger unit, comprising roughly the last two pages in the standard English edition (*Oxford Ibsen* 285-86), we may distinguish the *very end*, the actual leave-taking or exit scene, comprising the last six speeches, plus stage and acting directions. The subsequent discussion will focus on this part of the ending.

The passage that concerns us is the following:

HELMER. Nora, can I never be anything more to you
than a stranger?

NORA (*takes her bag*). Ah, Torvald, only by a miracle of miracles. . . .

HELMER. Name it, this miracle of miracles!

NORA. Both you and I would have to change to the point where. . . . Oh, Torvald, I don't believe in miracles any more.

HELMER. But I *will* believe. Name it! Change to the point where. . . ?

NORA. Where we could make a real marriage of our lives together. Goodbye!

(*She goes out through the hall door.*)

HELMER (*sinks down on a chair near the door and covers his face with his hands*). Nora! Nora!

(*He rises and looks round.*) Empty! She's gone!

(*With sudden hope.*) The miracle of miracles. . . ?

(*The heavy sound of a door being slammed is heard from below.*) (*Oxford Ibsen 286*)

Compare this to the ending in the draft version:

HELMER. Nora, can I never be anything more to you than a stranger?

NORA. Ah, Thorvald, only by a miracle of miracles. . . .

HELMER. Name it, this miracle!

NORA. Both you and I would have to change to the point where. . . . Oh, Thorvald, I don't believe in miracles any more.

HELMER. But I believe in them! Name it! Change to the point where. . .

NORA. Where we could make a real marriage of our lives together. Goodbye.

(*She quickly picks up her bag, waves, and goes out.*)

HELMER (*sinks down on a chair near the door*).

Nora! Nora! . . . The miracle of miracles?
(*Oxford Ibsen 343*)

Although the two texts may seem very similar, there are some notable differences between them. In the draft Nora's leave-taking is somewhat hesitant: she picks up the bag immediately before leaving; she waves to Helmer; and—what is most surprising—there is no slamming of the door. In the published version, by contrast, Nora picks up the bag at an earlier point; she no longer waves to Helmer; and not only does her departure show much greater determination on her part, but it is also much more definite. Ibsen very specially informs us that the door does not merely slam shut but actually locks behind her (“*slåas ilås*”)—as though no return were possible.

While the Nora of the draft may well come back sooner or later, there are also various indications in the published version that she will not. Her slamming of the door, Quigley rightly observes, “seems to summarize in a single action Nora's rejection of her husband, her children, her home and her social position, along with the society that taught her to need such things” (91). Nora's exit through the front door both parallels and contrasts with the opening of the play, where we see her happily returning home with a Christmas tree. “The unadorned Christmas tree, framed in the doorway at the beginning of the play,” Quigley points out (100), is linked “with the figure of Nora, no longer in fancy dress, passing through the same doorway at the end of the play.” We may also, with Hornby, note the contrast between the warmth of the interior and the wintry cold outside: “The physical setting . . . emphasizes the safe, cozy world in which Nora has lived, in contrast to the harsh, cold world to which she will escape” (123).

As for Helmer, we may note that in the draft he claims to believe in miracles, whereas in the play this belief is weakened to a desire to believe in them; as a result the added acting direction concerning the hope he suddenly clings to seems to be born more from desperation than from faith.

Taken together, the nuances inserted by Ibsen considerably strengthen the ending in the published version, making it harsher, more provocative.

Is the ending, then, complete in the Aristotelian sense? Certainly not. Long before Brecht, Ibsen in *A Doll's House*—as well as in *Ghosts* (1881; tr. 1885)—created an open ending, a question-mark ending. At the end of *A Doll's House* he invites the recipient (reader/spectator) to speculate on what will happen to Nora and Helmer after her exit, that is, to take a stand with regard to the situation that has arisen.

There have been many suggestions as to what happens to the Helmers after Nora has left her family, and there are numerous sequels to Ibsen's drama by other hands, providing the audience with a reassuringly definite ending, palatable to a bourgeois audience. The implication in such endings is that Nora should not have left her home. By contrast, those who agree with her decision tend to see Ibsen's next play, *Ghosts*, as a kind of sequel to *A Doll's House*. For in *Ghosts* we witness—in the figure of Mrs. Alving—what might have happened to Nora if she had *not* left her home. Clearly, more than most play endings, the end of *A Doll's House* calls for something “following it.”

On the other hand, the ending is more complete than many people tend to think. Thus, in various ways, Ibsen indicates that Nora will never return to her “doll's house.” If she ever returns to her home—and the parallel between Nora and Mrs. Linde, reunited with Krogstad, may suggest this—it is to help create a new relationship with her husband.

However, it is well known that Ibsen wrote an alternative ending to his play—after he had heard that it was about to be produced in Germany with an altered ending, falsely attributed to him. To prevent such violation of his text by others, Ibsen preferred to commit what he termed “a barbaric act of violence” to the piece himself: “It is thus very much against my wish,” he wrote in a letter (17 February 1880), “when people make use of this alternative ending.” In a letter the following day, he pointed out that the power of the play could only be weakened by the alternative ending. It was primarily the German actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe who was the cause of the new ending. Declaring that *she* would never have left *her* children,

Mrs. Niemann-Raabe refused to play the ending as written. To meet her demands, Ibsen grudgingly fabricated his alternative ending (*Oxford Ibsen* 287-88):

NORA. Where we could make a real marriage out of our lives together. Goodbye. (*Begins to go.*)

HELMER. Go then! (*Seizes her arm.*) But first you shall see your children for the last time!

NORA. Let me go! I will not see them! I cannot!

HELMER (*draws her over to the door, left*). You shall see them. (*Opens the door and says softly.*) Look, there they are asleep, peaceful and carefree. Tomorrow, when they wake up and call for their mother, they will be—motherless.

NORA (*trembling*). Motherless. . . !

HELMER. As you once were.

NORA. Motherless! (*Struggles with herself, lets her travelling bag fall and says.*) Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them. (*Half sinks down by the door.*)

HELMER (*joyfully, but softly*). Nora!

(*The curtain falls.*)

Nora's words about committing a sin against herself are applicable to Ibsen, for this is an ending completely at odds with the one in the published version of the play. Despite Nora's words and despite the indication of an inner struggle, this ending must have seemed very acceptable even to conservative theater-goers at the time. The provocative open ending, stressing *human* rights, has here been transformed into a closed ending, emphasizing woman's maternal obligations. Fortunately, most directors and actresses were not impressed by this second, utterly sentimental ending. It was used only a few times. Even Mrs. Niemann-Raabe after a while reverted to that of the published version.

Where does Nora go once she has slammed the street door shut? To some critics this is an irrelevant question, since—so they argue—

once the final curtain has come down, we know nothing about the future fate of the characters. This is a slight overstatement, overlooking what is explicitly stated in the text. Nora makes it quite plain that she intends to stay the night at Mrs. Linde's place. After that, she intends to return to the area where she spent her childhood to look for a job there, a clear indication of her serious determination to "educate herself," as she puts it.

It is of course very plausible that Nora, departing in the middle of the night, should turn to Mrs. Linde. But besides this being a realistic explanation, it emphasizes that the two women, as Northam has pointed out (26f.), are parallel figures moving in opposite directions. When the play begins, Mrs. Linde turns to Nora for help. Now it is Nora's turn to do the same with regard to her. Mrs. Linde finds a husband: Krogstad. Nora loses one. Just as Mrs. Linde has earlier done, Nora at the end must go out into the world to earn her living. She will arrive at Mrs. Linde's, Northam concludes, a second Mrs. Linde.

Nora's fighting spirit at the end markedly contrasts with the thoughts of suicide she has voiced earlier in the play: "And never see the children again either. Never, never. Oh, that black, icy water!" (*Oxford Ibsen* 275). When this is spoken, Nora still believes that Helmer is prepared to sacrifice himself for her—and so she is prepared to do the same for him. Once Helmer has revealed that he is not at all what she has imagined him to be, the self-sacrifice becomes pointless. When, at the end, Nora puts on the *black* shawl and exits through the *dark* hall, the costume and lighting are no signs that suicide is on her mind. They merely stress the sadness of what is happening—a home is being broken up. They also indicate that the future in store for Nora will be a grim one, making her decision seem all the more courageous.

It is of course true that we can have no certain knowledge of what the future has in store for Nora—or for Helmer. Will she find a job, as she hopes? Will she be able to educate herself? Will she cope with her own situation? And what about him? These are questions we pose when the door has slammed shut, and the final curtain has fallen. Much depends on how Nora's and Helmer's parts are recreated in

performance. A Nora who strikes us as being not only honest but also struggling hard with herself until she reaches her decision will suggest that she *will* manage, whereas a Nora who appears childish, superficial, or high-strung even toward the end of the play will indicate that she will not.

Various critics and directors, in fact, have seen Nora, even at the end, as a doll who is badly equipped to cope with life outside her doll's house. To these commentators it seems obvious that Nora will eventually return home to Helmer and the children. However, they may well disagree as to what this return will signify. In principle, there are three possibilities:

- 1) Nora returns to her earlier doll's role.
- 2) Nora takes over familial authority.
- 3) Nora helps establish a new relationship with her husband, based on equality.

This is the way Weigand, one of the leading Ibsen scholars of his generation, speculated about Nora's fate in the 1920s:

It is hard to picture Nora as a bank clerk or a telephone operator, but it is harder to think of her playing the part for more than three days at a time. Other possibilities come to mind, too. One can choose to think Nora taking to the lecture platform, agitating for the emancipation of woman. Or, again, she may find a lover and weave new romances about a new hero. But personally I am convinced that after putting Torvald through a sufficiently protracted ordeal of suspense, Nora will yield to his entreaties to return home—on her own terms. She will not bear the separation from her children very long, and her love for Torvald, which is not as dead as she thinks, will reassert itself. For a time the tables will be reversed: a meek and chastened husband will eat out of the hand of his squirrel; and Nora, hoping to make up by a sudden spurt of zeal for twenty-eight years of lost time, will be trying desperately hard to grow up. I doubt, however, whether her volatile

enthusiasm will ever carry her beyond the stage of resolutions. The charm of novelty worn off, she will tire of the new game very rapidly and revert, imperceptibly, to her role of song-bird and charmer, as affording an unlimited range to the exercise of her inborn talents of coquetry and play-acting. (68)

In this male chauvinist statement, Weigand clearly sees Nora's future as a combination of our point 2)—takes over familial authority—followed by point 1)—returns to her doll's role—whereas the play text, assuming that “the miracle of miracles” does happen, suggests alternative 3). Weigand's “conviction” seems founded more on his own wishful thinking than on what can actually be supported by the text. It is in fact an oblique condemnation of Nora's decision to leave her home. Weigand seems to be commenting, not on the play, but on a possible production of it; as a critic he does what a director of the play might do: he demonstrates that Nora, even at the end, is a doll and/or a neurotic in whom we can put little trust. Such an interpretation takes some “reading against” Ibsen's text, but it can certainly be done and has obviously formed the basis for some productions of the play.² A director is here free to interpret in a way a critic is not. It is characteristic of much (older) drama criticism that the critics make no distinction between the play's text and a recreation of this text in performance. Weigand's critique is an example of such lack of discrimination.

Unlike Weigand, Strindberg settles for alternative 3)—with the reprimand in the direction of the “Nora-man” (as he liked to call Ibsen) that Nora should never have left her home. Strindberg several times commented on *A Doll's House*, notably in the short story by the same name included in the collection *Getting Married*, published in 1884, where he openly argues against the thesis in Ibsen's play. Strindberg's reason for wanting Nora to stay home was not the conventional one at the time—a true mother just does not leave her children—but a well-founded one, in the light of the play's context: “When Nora finds out what a dolt her husband is she has an even

greater reason for staying with her children” (174). Identifying his male protagonist with Helmer, Strindberg has Pall tell his wife,

You, my little Nora, were badly brought up, I, old fool that I am, hadn't learnt any better. We're both to be pitied. Pelt those who brought us up with rotten eggs, don't hit only me over the head. For though I'm a man, I'm as innocent as you are! (174)

This idea of mutual and equal guilt provides a basis for a new relationship between husband and wife. Strindberg indicates a possible ending of *A Doll's House*, but it is not the ending Ibsen chose to write: when the play closes neither Nora nor Helmer seems willing to acknowledge personal responsibility/guilt. It is interesting to compare Strindberg's rational suggestion for an alternative (happy) ending with the rather sad and pathetic German one fabricated by Ibsen himself.

Even after the early German productions, directors have occasionally omitted the final exit called for in the text. That was, for example, the case in a Swedish stage production in the 1960s, directed by Per-Axel Branner, and in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's heavily adapted television version of the play, transmitted by West German TV in 1976. Fassbinder had turned the play into a Strindbergian power struggle between husband and wife. His Nora recklessly makes use of radical feminist slogans to create a comfortable position for herself within a society she claims to fight. At the end it stands clear that Nora, having humiliated her husband, is from now on the stronger of the two. There is no reason for her to leave.

Another variation of the ending figured in the 1985 Gothenburg City Theater production, directed by Anu Saari. In that version, stressing the comedy aspects of the play, Nora left—only to return almost immediately. Had she changed her mind? That idea was quickly put to shame when it appeared that Nora, having given away her keys, had returned merely because she found the street door locked on the inside for the night. Helmer consequently had to go down to the street and unlock the door for her. There was irony in the fact that he thus literally

let her out into the world. It was she, rather than Helmer, who was humiliated at the end.

So far we have focused on Nora. What about Helmer? This is how the play's ending is described in a recent introductory book on Ibsen:

At the end of the play, she walks out on her husband and her children, leaving behind her a bewildered and confused man who is still completely imprisoned within the conditioned assumptions of his middle-class world. Torvald, we now see, is as much a victim as Nora, but he has not even begun to understand his predicament. The play closes with a question mark left in the audience's mind. Will Torvald ever learn to see and to understand in the way that his wife has, or will he continue to allow his responses and actions to be controlled by social conditioning? (Thomas 72)

This interpretation of Helmer's situation seems valid enough, yet it should be noticed that the critic opts for suggestive statements rather than open questions. Is Helmer at the end still imprisoned in his middle-class world? Does he not at all understand his predicament? Different productions of the play would provide different answers to these questions.

As a matter of fact, a great concern for Helmer's situation is apparent in many recent performances of the play, not the least in Ingmar Bergman's two productions (Munich 1981, Stockholm 1989) of *A Doll's House* (Marker and Marker, *Ingmar Bergman* 19-31; Törnqvist, "Ingmar Bergman's Doll's Houses" 63-76).

Summarizing, I would like to draw attention to three aspects with regard to the ending of *A Doll's House*. Firstly, when discussing this ending, critics have rarely distinguished clearly between the play's text and the performance text, that is, it is often uncertain whether their comments/hypotheses are based on a reading of the text or on impressions from one or more productions—or on a combination of the two.

Secondly, it has appeared that we can divide the critics evaluating Nora's final decision not only into the categories "approving" and

"disapproving" but also into the categories "explicitly evaluative" and "implicitly evaluative." In the former group we find those who state, "Nora did the right thing"; "she shouldn't have left her family"; and so on. In the latter group we find those who state, "Nora will stay single and make the best of it"; "Nora will be back within three days"; and so on. Unless they can be supported by the play's text, the implicit statements, unlike the explicit ones, are not valid; they pretend an objectivity that simply is not there.

Finally, what do the critics and directors who have concerned themselves with the end of *A Doll's House* have in common? What do critics like August Strindberg, Bernard Shaw, Hermann Weigand, John Northam, Austin Quigley, and David Thomas have in common with directors like Ingmar Bergman, Per-Axel Branner, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Joseph Losey—all of them responsible for productions of *A Doll's House*?

Obviously that they are all men. When it comes to recreating the ending of *A Doll's House*—be it for the stage, the radio, the small screen (television), or the big one (film)—there have usually been two men (the actor doing Helmer and the director) to one woman (the actress doing Nora).

It is said in a monograph on Joseph Losey that "[Jane] Fonda and the director did not get along—one of the few times that Losey and one of his stars clashed. Fonda wanted to play the role of Nora in a warmer, more emotional way than Losey allowed. Her natural animation collided with Losey's more restrained temperament" (Hirsch 205). Is it accidental that the director just in this case had a clash with his chief actress? I think not.

Of all the males listed above, no one has sided as strongly with Nora as the author: Henrik Ibsen. What is the reason for this? Sprinchorn (121) assumes that Ibsen thought Nora's decision to leave would be so shocking to his contemporaries that he had to temper it by turning Helmer into a prig and a dolt. Nowadays, when we can more easily accept Nora's decision, Sprinchorn argues, the danger of presenting Helmer in this way is that we are but all too inclined to

understand Nora's choice. Consequently, there is every reason to tone down the more ridiculous aspects of Helmer's character to make him a worthy match for her.

This change in emphasis is apparently also what has happened in modern productions of the play. Contrary to what is generally assumed, modern directors tend to support Helmer rather than Nora. It is an open question whether this is so because 1) Helmer needs this support so that a proper balance between the two is established (Sprinchorn), because 2) it has usually been men who have produced the play, which might result in a greater understanding of the male point of view, or because 3) we have so long been aware of "the woman question" that there is a natural need—after a hundred years—to deal (also) with the man as victimized by society.

Unable to answer this question, I would suggest that it could be further illuminated if some outstanding women directors would side with Nora against a single male (the actor doing Helmer). Just for the sake of balance. To Bergman the most central line in the entire play is Nora's decision that she educate herself, that is, *she* must do something for herself. I can imagine that to a woman director another line would seem very central: Nora's reply to Helmer when he says that he still has it in him to change; it is: "Perhaps. . . if you have your doll taken away from you." For this is what happens in the end when Nora walks out. She sees clearly that this is the only thing that can possibly bring about a change *for both of them*. That is why the end is so worrying—even now.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the traditional English title as compared to the more recent variant *A Doll House*, see Egil Törnqvist, *Transposing Drama: Studies in Representation*. In this book the ending of *A Doll's House* is discussed on pages 84-93, mainly with regard to media differences and varying directorial approaches.

2. For the stage history of the play, see F. J. and L.-L. Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays*, pages 46-89.

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REDIVIVA
THE FEMALE HERO
DAGNY JUEL PRZYBYSZEWSKA

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The woman who departs from the role prescribed for her by patriarchal society is one of the most popular figures in Western literature. . . . Virtually every female hero . . . disobeys patriarchal injunctions concerning virtuous female behavior and thereby reenacts the primordial "fall."

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, *The Female Hero*, 1981

If I were a woman I'd blow someone's brains out.

Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 1915

. . . the best thing about this scene [the shooting of the would-be rapist] is that it shatters the knight-in-shining-armor myth. A woman doesn't really want her father, brother or husband to slay the dragon for her. She wants to slay the dragon herself. Or, if she's unable, to have her mother, sister or girlfriend do it.

Jean Gonick, "Warning: Thelma & Louise On Board," 1991

On the surface, Dagny Juel Przybyszewska might just as well have been a creature of fiction. She left the protective, familial environs of Kongsvinger, Norway, in 1893 at the age of twenty-five. She walked onto the world stage in Berlin, becoming the central woman of the *Schwarzen Ferkel* circle, defying convention, indeed, disobeying "patriarchal injunctions concerning virtuous female behavior," keeping company with the men—Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, and Stanislaw Przybyszewski among them. That summer she married Przybyszewski and with him presided over two of the major cultural bohémias of the *fin de siècle*, first in Berlin, then later in Cracow. With Przybyszewski she traveled across Europe, to Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Spain, and Poland. She wrote. She had two beautiful children, a family who loved her, a husband who adored her. She seemed to have reaped all the rewards of risking great change, "reenacting the fall," and not only finding a new world in the avant-garde but at the same time retaining and returning to the old world of the bourgeoisie.

Reality inevitably shattered the romanticized journey. The last two years of Dagny's life were marked by marital betrayals, both her own and her husband's. She was often separated from her children, who were cared for by others. She lived in poverty and with illness. She fled restlessly, desperately from city to city, from Cracow to Paris, to Prague, back to Kongsvinger, then back to Cracow, and finally to Warsaw. The last spring of her life she and her young son were staying in one room in a boardinghouse in the middle of Warsaw. Przybyszewski had vilified her in print and for all practical purposes had left her. She had no space to write or to read or to play the piano, which she so loved. In one of her last letters to her husband she wrote, "I am so tired of not having a permanent place. Don't you understand that?"¹

For reasons that remain lost in the labyrinths of Dagny's life, she set out in late April on one final journey, traveling with her young son and a friend of both her and her husband across thousands of miles of foreign terrain to the town of Tbilisi in Russian Georgia. Once again

she was taking a risk, but this time of a potentially very self-destructive sort. As if to emphasize it, she was traveling without a passport. On 5 June 1901, she was shot in the head by her friend, who then shot himself. A dramatic, wasteful end to the life of Dagny Juel Przybyszewska.

Her death was a scandal. Rumors were rampant: her young friend was a lover; she laughed her provocative laugh, and he shot her. Stories were told and retold casting Przybyszewska in the roles of the *femme fatale*, the temptress, the man-eater, the snake. It was the way she was to be remembered for many years, connected to scandal, to a destructive eroticism, and to death.

Heroes, female or male, are inherently life-affirming. Dorothy Norman, in her book *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol*, has written, "Myths of the heroes speak most eloquently of man's quest to *choose life over death*" (11). Though Przybyszewska's memory was for many years kept alive through her image as a slayer of men and the provocateur of her own death, I suggest that her real, continuing attraction, for her contemporaries and potentially for us, lies in the intensity with which she embraced her life, its risks, its joys, its pain. A friend wrote to her sister Ragnhild several years after her death: "I remember that Dagny once said to me, 'Everything that we experience of good and, perhaps most, of bad contributes to our development: and the intention *must* be that we shall reach completion.'"²

In my book *Dagny: Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, the Woman and the Myth* (1991), I attempt to recreate the reality of her life as far as I have been able to authenticate it and understand it, moving dialectically between the so-called real persona of daily life; the poetic persona that she alone created in her writing, in response to the world in which she lived and was seen and the way she saw herself; and the mythic persona that she generated in collaboration with her contemporaries, a myth of a new woman, mobile, magic, and free. I rely on a paradigm of the magic woman developed by Nina Auerbach in her book *Woman and the Demon* (1982). Yet the heroic paradigm, as developed by Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope in their book *The Female Hero*

(1981), applies equally and uncannily to Dagny's life, to the sweep of events, to the myth she inspired, and to her writing. It explains in yet another way, from yet another perspective, why Dagny continues to draw, to attract, to fascinate, and particularly to fascinate women.

In *The Female Hero* Pearson and Pope draw on an exceptional group of writers for their source material: the Brontës, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austin, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, May Sarton, Virginia Woolf, Anaïs Nin, Margaret Atwood, and scores of others. Dagny's extant body of writing is small: four plays, a short story, a cycle of prose poems and a cycle of lyric poems. But though she was only a fledgling writer—and not prolific—she still belongs inside the circle of women writers who forged, in however circuitous ways, a paradigm for the female heroic journey.

I would here like to draw attention to her mythic and literary personae, projecting each into the heroic mode. Both are complex creations, the myth engendered by her in collaboration with her contemporaries, the literary hero created by her in response to the roles in which she saw herself cast. Initially, they seem antithetical, the literary persona a lost and divided self, the mythic persona a self whole, contained, ever-changing, always possible. But, together, they represent the beginning and the end of the heroic journey, the literature containing the seeds of heroic action, the myth the treasure that awaits the hero upon her return.

Pearson and Pope begin *The Female Hero* with the following definition:

The classical works on the hero—such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Lord Raglan's *The Hero in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, and Dorothy Norman's *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol*—conclude that the basic heroic pattern in all cultures can be reduced to a monomyth. Dorothy Norman states in *The Hero*: "... the myths of the hero pertain to our most essential struggle with ourselves. . . . It is the hero in man who both reacts most sensitively to challenge,

and courageously pays the price for performing whatever deed is necessary to his or our evolution." (3; Norman 12)

Pearson and Pope use Joseph Campbell's archetypal paradigm of the heroic journey, while at the same time they challenge and change the assumption at the heart of the archetype: "that the hero and central character of the myth is male" (4):

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, begins by saying that the hero may be either male or female. He then proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male and to define the female characters as goddesses, temptresses, and earth mothers. He declares: "The hegemony wrested from the enemy, the freedom won from the malice of the monster, the life energy released from the toils of the tyrant Holdfast the status quo—is symbolized by a woman—if his stature is that of the world monarch, she is the world, and if he is the warrior, she is fame. She is the image of his destiny. . . . (4; Campbell 342)

Pearson and Pope reject the notion that "the male is subject and hero and the female is object and heroine . . ." (4): "Freeing the heroic journey from the limiting assumptions about appropriate female and male behavior . . . is an important step in defining a truly human—and truly humane—pattern of heroic action" (5).

Campbell's three-stage journey includes the departure, what Pearson and Pope call "the exit from the garden"; the journey itself, also called the "initiation"—with its attending trials and tempters—the meeting with the god and the tempter of the opposite sex; and "the reconciliation" with the god of the same sex; and finally "the boon," the triumphant return to the community. The most blatant difference between Campbell's paradigm and Pearson and Pope's is in the penultimate stage, which makes possible the heroic return:

According to the traditional view of the hero, both men and women dissociate themselves from the mother at the beginning of the heroic quest. The traditional quest

is a search for the father, who will initiate the hero into the world. Through the discovery of the father, the hero finds an appropriate identity and place in society. During the quest, the male hero is to develop his father's positive qualities—autonomy, courage, intelligence, independence, and self-control—so that he can replace his father as “master of the world.” The female, however, is not expected to develop the father's qualities. Her task is to learn to sublimate her desire for autonomy and growth and to find identity through her relationship with a man. In Joseph Campbell's words, her task is “to be the mastered world.” (Pearson and Pope 177)

In other words, in real terms in Campbell's paradigm, women can never be heroes because they never come full circle to identify with the parent of the same sex. Pearson and Pope rewrite the penultimate stage of the paradigm for the female hero, to allow her to gain mastery of the universe. Her final reconciliation comes not in the exclusion of the father, but rather in the additional inclusion of the mother. “Having discovered the powerful father within herself, she reconsiders her original repudiation of the mother. Her quest becomes a search for her true, powerful female parent” (177). Pearson and Pope insist that “authors who are consciously feminist emphasize the female hero's reconciliation with her mother as crucial to a successful journey . . .” (178).

This final goal of reconciliation with a powerful female figure is not achieved in any of Dagny's literary works. I believe, however, that it is foreshadowed in them, even by its absence, and that it is potentially achieved in the active interplay between her writing, the myth that grew up around her, our perception of who she was, and our possible identification with her. We, in other words, insist on reconciliation with a woman/myth like Dagny, actively, symbiotically, completing the paradigm of the heroic return.

More immediately critical for any discussion of Przybyszewska and her works is the change in the definition of the primary inhibiting

forces the female hero must rise up in opposition to—the dragons, tempters, seducers, and false guides. The male hero is initially at risk because of hubris. Excessive pride brings about his “fall.” The female hero risks being brought down not because of pride but because of insecurity. “The difference between the female and male heroic pattern usually results from the cultural assumption that strong women are deviant and should be punished” (Pearson and Pope 10). In other words, the male hero must learn to live up to traditional ideals of strength. He must fulfill his conditioning. The female hero must learn to violate her own conditioning, slaying weakness, incorporating strength. She must learn not to martyr herself, not to be selfless, to trust her own perception, to need no approval but her own.

Pearson and Pope isolate four societal myths that, as they say, “conspire to leave the potential hero content with being a heroine only—that is, a secondary, supporting character in a man's story, who is unworthy and unable to do anything other than self-destruct for the sake of others” (18). The four societal myths—the conditioning dragons the hero must slay—are sex-difference, virginity, romantic love, and maternal sacrifice. The two most critical to Przybyszewska as a writer are virginity and romantic love.

According to Pearson and Pope, the female hero's journey is both dialectical and antithetical:

[She] learns a series of paradoxical truths. Self and other, mind and body, spirit and flesh, male and female, are not necessarily in opposition to one another. . . . The hero learns about paradox by journeying through duality. . . . The stage is set for the return and the attendant transformation of the kingdom when the hero recognizes that the tempter and the savior are not opposites and not ultimately external to her. . . . Because society divides human qualities into categories of male and female, the symbols of the final state of wholeness usually are androgynous. (15)

Bearing these generalizations in mind, I would like to return to the worlds of Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, and, proceeding in the heroic

mode—that is, dialectically—from poetic to mythic persona, I will try to reveal the heroic paradigm at work at the heart of both.

When Przybyszewska became the celebrated *bohème* of the *Schwarzen Ferkel* circle, she had murder on her mind. As early as the winter of 1893, she had begun to write brutal little stories about women who kill and are killed. In her first known story two star-crossed lovers murder the man's wife, not with a dagger, but by willing her dead. As the female hero says, "... we simply knew with smiling certainty that she must and would die—she stood in our way—everyone had to understand that—we did not need her—no one needed her, and so we let her waste away and die." Przybyszewska called the story "Rediviva" (Risen Again; first published in 1977).³

In plays she wrote sometime later (probably in the summer of 1897)⁴ the murders become more active in execution. In *Synden* (The Sin; 1898), the beautiful, erotic, white-costumed Hadasa first betrays her good husband, Miriam, with his best friend and then drops poison into his champagne. He dies, wildly shrieking her name. In *Ravnegård* (Ravenwood; 1902), the dark, silent, experienced Gudrun, keeper of a mysterious greenhouse of flowers, which she likens to "fever-blotches on a sick woman's face," confronts her light, innocent sister, Sigrid, now married to Gudrun's former lover. The experienced sister pushes the innocent sister over a high cliff and into the sea below. In *Når solen går ned* (When the Sun Goes Down; 1899), the frail Ivi, dressed in a nightgown, lying in a sickbed, and afraid of the dark, is visited by the ghost of the woman she has murdered, so that she and her lover, as in "Rediviva," might have her out of the way. The play ends in a gothic tableau of twin women in battle, the one already dead, poisoning the air in which the one still living breathes, the dead pressing against her, suffocating her, taking her last breath.

Commenting on Przybyszewska's writing in the winter-to-spring of 1894, Bengt Lidforss wrote to August Strindberg, "Juel has now chosen her occupation and seized the pen instead of the prick. She's writing short stories about love, whoring murder and other depravities ... deeper into animal baseness one can hardly sink. ..."⁵

I suggest that in these gory, grim little stories—these stories about "whoring, murder and other depravities"—that Przybyszewska, in fact, planted the seeds of heroic beginnings for the female hero:

[She] did not write realistic plays about three people involved in a love triangle. She wrote mythic plays about the internal drama of one woman, a woman larger than life, who surrenders her innocence in favor of a darker, more demonic persona closer to the source of her power as a woman. Fundamental to the "action" of each of her plays is the slaying of the inhibiting inner angel, [the dragon of the classic, heroic journey]. . . . She used the triangle to symbolize the painful, incomplete rite of passage of the passionate woman seeking self-knowledge and fulfillment. (*Dagny* 79)

Przybyszewska's plays might be described as raw myths about the beginnings of the female journey toward the "treasure" of the self. In an interview in the *Los Angeles Times* (19 Mar. 1991), Robert Bly said, "Myths do not belong to two centuries ago, or ten centuries ago. They belong basically to the entire human endeavor. One turns to myths when the old patterns become destructive . . . the stories we tell . . . contain modes of action." Both in her life and her writing, Przybyszewska challenged the "old patterns" and suggested new "modes of action." Her journeys, both literal and literary, were incomplete. But she began them, and in the beginnings are always the possibilities of the future ends. As Pearson and Pope have written,

The departure anticipates the wholeness and community experienced in the heroic return. The "treasure" that is the hero's reward, therefore, exists potentially throughout the journey. At the moment of departure, the hero metaphorically moves into a new universe, a new way of seeing. (92)

In Przybyszewska's plays her characters only begin to enter "a new universe." All are brutally threatened after they have slain the first dragon, the dragon of innocence; they are cut off, expelled,

condemned—always by a voice of the status quo, often by woman. In *Ravnegård* (R.), after Gunhild has slain her innocent sister, Aunt Åse brings down a curse on her:

The last words you will hear from my old mouth, which so often sang you to sleep when you were an innocent angel of God. . . . I curse you! I curse you for all eternity! May your bewitched hell-flowers cloud your mind and soul with their poisonous breath, so that you will nevermore see the light and the sun! May you sink into the madness of depression! (R. 58-59)

This curse of madness is a more clouded, terrifying, but more real, way of seeing than before the journey had been undertaken.

It was in the myth that Dagny Juel Przybyszewska herself actually inspired in her lifetime that the "treasure" of the new universe, the "treasure" of self, definition, possibility, was foreshadowed. In my book I reinvent the myth, gathering together a chorus of voices from people of the time, all of whom individually saw in Dagny something quite unique and who collectively saw in her a woman of the future. In symbiotic collaboration, a myth was created, a myth of feminine redefinition, of a female hero intellectually, sexually, and spiritually free, in her image containing and, thus, dissolving all polarities. In her "the unnatural divisions disappeared, making the sensual seem spiritual, the intellectual seductive, the spiritual so astonishingly physical" (*Dagny* 26). She literally seemed to break down temporal and material limitations, giving rise to fantasies of new, ever-changing forms of existence. No single persona captured the essence of all the others as did the "solo dancer," who seemed to defy the laws of matter.

She was also something that was for that time very unusual, a kind of solo dancer, the only one in our closest circle. There was something of the wood-nymph, the mirage in her dance, something fantastic and magical, that completely bewitched the spectators. (Franz Servaes; quoted in *Dagny* 22-23)⁶

. . . her body found limitless possibilities for expression in the measured, nearly commonplace rhythm. . . .

With the first glance her arms seemed to fasten themselves immovably around your body. With a movement full of promise she stretched them out, let them flutter in the air and lift over her head. In her hands she held wreaths of flowers. Like a vestal she strode toward the temple, like a Euridice she glided into the night, like a Judith she snuck to Holofernes's tent. Her well-formed head bobbed like a little boat and disappeared into the cloudy mist. In this cloud her face shone with a phosphorescent light. (Julius Meier-Graefe; quoted in *Dagny* 23)

Interestingly to me, Pearson and Pope in *The Female Hero* use, as a metaphor for female completeness, an image of Anaïs Nin from her *House of Incest* (1936), an image of a woman dancing "wildly and alone and yet at one with all things," what they call "the community of one" (230).

She looked at her hands tightly closed and opened them completely like Christ; she opened them in a gesture of abandon and giving; she relinquished and forgave, opening her arms and her hands, permitting all things to flow away and beyond her. . . . And she danced; she danced with the music and with the rhythm of earth's circles; she turned with the earth turning, like a disk, turning all face to light and to darkness evenly, dancing towards daylight. (Nin 70-71)

The image is strikingly like the image of Dagny as the solo dancer, who was, indeed, perceived in her time to be a community of one. "She was talked about," said a member of the circle, "as if she were the only woman of her kind" (Julius Bab; quoted in *Dagny* 24). It is the image her literary persona begins to search for and never finds. But she does break out of her confining garden and slay the dragon myths of, in particular, innocence and romantic love.

The symbols of the "cage" and the "mirror" are the most common expressions of the oppressive garden of traditional roles. All of Przybyszewska's dramatic protagonists are trapped in cages and mirrors of various kinds. Hadasa of *Synden* is confined to a large, rich drawing room. It is elegant, but it is a prison nonetheless. She loves to go out into the world, but her husband, Miriam, the keeper of marital fidelity, begs her to stay in the confines of the drawing room. We first encounter her there in a beautiful white silk dress. Again it is elegant, but it is also a cage, a costume of purity and innocence in which she can no longer conceal herself.

Gunhild of *Ravnegård* also inhabits an artificially big space, "*a large, deep room*" (R. 32) with a great fireplace. But it, too, is a cage, a dark, Gothic house, far from human beings, encircled by threatening ravens. There Gunhild, who tends her sick flowers that, as she says, long to be free, is watched over, guarded, by her old Aunt Åse, the voice of the traditional role, who will finally condemn her. Her greatest companion is silence, but it is the silence of the utterly self-conscious, the cage of the self. She speaks of it thus to her Aunt: "If you don't speak, then the fire crackles or the frost moves softly around the house, or the wind tugs at the door or the walls expand. And even if everything is silent, one still hears one's own heart beat" (R. 36).

The cage of *Når solen går ned* (N.) is the most ominous of all and the one from which the protagonist does not escape. It is "*a deep room, completely in shadow*" (N. 95). Again it is a rich room, its walls, floors, and tables covered in thick carpets and tapestries. But, in the room is a bed on which Ivi lies, dressed in a long white gown, like a nightgown, throughout most of the play. She rises only at the end, to struggle with the ghost-woman who wants to poison her. She flees to the door, then runs back to the cagelike bed, where she collapses.

Przybyszewska's cages are gloomy mansions, white gowns, elegant parlors, and silence. All her protagonists long to free themselves. All take the first step; all slay at least one dragon. In the world of the plays the dragon is perceived primarily to be the myth of innocence or

the myth of the virgin. Pearson and Pope (27) refer to Virginia Woolf who, in *A Room of One's Own*,

discusses how the ideal of virginity limits women's achievement and psychological growth. The chief task of the virgin is not to learn all she can about the world, but to be protected from physical, emotional, and intellectual knowledge—indeed, from even the appearance of experience.

Przybyszewska's heroes are already worldly when the play begins. They have, in the terms of the paradigm, already exited once from the garden. Hadasa loves to go to balls. They are, in her husband's words, the great sea in which she mirrors herself. The mirror, of course, is simply another form of the cage. But it is the world stage, at least, the stage of experience, that is Hadasa's mirror. She herself has—or at least feigns—a more limited view, however. Her husband, Miriam, speaks of her worldly mirror in response to her seductive assertion that he and Leon, the friend with whom she will betray Miriam, are her reflecting seas. By the end she shatters all mirrors, rejecting the lover and poisoning the husband, and is left only with herself. The last word of the play is her name, Hadasa, called out by the dying Miriam, the inhibitor of experience. Should Hadasa have the courage to walk out into the world again, she will be walking onto a very different stage. Przybyszewska leaves her, however, confronting the horror of her fading reflection. But her name, Hadasa, has been spoken.

Gunhild, too, has been in the world. She has known many people and had a passionate liaison with a man by the name of Thor. She has left him, though, retreating to the eerie estate of Ravenwood, where she lives with her captor-Aunt, her dark birds, and her sick, exotic flowers. Retreat is, however, impossible for Gunhild. As the play opens, she awaits the arrival of her innocent sister, Sigrid, who has married Thor and who has naïvely insisted that they come to celebrate with Gunhild. All these characters I interpret as the internal voices of the hero: Thor, her repressed passion; Aunt Åse, her internalized social morality; Sigrid, her innocence; Gunhild herself, the authentic,

raging—but silenced—voice. Aunt Åse says to Gunhild that she has always spoken in one-syllable words, whereas Sigrid, whom she calls “the ray of sun” (R. 44), always “chattered like a canary” (R. 36). Gunhild was constantly hushing her sister: “Be quiet, you disturb me” (R. 36).

The crux of the play is that Sigrid must be silenced so that Gunhild can learn to speak. In terms of the action of the play, Gunhild embraces Thor again, in passion and in fear, and then murders Sigrid by pushing her into the sea. In terms of the heroic paradigm, Gunhild shatters the mirror, the “adored little sister.” The chaos she unleashes, however, is profound. Gunhild has attempted to construct another mirror for herself, one that comes from within, her flowers. When her aunt asks her why she has never spoken of Thor, her passion, her experience, she responds,

Do you see the [flowers] that look like fever blotches on a sick woman's face. And those that look like frost flowers on the window pane. . . . And . . . my soul's big speckled birds! They would love to fly to another world where space goes on forever . . . , but they sit so tightly on their stems, they're bound so tightly to the earth, and they're suffering. Can you see that all my flowers are sorrowful? I've nursed them all in my greenhouse. . . . Don't you think that's better than all those words? (R. 35)

Sad as they are, shackled as they, sick as they are, Gunhild's flowers have been her words, in isolation her reflection of herself. In outrage and rage, Aunt Åse, suspecting the death of the innocent sister, begins to destroy Gunhild's flower-language. Przybyszewska's stage directions read,

Aunt Åse walks up and down in extreme agitation. She listens. she waits. She wrings her hands in helpless anger.

She catches sight of a bunch of flowering begonias placed on the table. She stands in front of them, puts her hand to her forehead as if the strong fragrance

pained her. Suddenly she rips the flowers loose and throws them in the fireplace. The she leaves quickly. The stage stands empty. (R. 54-55)

In the end Aunt Åse curses Gunhild for her loss of innocence, asking that her “bewitched hell-flowers cloud her mind and soul with their poisonous breath . . .” (R. 58-59). She asks, it seems, that Gunhild's own words destroy her. Gunhild accepts the curse. “Woe unto the day I was born” (R. 59), she says. “But never believe that your curse can separate me from the man I love and who loves me. Come, Thor, come. . . we two are condemned to love each other forever. . .” (R. 59). And she breaks into tears.

It might seem that Przybyszewska has slain one myth simply to embrace another, that is, the myth of romantic love. Indeed, in each play the hero's innocence is first lost through her passionate attraction to a man. As I said earlier, however, I do not believe that these plays can be read as love stories. They must be read as myth, as the internal drama of one woman. Thus Gunhild leaves the stage condemned, but embracing her passion in the form of Thor.

This is not to deny the power of the myth of romantic love, either in Dagny's life or in her literary works. In actual fact, she became a real victim of it in her relationship to Przybyszewski. In her plays she used it as the impetus for the flight from the cage or the shattering of the mirror of innocence. And in her cycle of prose poems, *Sing mir das Lied vom Leben und vom Tode* (in Polish translation in 1899), she used love as the primary metaphor for the loss of self. In these four poems (hereafter SLLT.), published in the original Norwegian in 1900,⁷ at a time when Dagny was separated from her husband, she “confronted the myth of the queen of love, poeticizing the nightmare of the recovery and loss of the poet's soul in the wake of her consuming attraction for the man who has adored her” (*Dagny* 94).

The first poem begins with a startling image, a woman staring down at a dead man's face. Her tone is calm. It is, we soon learn, a brief, thrilling moment of freedom. The symbols of the cage and the mirror play in her opening description of her entrapment in his love:

HE was dead now.

She sat motionless, looking inquisitively down at the face, pale, with closed eyes.

How he had loved her! His love had wrapped her in queen's robes and set a queen's invisible crown on her head, a crown everyone sensed, to which everyone bowed. The shining beams of his eyes had spun a tiara around her forehead, loftier than any royal sovereign had borne. She had been queen in love's kingdom, for never had any man loved a woman more than he had loved her.

And now he was dead.

Nevermore would she read in his eyes that she was the sun round which the world revolved. Nevermore would she feel the fragrance of the flowers his love bred all about her. The flowers were now withered, and death's bony hand had torn the queen's crown from her head.

.....
She felt at peace, relieved, almost happy. She stretched out her arms and breathed deeply, as if freed from a painful thought.

The flowers in his garden of love had grown too lushly around her; the fragrance had choked her breathing; the tendrils had wound themselves around her life, until she had felt bound, hand and foot.

And now he was dead, and she stretched out her arms in well-being, like someone awakening from a nightmare. (SLLT. 289-90)

In the first volume of *No Man's Land* (1988) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the transformation of what they call "words into weapons" by late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century women writers, their ultimate goal being, according to Gilbert and Gubar, "to wrest authority from men" (65). They find that such writers as Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, H. D., Katherine Mansfield, and Edna St. Vincent Millay (among others) "create women who achieve heroic stature

through witnessing or facilitating male death, who feel inexplicably empowered by male deaths . . ." (94-95). They examine, in particular, Mansfield's "The Garden Party" (1922) and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), in which "two major feminist modernists explore moments of being in which women are mysteriously empowered by meditations on dead men" (95).

There is no question that female empowerment is the underlying theme of Przybyszewska's prose poem cycle and that the woman protagonist's flourishing is intimately connected—both psychologically and metaphorically—with the death of the male lover. Yet empowerment eludes Przybyszewska's hero, for the dead man will not die. In the first poem, when she opens herself to the winds, she finds herself in "the rainbow-colored cobwebs of her own dreams," taking pleasure "in her feelings' unfettered indefiniteness, her thoughts' eternal ebb and flow" (SLLT. 290). But the cobwebs are too fragile. The dead man invades her dreams once again, "and she builds a temple for him in her heart, and all her dreams, her pain, her longing she let billow like frankincense around his image" (SLLT. 292).

In *The Female Hero* the authors make the obvious, but necessary and reassuring, observation that,

The hero seldom proceeds directly to the treasure. Her journey is more often a circuitous, labyrinthine one, in which she moves back and forth between dualities, and through an incongruous series of true and false guides and trials. . . . Each seducer . . . brings her closer to a full understanding of herself. (77)

In the progression of the cycle it is precisely through such a labyrinthine course, moving from duality to duality, that Przybyszewska leads her hero, shattering recurring mirrors of the Other. The initial, liberating moment is her meditation on male death. In the three poems that follow she strikes out, not, as in the plays, through physical acts of murder, but through creative acts of her own, captured in her colorful mental cobwebs.

In the last poem the protagonist is running through the streets of a city, not knowing where she is going, fleeing love, desperately looking for the answer to one question: who am I? She runs into a corridor, somewhat like Alice running toward a dark Wonderland. It is lined with threatening portraits, perhaps of people trying to determine who she should be. The corridor leads to a vault that becomes an underground grave. And, there, she encounters once again the dead man, lying on a bier, incense billowing around him. Who am I? she asks him again, still believing he is the only one who has the answer. But his face simply stiffens and his eyes close. "Only his hands pressed hers hard and mercilessly, and she felt herself wither in their grip, under his dead glance, wither like a tree in autumn, as the storm once again sang its wild psalm of death around her and the black night covered her up forever" (SLLT. 297).

In this cycle of prose-poems Przybyszewska puts to rest the myth of romantic love. Her protagonist does not survive it. But she is in that last moment, though hideously linked to the dead lover as night covers her up, symbolically closer to herself than she has been before. Metaphorically, at the very least, she is his equal. She has asked the question: who am I? The image with which she is rewarded is a schizophrenic one: a questioning woman entwined with a demon corpse. But it is a true image. And Przybyszewska comforts her hero as if she were a small child, swaddling her in the psalm of death and covering her up with the blanket of night.

In a sense this is as far on the heroic journey as Przybyszewska's literary persona really comes. The reward is bitter. It is the perception that she is a deeply divided self. This is the posture Przybyszewska also takes in her cycle of lyric poems, *Digte (Poems)*.⁸ "The poems . . . are all existential nightmares about the divided self. There is no lost lover, no soul mate, for whom the woman searches. She is searching only for other parts of herself . . ." (Dagny 105). In terms of the heroic paradigm, it is as if she had already exited the garden, shattered the first mirrors of innocence and love, and been left alone in a labyrinth with estranged parts of herself which she anxiously attempts to

gather together. She sees her twin self as a bloody memory swimming toward shore, a beast at the door, a sisterly bat full of dark dreams hovering near her as she sails on a river of blood, like a head of burning hair. "Her past is separated from her present, her fear from her will, her creative dreams from her consciousness, her head from her womb" (Dagny 105-06).

In *The Female Hero* Pearson and Pope remark that "the conflict between the persona and the repressed and unacknowledged self creates a bizarre, terrifying existence" (55). They use another image from Nin's *The House of Incest*:

I am a woman with Siamese cat eyes smiling always
behind my gravest words, mocking my own intensity.
I smile because I listened to the OTHER and I believed
the OTHER: I am a marionette pulled by unskilled
fingers, pulled apart, inharmoniously dislocated; one
arm dead, the other rhapsodically in mid-air. . . . I
see two women in me freakishly bound together, like
circus twins. (Nin 497)

Perhaps Przybyszewska's poet in the poems has come one step further. The images to which she is freakishly bound are not the Other, they are herself. But they seem ugly and dangerous: a bloodied memory like a sea-troll, a gray bat, a wild beast. She does not yet know them, nor can she love them, nor can she incorporate them. As one of Edith Wharton's protagonists says (*The House of Mirth*, 1905), "I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts—I hate ugliness you know" (191).

Nin's counterpart to the freakish circus twins is the woman dancing "wildly," "alone," "at one with all things." For Pearson and Pope it is a metaphor for "female completeness" (230). I have earlier suggested that Dagny Juel Przybyszewska inspired a myth in her time not only of female completeness but of endless possibility. It is captured, in particular, in the image of the solo dancer, so like Nin's own. In total it subsumes all polarities, diffuses all hierarchies. Dagny was perceived to be human and animal, boyish and divinely feminine, bold

and passive, beautiful and not beautiful, intellectual and sexual, muse and *femme fatale*, dark-haired and blond, of death and of life, angelic and demonic, of the sublime and the mundane. One of the most moving images came from a woman who, as a girl of twelve, had met Dagny in Lund, when she was visiting her sister. The young girl happened to catch Dagny in a private moment in the library:

... in the middle of a ray of sun Dagny and her young son danced and played. ... the boy looked like a little, high-spirited, gracious Puck in Midsummer Night's Dream. The mother's frizzy, dark blond hair, parted in the middle, had fallen into disorder when, light as a bird, she jumped up on the big library table. The bun at the back of her neck had come loose, the color had risen in her otherwise ivory cheeks—she actually looked at that moment like some kind of Titania or wood nymph. I stood in the doorway, not wanting to disturb the beautiful sight. It was like accidentally surprising a deer with her young in the deepest thicket of the forest—far from humans' narrow domains. (*Dagny* 31-32; quoting Posse)

Pearson and Pope remark, "Heroes in fantasy and myth enjoy a magical, symbiotic relationship with the culture" (226). The mythic persona Dagny engendered in her time is, I suggest, the treasure of the whole self, for which her literary heroes—and indeed we—go in search. The young girl from Lund had written, "She was a messenger from the great world out there that lay waiting for me with all its enticing promises and unlimited possibilities. In my heart I immediately called her 'Europa' . . ." (*Dagny* 47; quoting Posse).

There was, of course, a great discrepancy between myth and real life. The story of the woman—the writer, the lover, the mother—was a story of incompleteness and tragedy. Nevertheless, the heroic paradigm does inform the journeys Dagny took, in literature, in legend, and in real life. In her short story, "Rediviva," she had written (see p. 24) about the other woman, let us call her the "preheroic woman": "We did

not need her—no one needed her, and so we let her waste away and die." That woman is still wasting away, still dying off today. Dagny, with her pen and her person, dealt her a blow.

NOTES

1. The letter, undated, is in the possession of Professor Roman Taborski, Warsaw.
2. The letter from Hedvig Aubert, dated 18 June 1908, is in Ragnhild Juell Bäckström's correspondence, which is in the possession of her grandson—Dagny's grand-nephew—in Stockholm.
3. Martin Nag discovered the unpublished manuscript in Edvard Munch's papers in the Munch Museum in Oslo and had it published.
4. Przybyszewska wrote four extant plays, only one of which, *Den sterkere* (1896), was published in Norwegian in her lifetime. The three other plays, *Synden*, *Ravnegård*, and *Når solen går ned*, were published in Polish or Czech translations, and finally in the original Norwegian in 1978. All page references to these texts are to my translations of passages found in this Norwegian edition.
5. Dated 6 Feb. 1894, Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm.
6. Many of the quotes of Przybyszewska's contemporaries which I make use of in *Dagny* were originally collected by the Polish writer and journalist Ewa K. Kossak, in her biography of Przybyszewska from 1973. It was translated into Swedish in 1978. References are to the person originally quoted and to my published translations in *Dagny* (1991).
7. English translations from the Norwegian text in the journal *Samtiden* 11 (1900).
8. The poems were initially published by Martin Nag in an article in *Samtiden* in 1975. They appeared in English in 1988.

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- (N.) See Przybyszewska. *Synden og to andre* . . .
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OLAV DUUN'S WOMEN

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The Norwegian novelist Olav Duun often sent characters in his fictions to America when problems arose for them at home, but few of Duun's novels have managed the crossing or been translated into English. The fact is that even in Norway Duun's novels are less read than literary quality should indicate. Duun does have what could be called his congregation, and his best novels are part of a national literary canon. Still one could claim that Duun is a victim of the linguistic peculiarities or the specific language situation in Norway. This small country has two languages, with small differences between them. "Bokmål," the majority language, is based on the Danish-Norwegian written language tradition—to which Ibsen, Hamsun, and Undset belong. "Nynorsk," founded as a written language in the 1850s, is based on a majority of Norwegian dialects and is a very rich literary language—in which authors like Arne Garborg, Tarjei Vesaas, Kjartan Fløgstad, and Olav Duun wrote. "Nynorsk" is still a minority language, which has the capacity to produce aversion, even aggression, in groups of readers. That is the main reason Duun's popularity, even in Norway, is less than it ought to be. Let me add that when selected passages from one of Duun's novels appear here in my own English translation, they are in no way an adequate substitute for Duun's rich language, characterized by irony, ambiguities, and puns.

Many of Duun's novels have women as their main characters. They are energetic and strong in body and will, and they have the qualities of real heroines, which some of them actually turn out to be. It seems, however, that Duun also knows a good deal about the suppression of women. He is at any rate very much aware of the distinction between the sexes and their sex roles in society. In one of the few letters from Olav Duun at the Oslo University Library, a letter addressed to a girl-friend of his, he especially comments upon the consequences of being a woman:

So it was decided that you had to go to the kitchen school at last. But isn't that damned unjust. And, all in all, girls seldom get the opportunity to become what they want to. It must be terribly strange to be a girl. I suppose you girls do have to suppress much that we know very little about.

A letter like this, however, does not give real access to the main motifs and themes in Duun's novels. He was no feminist writer nor in any way a revolutionary. He did not use literature to participate in actual political and social conflicts. This fact, however, does not mean that he was not committed to values. Despite a persistent irony, he is an eager spokesman for human dignity, and the defenseless, many of them women, are always depicted with sympathy in his work.

Olav Duun was born in 1876, in a small fishing and farming community north of Trondheim, an area that served as the main source for the basic elements in his fictional world. He was educated as a teacher and practiced in primary school for more than twenty years. He died in 1939, just after the outbreak of the First World War, ten days before the death of Sigmund Freud, with whom he had something in common, which I shall briefly comment upon later. Olav Duun made his debut in 1907. He published twenty-five novels and five collections of short stories.

There are three high points in Duun's production. In his last novel *Menneske og maktene* (1938)—given the retrospective title *The Human Being and the Forces* and translated into English as *The Floodtide*

of Fate (1967)—humanity is exposed to the destructive elementary forces of nature, symbolized in an overwhelming flood threatening the inhabitants of a small island community with death and catastrophe, while at the same time testing their will to survive and their hopes for a new life. Most critics estimate that the peak of Duun's artistic achievement is the six-volume series *Juvikfolke* (1918-23; *People of Juvik*, 1930-35), a family saga developing a modern hero with old ancestors. His name is Odin, like the chief god of the Old Norse pantheon. However, the relationship indicated is not only to the pagan Norse gods, but to Christ, since Odin, the illegitimate child and the son of a carpenter, voluntarily sacrifices his own life to save his ugliest enemy and thus brings about reconciliation in a conflict-ridden society. The New Testament, then, can be easily identified as an effective background for the plot in what is actually a very complicated work of art.

My special choice among Duun's novels is a trilogy published 1929-33, in which Duun really develops his woman hero. Her name is Ragnhild, and though she is in some ways a counterpart of Odin, many of her acts are antithetical to his. He sacrifices himself, while in the first novel of the Ragnhild series, titled *Medmenneske* (1929; *Fellow Human Beings*), Ragnhild, the good human being, kills the evil one, her father-in-law, and this act brings about the possibility of reconciliation. Ragnhild and the novels about her will eventually constitute the basis for my main argument.

Despite a general veneration for such contemporaries of Olav Duun as Knut Hamsun and Sigrid Undset, I consider Duun to be the most outstanding of Norwegian novelists. It is possible to say of Sigrid Undset that her knowledge of historical facts is superior to Duun's and that her use of details makes her description of life during the Middle Ages strikingly rich and vivid. But Olav Duun has a more subtle insight into the history of a family as a dynamic force in later generations. Knut Hamsun's happy linguistic eruptions create great love poetry and equally great nature poetry, for example, in such novels as *Pan* (1894; tr. 1920) and *Victoria* (1898; tr. 1923), and his artistic mas-

tery is demonstrated also through the unconscious conflicts in strange souls, as in *Sult* (1890; *Hunger*, 1899) and *Mysterier* (1892; *Mysteries*, 1920). Although Duun's rich prose may not be as rhythmically seducing as Hamsun's, Duun matches Hamsun in linguistic opulence and artistry, when the real depths of existence are to be fathomed. Let these assertions, however, be what they are. Artists cannot really be compared, and I have made this comparative detour just to throw Duun into a certain relief.

Duun was born in 1876, three years before Ibsen had his second breakthrough with the publication of *A Doll's House* (tr. 1880), and Duun had his breakthrough in 1907, the year after Ibsen's death. The two men, therefore, belong to different periods in literary history. Even so, Ibsen may be the best starting point for an introduction to Olav Duun. Their social backgrounds were different, Ibsen being essentially a small-towner and a member of the petty bourgeoisie. And, on the surface at least, the values at stake in the conflicts of most of Ibsen's plays are equally bourgeois/philistine. The major characters of Duun's novels, as already indicated, belong to a farming and fishing community, partly in opposition to the bourgeois world. This fact, of course, does not mean that Duun's society is emancipated, without hypocrisy, freed from philistinism. But the conflicts of Duun's best novels are fundamentally existential, directly concerned with the great concepts, such as life and death, the forces of destruction, and the possibility of resurrection and reconciliation. Duun himself was what you might call an agnostic humanist, but metaphysical aspects are essential in his best novels.

Despite these differences, there is an amazing kinship between Ibsen and Duun on a deep, thematic level, especially where their conception of the role of the unconscious forces of the psyche are concerned. It is a well-known fact that Sigmund Freud received a strong impetus from Henrik Ibsen's dramatic works. For instance, Freud used Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* (1886; tr. 1889) as a main example to illustrate the unconscious mechanisms of the Oedipus Complex. There is no reason to believe that Ibsen knew Freud, but with his

creative imagination, Ibsen has been able to grasp or anticipate, without any frame of theoretical reference, a psychological insight that corresponds very well with the results of systematic psychoanalytical research of decades later. Characters like Rebecca West, Ellida Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea* (1888; tr. 1890), and Hedda Gabler are examples of how Ibsen, through his imagination, and unconsciously or not, discovers the unconscious as a system and a controlling force in the personality, a force that is based in childhood and thus makes regression a compulsory part of grown-up life.

What has been said here about Ibsen would be even more adequate as a characteristic of Olav Duun and especially of his early novels, some of them with women as main characters. We don't know if Duun had read any of Freud's works. What we do know is that Duun's own imagination was in tune with the Freudian concept of the unconscious, especially the Oedipus complex. Compulsory drives, rooted in childhood, are strong forces in Duun's world, where passion, aggression, and sexuality are dominant traits that are—as a rule—transformed and, in fact, disguised. The protagonists/subjects have a goal or an object that the text reveals to the reader, but not to the protagonists, who often act destructively without knowing why, without discovering the enormous regressive power of passion and love. I shall give one example.

Duun introduces this central thematic complex through a woman with the name of a Norse goddess, Sigyn. She is the main character in two novels, *Nøkksjølia* (1910; Nøkksjø Valley) and *Sigyn* (1913). The first of the two novels tells of Sigyn's unhappy childhood and youth; the second depicts a matrimonial crisis, about seven years after Sigyn's marriage to a man she did not love, but whom she married in order to spite the man she thought she loved. Sigyn is a complicated and interesting character. Left as a baby by her mother, Sigyn has no conscious memory of her. Nevertheless throughout life, Sigyn is governed by her relationship to the absent mother. Unconscious, regressive mechanisms work with terrifying consequence. Any relationship Sigyn establishes later on involves her mother. Sigyn herself does not

recognize the basis of the strange patterns of feeling and behavior she develops, especially in love affairs, in which dominance—even sadism—is one concept, masochism another. The most interesting part of the pattern appears when Sigyn consciously starts on a new project in the novel *Sigyn*: she wants to reestablish the relationship to her husband. She has reason to feel guilt and wants to give their marriage a new start. Then a girlfriend from the past pays a visit. Warm friendship and a bewildering secret rivalry create a sudden symbiosis within Sigyn when her girl friend starts to talk about the man she loves. The friend does not tell who the man is, but, with an absolute instinct, Sigyn automatically chooses just the same man as a love-object in a new affair, which makes her forget everything about repairing her own marriage. The consequence is disaster, symbolic murder, and a terrible feeling of guilt, until at last there is a kind of reconciliation. The author depicts compulsory acts that really are intelligible only within the framework of psychoanalysis: it is not the girlfriend who is Sigyn's real rival. The girlfriend represents something in Sigyn's unconscious that makes regression unavoidable, an open entry to the old, unresolved conflicts at the bottom of Sigyn's soul. This is Duun's first introduction of the Oedipus/Electra Complex, which is a very frequent theme in his novels, often subtly combined with the motif of incest.

I have claimed that there is a kinship between Duun and Ibsen. Such a kinship is also manifested partly through intertextuality, especially with regard to *A Doll's House* and the Ragnhild trilogy. I suspect that, when Duun wrote *Medmenneske*, he was actually arranging a substructural dialogue with Ibsen. Listening to this dialogue, readers must be struck by the similarity of motifs, but they will also notice a profound thematic difference. Motifs found in Ibsen's text are transformed and given new perspectives in Duun's.

Remember the conflict in *A Doll's House*. Nora Helmer has committed forgery to save the life of her husband, Torvald Helmer. She treasures the knowledge of that secret, which she fantasizes revealing to her husband sometime in the future. Then he will really see what she has done and highly value her deed. This is her first concept of *the*

wonderful. When Torvald gets to know of her action, through a letter of blackmail, he condemns his wife totally. He sees her as just a traitor who has insulted him and trespassed society's norms of morality. He sentences her to spiritual death: to keep up a veneer of respectability, stay in the doll's house, but be totally removed from her children and any responsibility in life. When, later on, the false bills are returned to Torvald, with the assurance that the case is over, he rejoices—with the cry "I am rescued"—and offers Nora her old rights as a lark in the doll's house. But then he meets a new Nora, one who has recognized that she has been cheated and suppressed. She cannot stay. She does not love her husband anymore. She leaves, to search for her inner self, and now is to be found everywhere in the world, on all its stages, as a hallmark of Ibsen's dramatic genius.

I shall give a brief outline of the conflict in Duun's novels about Ragnhild, with special attention paid to *Medmenneske*, the first novel in the series. We are not in a doll's house; we are in a Home of Despair and Hopelessness. That name—*Vonlausheimen*—has even been given to the farm and the house where Ragnhild and her family live. Ragnhild is married to Håkon. They are in their late twenties, have been married for a couple of years, and have one son. They live on a small farm, together with Håkon's parents, Didrik and Tale, both in their sixties. Didrik is still going strong. He is full of activity and vitality, even sexuality, with the maid as his main object. Tale is a very straightforward woman, who is, nevertheless, always speaking ambiguously, often with a harsh tongue. Didrik neither loves her nor respects her; he even treats her with outright violence. One could say that Didrik reveals psychopathic traits. His actual problem, however, is that there is no true outlet for his vitality and his power. The farm is small and there is no real work to do for either him or Håkon. And he has been forced to let Håkon take over, with a small retirement possibility for himself. Now Didrik wants to found an industry on the farm, using the waterfall for large-scale milling. The problem is that Håkon has the same plan as his father but cannot cooperate with him. One of them has to yield, but neither of them wants to.

There is no doubt that Ragnhild is the main character. She ardently wishes to be a mediator reconciling father and son. Not only she herself but also the community around her believes in her capacity to bring about harmony. She represents the creative principle in the world and is a symbol of good. The following passage, which is from an inner monologue, acquaints the reader with her qualities. It is the first night depicted in the novel. Ragnhild has observed the enormous tension between her husband and her father-in-law, who at the moment is tiptoeing through the house, plotting:

She tried to devise something that could be of help, so that Didrik and Håkon would agree and cooperate. She devised various things, but at last she stopped with the thought that something would happen to show one what was the most correct thing to do. Behind everything stood Our Lord. If He needed her, He would find her. Håkon slept. Silently, but heavily; she thought the Lord himself put His hand on his forehead and let him sleep. A merciful sleep for him. For the only one she knew who deserved it. Outside was the great silent darkness. The raindrops knocked at the window; to her, it was as if they were acquaintances who knew about her, or like a higher power that would remind her of its existence. It was strange to know: under this roof lived this person and that person, a whole misfortune of people. What might not happen? This is where *she had come*. Good night, everyone, fools and wise men, you are all alike, Amen! (29)

It is once said that she has the faith of a whole congregation. But Didrik's demonic intrigues and violent advances teach her a hard lesson and little by little leave her in a state of deep anxiety and despair. She nevertheless refuses to give in. She wants to believe that her life at the Home of Despair is not in vain. Even in days of violence and destruction she radiates a mysterious light and a kind of hope in that dark world. Within her a voice keeps saying, "I trust I shall find heaven some day" (38).

She sees the suffering of her husband; suddenly she even fears that he might murder his father one day. Not only does she want to reconcile father and son, but she also wants to rescue her husband from the fate of becoming a murderer. One day Ragnhild kills Didrik. He approaches her with plain evil, a mixture of sexuality and violence, and bringing threats against Håkon, and his insinuations are so shameless that Ragnhild just acts spontaneously. She is carrying an ax and hits Didrik with its butt. She is very confused: "she knew many things at the very same moment," the text says. But all of a sudden she feels that what she has done was an act that was necessary to rescue Håkon from killing his father.

Maybe that is not "the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Ragnhild is also a relative of the typical Duun family, which I have described earlier. Ragnhild, too, is motivated by unconscious drives, not only by hidden passions within her, which she does not want to recognize, but even by fear and converted aggression.¹ The existence of these drives, however, does not imply that Olav Duun, in a naturalist manner, describes Ragnhild as just a passive victim of destructive forces. Duun rather implies the existence as well of positive, creative unconscious forces, which may lead a human being to act on behalf of life, even through blind aggression. That is what Ragnhild does. The author, as it were, agrees with her, when step by step she realizes that, in her terrible act, she has been the tool of a higher power. Some of the passages quoted below will, I believe, clearly indicate this.

Before she hits Didrik, Ragnhild has never thought of doing so. After the act, her only commitment is to give meaning to what she has done. She realizes that, had she not done what she did, there would have been even more destruction. She knows the agony of Håkon and recognizes that it was a question of his life or Didrik's. Like Nora in *A Doll's House*, Ragnhild hopes that when she tells Håkon what she has done and why she did it, he will not only accept it but even be glad and thank her for doing it. But Håkon absolutely refuses to accept her sacrifice, and, like Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House*, he condemns his wife, not only to an inner exile in their home of despair, but also to

an acceptance of the punishment of the law and of society. It is not his commitment to surface values and his fear of what others might say that makes him react like this. It is an ultimate and numinous respect for life in and of itself: "Thou shalt not kill." This old commandment or taboo is confronted with another morality, and that is what is really at stake in the novel. The theme and the conflict really actualize the question: is it ever defensible to put a human being to death?

This problem makes up the major difference between *A Doll's House* and Duun's novel. The values involved in *A Doll's House* are in a way superficial and bourgeois compared to those discussed by Duun, who asks more basic questions through his fictional characters and conflicts.

The best way to provide a foundation for these claims is to quote selected passages from *Medmenneske*, in which we get to know Ragnhild's Gethsemane-like agony and her inner struggle to transform the terrible and meaningless into meaning, as well as her struggle to retain the dignity of a human being in times of despair. As a matter of fact, Ragnhild is sentenced to years in prison and to years of spiritual death. We read about her fate in the two following novels of the trilogy, in which we also learn about the possibility of resurrection and a new life for both Ragnhild and Håkon.

The following quotations are taken from scenes after the murder, the first occurring when Ragnhild tells her mother-in-law, Tale, what she has done:

—But *who* was it that made me a murderer? I did not want to kill. There was no hatred within me. I just stood there and had done it. Tell me, whose tool was I?

—No no no! Tale was wailing. —Let us not mingle devilry and superstition into it.

—Who was it that turned the ax in my hand?

Then Tale cried. —Oh, you have to forgive me, Ragnhild, that I am not stronger. Where you are concerned. I should have had this burden laid upon me. Lord, Our God, how miserable you must be now! You

have to—you have to hold up. And pray to Our Lord, you who know that Man—thank God that He exists: although he has not all the power. We are going to bear it, Ragnhild. Remember now that it was not Håkon who—.

Ragnhild stood quietly and watched her helplessness. —Come now, let's go in, she said.

And so they went in. A cold thought rushed through Ragnhild, as if a door had opened to a stormy night: How will it go for someone who is *all alone*. (137-38)

Later Ragnhild also has to tell Håkon about the terrible act. The following passage has its intertextual counterpart in *A Doll's House*:

Ragnhild prayed to God. She believed they did so, both of them. But He was far away tonight; He was almost nonexistent. But surely He is omniscient? a voice lamented within her. —Surely, You are omniscient; You see me as I stand here. No, He didn't see her.

—I trusted that God governed everything, she said. She did not know she said it aloud. —But as the axe went forward, in what did I trust then? I do not know. That is the agony. Right? you ask. Yes! I answer. She turned to Håkon. She stood alone against all the world and was the stronger. —You can endure more than you think, Håkon. You have to trust me. Because I see what you don't see. In God's name, you can stare at me as nastily as you want to, I can't run away. And I won't run away!

She tried to smile to him. She stood holding the back of the chair with her hand; then she sat down.

—You haven't been to the sheriff yet? he asked. —I ask if you haven't told the authorities. Eh?

Still she tried to smile. —No. Because when that is done, then you are done with, too.

His eyes grew dark; later his whole face darkened. There was a struggle before she could make him look at her again.

—You see me only as a murderer, then?

—I wonder that you are able to speak, he said in a low voice.

—For your sake I am.

—Shut up with that. For my sake. . . you ought to take the consequences of what you have done.

They stared at each other. Ragnhild little by little grew pale. She rose, stood for a while, gazing at him. She saw his face far away, she *knew* it was he. Then she left the room. It was her way of saying good-bye. . . .

She was expelled from humanity and the world, but she still had not given in. —Our Lord, who has given me this conviction, has to give me more, she said. —I won't pray. A while later she said, and her sense of agony was about to destroy her: —There must be another God than You! One for the little people. For creatures in distress. (145-46)

The most impressive passage of the novel follows immediately and runs like this:

She believed she was still awake when she saw the Devil approaching her. Even in her dreams she had never seen anything so naked and so disgusting. He was yellow all over his body; he must be cast of bad tallow, and so decrepit was he that hair and beard shed from him in wads. He had no horns left, but his eyes were furiously alive, and they laughed at her and spoke. Step by step she fell back, but he came creeping after her.

Behind him, in a semicircle, stood the priests. They were long-bearded and with black caps on their heads; they wore vestments and ruffs, every one of them. They all looked alike; the one man was the same as the other. In the middle stood the local clergyman, but he was just a nobody between the others, with gold-rimmed spectacles and whiskers and wrinkles on his face, just a human being, you might say.

The Evil One came, and she herself was standing there, the ax in her hand. And she could just yield no further because behind her she had something that had to be defended. It was Life and something even dearer than that. She looked at the priests and questioned them. But they were dead calm, staring at her, as if each of them were a pillar of stone on a grave. She was the only human being in the world.

Then she lifted the ax and hit him all the same. The Old One fell to his knees, but he still pursued her, came and came, creeping. She hit him once more; then he was lying there. But he still moved toward her—she screamed and wanted to wake up, for this had to be a dream! But no, it was not a dream. The Devil's eyes shone upon her, more vividly than ever before. They laughed and said, you can't kill Evil with an ax. And the priests lifted their book with the cross upon it and condemned her. In the coldest despair she ran up against them, but they stopped her, standing in a sacred semicircle, like a wall. Then she saw the local priest and rushed toward him. He lost his glasses and she got through.

But again, she ran on into a forest of priests, no it wasn't priests, it was human beings, all the human beings in the world were standing there, blocking the way, a wall of people with stone faces; she ran against them and was so badly hurt she couldn't move. Then she remembered Håkon and their little boy; she had run away from them! They were left inside. She was never to see them again; they were the ones she really should defend.

She woke with a jerk. She was lying on the bench in their living room. Yes, this was her sleeping place for the time being. What I dreamed was true, she thought as soon as she recovered a bit. I have done the right thing, and still it was a sin. But I cannot have destroyed both them and myself. That cannot be! I do not yield. I am not allowed to do so. You can't kill Evil with an ax, it was said. I give Evil not a damn; I want to rescue what has to be rescued. (146-48)

The last quote is from a passage some days later. Ragnhild has followed Håkon's instructions. Now, talking with her mother-in-law, she is waiting for the sheriff to come to take her into custody:

Tale was sitting for a long while without speaking. — This is the worst! she wailed, turning away. — A person might be so bewildered, you wouldn't know if you were alive. . . . I might even throw myself into fearing God! How will life be here when you leave. Surely Our Lord can't accept this, can He?—she turned to Ragnhild again.

Ragnhild sat as if she didn't notice Tale; nevertheless she answered. — Who Our Lord is and what he wants, that is a matter all to itself. What a human being is, you mustn't ask me either. I only know that all burdens must be borne that are laid upon us. Were it not improper to say it, I would say it outright: if a real human being were to be found, that person would be sentenced to bear a *heavy* burden. Only God knows what that person would have to do for Him. But then such a person would also be able to endure more than others.

They were sitting for a long time, looking ahead, not uttering a word.

Suddenly Ragnhild said: — I could laugh. At first I believed Håkon would be happy when his father was gone. Then I thought he would be relieved when I told him that it was me. . . . that I had done it for his sake. Today I hoped the same, when I told him that I had given myself up to the authorities. I have hoped many things. But the worst is that I still haven't stopped believing. That's not the way I'm made. I ought to be happy, for now he is safe, at least. (165-66)

Through this account and the quotations I have tried to give some impression of the fundamental questions raised by Olav Duun's woman hero, as well as an impression of which values are at stake in his epic universe. I have hinted at Duun's intertextual dialogue with Henrik Ibsen, and even more explicit are the Biblical allusions, especially in the trilogy as a whole.

The consequence of the criminal act in *Medmenneske* is that Ragnhild is sentenced, not only to seven years in jail, but also to spiritual death. When we first meet her again in the second novel, *Ragnhild* (1931), she is set free from jail, but she is still, as it were, buried, and she dwells in the realm of Death. What is demonstrated in the last two novels, however, is the possibility of resurrection and reconciliation. Ragnhild figuratively rises from her grave; she literally reappears in the "Home of Despair," offering both herself and Håkon the chance of a new life based on human dignity, which is what Olav Duun's real commitment is to.

NOTES

1. Hageberg, Otto. "Drift og drap. Ei anna røyst i *Medmenneske* av Olav Duun." In Otto Hageberg, *Frå Camilla Collett til Dag Solstad* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1980) 60-80.

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AKSEL SANDEMOSE'S FELICIA AND HERBJØRG WASSMO'S DINA: A COMPARISON

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The novels *Varulven* (1958; *The Werewolf*, 1965) by Aksel Sandemose and *Dinas bok* (1989; *The Book of Dina*) by Herbjørg Wassmo both present themselves as mainly realistic stories in a realistic Norwegian setting but, at first glance, do not seem to have much else in common.

One novel is contemporary, the other historical; one deals with a man (Erling) and his relationship to one woman (Felicia), the other deals with a woman (Dina) and her relationship to several men. The relevance of comparing two such apparently different novels may not seem obvious. Moreover, one of the authors of the novels was an elderly man, the other a woman in her mid-forties. Herbjørg Wassmo, like most women of her generation (she was born in 1942) and class (she used to be a teacher), was a feminist when she was younger. Sandemose, on the other hand, is not known to have cared much for the Women's Issue at any period of his life.

It is a common assumption that male authors are not very good at portraying women; the contention is that they often end up with such stock characters as the Madonna, the Witch, the Whore, and so on. This may be true to a certain extent, though brilliant exceptions to this

rule come easily to mind. However, Sandemose himself claimed that men are unable to render true portraits of women. Such portraiture was better left to female authors, on condition that they could bring themselves to lay aside a certain coyness and a certain false respect for (male) conventions about womanly behavior and womanly notions.

Sandemose himself rarely wrote about women other than as pawns in the eternal power struggle between men. Actually Felicia is his first and only full-sized portrait of a woman, and *The Werewolf* is the only novel of his in which a woman is given a voice of her own. He made no secret of the fact that he primarily wrote of himself and of his own life under different guises, that is, as the lives of various men. In the case of *Varulven*, however, the portrait of Felicia is the result of close cooperation between himself and his wife, Eva Borgen Sandemose. In fact he has given her all the credit for Felicia, the most credible of his female protagonists.

In some late writings Sandemose has admitted that he was inherently afraid of women, especially of educated or bourgeois women, during most of his life and therefore did not know how to behave toward them. That fear must have caused him to be a poor judge of women in general; the assistance of his wife, therefore, must have been exceedingly welcome. Being intimidated by bourgeois women was probably common among men of working-class background in Sandemose's generation, and the motif is evident in the relationship between Felicia and Erling as well.

In contrast, Herbjørg Wassmo has deeply plumbed the depths of women's psyche, above all in the moving account of the young girl Tora, in the trilogy that made Wassmo famous in the middle of the 1980s. But Wassmo has also given very fine and balanced portraits of men, both in the trilogy and in *Dinas bok*.

In the portrayal of Dina, however, Herbjørg Wassmo seems to have followed Sandemose's advice not to pay heed to conventions and expectations. There is no respect for traditional feminine qualities in the picture Wassmo gives of her. Through Dina, the author seems to have

given vent to the aggression and rage that many women have felt and had to suppress.

Unlike Sandemose, Herbjørg Wassmo does not write about her personal self. At least she claims that her protagonists "come to her" from somewhere beyond her own self and leave her no peace until she has written down their stories, which have nothing whatsoever to do with her own life. While writing, she is in the power of her protagonists and must do what they tell her. It should be added, so as not to make her seem unduly mystical, that her protagonists are not the "ghosts" of real, historical people, but are purely fictional.

Despite all these differences there is still some sense in comparing Felicia and Dina. Their creators are both interested in the workings of the psyche and the reasons why people behave the way they do, especially with regard to sexual issues. One of Sandemose's characters says that the only things worth writing about are love and murder, that is to say, those aspects of human life in which passions and drives are displayed in the most unbridled manner. Actually Sandemose himself writes about these two spheres of life in all of his fiction. They are also what *Dinas bok* is about.

About their female protagonists the authors have uttered much the same opinions—that is, that they are powerful, independent, and strong women who are envied and admired by other women, but who are found to be attractive, though sometimes rather frightening, by men. This evaluation of the female characters seems to be fair as far as it goes.

At a quick glance Felicia and Dina may well be summed up as superwomen. But a closer look will reveal that neither of them is truly happy and that their lives are full of (more or less) secret catastrophes.

In the following, I shall try to illustrate the fates of the two protagonists and then address the question of how their lives compare to those of real women in the respective periods covered by the novels. Finally, bearing in mind that Dina was conceived in our times, I will briefly discuss whether she may be considered an image of modern woman.

Felicia—a Paragon of Virtue or a Troublesome Bitch?

Felicia is the daughter of a well-to-do, widowed businessman. At seventeen, when still a schoolgirl, she meets Erling, who is twice her age and just beginning to earn a reputation as a writer and womanizer. He seduces her and makes a date for the following evening but never turns up. In fact he disappears completely out of her life. This is a great shock for Felicia. She feels used and discarded, as being of no account, but cannot forget him. The event haunts her and is decisive for her later erotic relationships.

Felicia and Erling meet again, as refugees in Stockholm during the war years. Erling is then in a terribly bad state: his marriage is going to pieces; he is in the middle of a dramatic mid-life crisis; he cannot write; and he has been drinking heavily for more than a year. Felicia manages to pull him out of his mental instability, and they become lovers. But she does not want to marry him, since she believes that he is fatally flawed by his upbringing in a miserably poor, narrow-minded, and authoritarian family, typical of the small town of Jante, as described in earlier novels by Sandemose. Instead, she marries the considerate Jan and has two daughters by him, while at the same time continuing the relationship with Erling.

Since there must be no doubt as to who is the father of her children, Felicia contrives to have Erling go abroad for more than a year during which she conceives and bears her second daughter. After his return in 1950, their relationship is carried on much as before. Then, in February of 1958, Felicia suddenly disappears, murdered, as they presume, by someone from the Nazi group that Jan and Felicia had been fighting during the war. Both had belonged to the same resistance group, and Felicia had herself killed the man who had betrayed her two brothers and thereby caused them to be executed by the Gestapo. The traitor was the husband of one Mrs. Gulnare Kortsen, who is believed to have taken revenge by killing Felicia, but that assumption is never substantiated in *Varulven*. As the story closes, two months after Felicia's disappearance, Erling has finally settled down for good at

Venhaug, something Felicia had always wanted him to do. He had previously declined to do so but now decides that the time has come for him to be faithful to her. He wants to dedicate the rest of his life to writing their mutual saga.

This is the outline of Felicia's life story. As to her inner qualities, it should be emphasized that she is mostly seen through the eyes of Erling, who loves and admires her but also feels quite strongly about what he considers to be her weaknesses. In the eyes of the others who know and love her, she seems to have no great flaws. The text itself seems to be ambivalent and vague concerning this point.

Erling, on the whole, admires Felicia for her independence, although he sometimes feels that it borders on a lack of sensitivity to other people's feelings (*his* feelings, primarily). She is presented as being indifferent to gossip and does what she believes to be right, regardless of what people think. In fact, she takes in Erling's allegedly hopeless, illegitimate daughter, born of a prostitute, to live with her at the farm. Felicia never listens to gossip about others but judges people for herself. In these respects she is the opposite of a Jante-person, and such qualities are highly esteemed and appreciated by Erling.

On the other hand, Erling finds Felicia to be gossipy, possessive, domineering, and overly solicitous for his well-being (an attitude he views as an attempt to control him)—as well as extremely jealous of his other female acquaintances. Most of the traits he sees as flaws of character have to do with her relationship to him. He also finds some of her traits rather alarming, especially her ability to kill deliberately and cold-bloodedly. He would have preferred her to kill in passion.

Dina—A Poor Victim or a Powerful Patriarch

Dina is the daughter of a district attorney and an only child. When she is five, something happens that completely changes the course of her life. Dina becomes the instrument of her mother's death by unknowingly turning a handle that releases a stream of boiling lye. Her father can no longer bear to see the child, so she is immediately sent

away to be brought up with a poor family of tenants. At ten she is taken home and given religious and other instruction, but her father finds her ungovernable and difficult. As soon as she is sixteen, she is married off to a widower, a friend of her father's, who is three times her age.

Dina's story, however, is not the traditional one that we know from the literature of the 1880s, in which an innocent young woman is disconcerted and frightened by the sexual demands of her experienced husband. As a child of nature, Dina is familiar with the mating of animals and quickly finds her so-called "marital duties" rather interesting. In fact, she soon wears out her more staid husband, who finds comfort in the arms of a less-demanding widow. When Dina discovers this, she does away with him—in such a manner that everybody believes it was an accident.

Dina is now a rich widow who reigns alone over the trading empire her husband left her, and she does not hesitate to use her power. She makes life so unbearable for a fraudulent accountant who is in her service that he hangs himself. That same man she had previously publicly shamed when he had made her maid pregnant and tried to get away with it. On the other hand, she herself takes sexual advantage of one of her laborers and marries him off to one of her maids when he becomes troublesome. She also seduces her stepson. In other words, her behavior is in accordance with stock conceptions of the all-powerful patriarch.

Matters are complicated, however, by Dina's falling in love with a mysterious stranger, a traveling Russian, whom she cannot control. She wants to marry him, but he feels unable to take any responsibility for her and their possible offspring. She is finally made to understand this, and while they are out hunting, she shoots him. The only witness is her son, a boy of twelve. The story ends with his outraged cry at what he has seen and with Dina's question: "Am I forever doomed to this?" The implication is that Dina must always kill the persons she loves.

Felicia's story ended with her death in her mid-forties, whereas Dina is still a woman of only thirty when the story ends—and the

question with which the novel ends, seemed to imply that another volume of Dina's saga would follow. Actually, a sequel did appear in the fall of 1992. In *Lykkens sønn* (Fortune's Son), Herbjørg Wassmo describes how the life of Dina's son is influenced by the cruel secret he and his mother share.

Obsession and Murder in Varulven

There is more to be said than has hitherto been discussed about the relationship between Felicia and Erling and about the connection between this relationship and Felicia's untimely death. And there is more to be said about Dina's relationship to men and her propensity for murder. A key factor for both women is, of course, their psychosexual development (which can only briefly be sketched here).

It is true that Felicia, like Dina, is a murderer, but the circumstances under which the two of them commit murder are not at all the same. Dina's murders have to do with her love relationships, especially with men, whereas Felicia's committing of murder is more like a soldier's in war. Actually she did kill while at war, and although the assassination was an act of revenge over her brothers and might therefore be regarded as part of a blood feud, as the text explicitly states, it was above all the means of stopping a certain person from killing more people. When discussing the act, Erling and Jan agree that there can be no guilt attached to that kind of killing. And, as for Felicia herself, she seems to be rather proud of what she did.

As already mentioned, Jan and Erling believe that Felicia is killed in revenge for the murder she committed: "Varulven tok henne" ("The werewolf took her"). Among Felicia and her friends, "the werewolf" is a code word for certain base and destructive drives and attitudes—like jealousy, hypocrisy, and stupidity—often found in people who became Nazis during the Second World War. (Actually, the members of a secret Nazi sabotage organization, which was established in Germany in 1945, called themselves "werewolves.") In Sandemose's next novel, *Felicias bryllup* (1961; Felicia's Wedding), it is made clear

that Jan and Erling's suspicion was well founded. Felicia was murdered by Mrs. Kortsen, widow of the prominent Nazi whom Felicia had killed. The blood feud even continued, since the gardener at Venhaug, to revenge Felicia, killed one of the members of the old Nazi group shortly after her death.

But, at the same time, the novel states expressly that Felicia's life would have been saved had she told either Erling or Jan of a deep personal secret. This did not concern the war and the Nazis, but her own sexual practice, or, more precisely, her sexual bond to the gardener at Venhaug, Tor Anderssen. The connection between this sexual practice and the Nazis is, however, vague and unconvincing on the narrative level of the novel.

The sexual bond to the gardener is rooted in Erling's early rejection of Felicia. Whenever a long time has passed since Erling's last visit to Venhaug, Felicia feels abandoned and is driven to her "encounters with the wolf," as she calls them to herself. In her private greenhouse she arranges exhibitionist sessions with the gardener watching her from a safe distance. This is what she calls a marriage between the exhibitionist and the voyeur.

During the first few years of these sessions, she is quite happy with them, as she fancies herself enveloped in the desire of all the men in the world—while she herself remains untouchable. The sessions give her both sexual gratification and revenge—as she puts it—over all the stupid men in the world. But gradually she finds these sessions degrading, and she grows more and more miserable about them. She is certain that only Erling's permanent stay at Venhaug will prevent her from giving in to the obsession. Jan's presence is not enough to protect her from herself.

What she fails to see is the connection, which is drawn explicitly in the text, between her obsession and the way in which in her youth she was first used and then abandoned by Erling. For some time afterwards she acquired the habit of undressing slowly with her curtains undrawn, while she imagined that Erling was hiding somewhere outside looking at her.

Felicia's reasons for not telling Erling about her obsession are complex. In the first place, it is a shameful thing to confess to, and she cannot bear to debase herself and have him triumph over her. Then, too, she is afraid that he will consider the confession as another of her tricks to make him stay permanently at Venhaug, something that she knows he does not want to do.

Erling's motives for not wanting to move to Venhaug are many and complicated. His excuses are that he cannot write there; that he cannot feel free to come and go as he likes, since Felicia will want to control him; that she will be jealous of his trips to Oslo; and, finally, that his permanent settling there will disturb the balance between the two of them and Jan.

More hidden reasons are his fear of Felicia's aggression towards him. In his dreams he sees her as a raging, vengeful fury. And there is his own aggression toward Felicia, which also often comes out in his dreams.

The novel says, then, that Felicia was killed because of the damage done to her by Erling when she was young, because of jealousy not overcome and aggression only partly bridled, owing to a lack of confidence and basic trust. Felicia was killed because the werewolf had not been neutralized by the triangle at Venhaug, even though they pretended it had been, just as they believed, for a short time after the war, that they had bridled the dangerous irrational forces let loose by the Nazis during the German occupation of Norway.

But how these psychological patterns connect with the suspense story of Nazis and a blood feud is hard to see, despite the fusion of these elements in the key symbol of the werewolf. It is as if Sandemose had not quite made up his mind which explanation to choose. Or perhaps he saw these two modes of explanation as closely tied, while some of the connecting lines are missing in the plot. Perhaps he had intended to make the connection clearer in the next book he was planning to write about the triangle of Felicia, Jan, and Erling, but that he never finished.

Passion and Murder in Dinas bok

If Felicia is thus a victim to psychic forces she cannot control, so is Dina, but her reactions are different. Where Felicia is passive and lets things take their own course, Dina actively takes fate into her own hands.

To understand Dina, one has to go back to her childhood and to the fact that she accidentally killed her mother and was expelled from the presence of her father and, thus, lost both mother and father. But in one sense she kept her mother. In her imagination she has met with her mother ever after; she talks to her and discusses with her and apparently finds her to be quite real.

So, while still a small child, Dina learns two seemingly basic conditions of life: that she is a killer and that only by killing people can she keep them forever and prevent them from hurting her or letting her down. Her next victim is her husband, Jacob. She deliberately kills him, in order not to lose him. There is at the same time a great deal of sadness and grief for her connected to this misdeed.

The suicide of her accountant, Niels, does not quite fit in with the pattern. There is no fear of loss connected to Dina's feeling for him, but rather a mutual hatred, jealousy, and contempt. Dina quite simply wants to get rid of him but in no way actually plans to kill him. She feels relief at his death, but it still bothers her.

The story ends with the killing of Leo, the Russian. At the moment Dina kills him, she "sees" that her dead mother, Hjertrud, is there to receive him and take care of him, the way she had with Jacob and Niels. Both of these men interfere with her life, especially her erotic life, after they are dead, in the sense that they seem to appear before her and talk to her just as her mother does; as for Leo, *Dinas bok* does not reveal what happens after his death.

Dina's psyche seems to have transformed a strong sense of guilt into a beautiful fantasy about a sort of paradise on the other side of death. In support of this interpretation it may be pointed out that Dina's

mother-in-law, who dies a natural death, does not later "come" to Dina. There is no guilt attached to Dina's feelings for her.

Dina has various reasons for wanting to marry Leo. She had a miscarriage after one of his previous visits but managed to conceal that she had been pregnant. If the pregnancy had been discovered, she would have run the risk of being accused publicly of adultery. Such were the laws at the time, and actually one of Dina's unmarried maids had been imprisoned for giving birth to a stillborn baby. Dina cannot risk another unwanted pregnancy.

She also abhors the feeling of being Leo's toy. His long absences, often for months or a half-year at a time, drive her to seek out other men for sex. She feels betrayed and debased and must gradually admit to herself that she is losing control of her life. In this respect there is a clear similarity between Dina and Felicia, the difference being that Dina is not afraid to state openly to her lover that she needs his permanent presence. When Leo rejects her, she can bear the situation no longer. The only way to keep him is to kill him.

The main force behind Dina's slaying of Leo, then, is her more or less unconscious impulse to avoid further deprivation and bereavement.

As for Leo's reasons for not wanting to come and live permanently with Dina, they seem to be what he tells her they are—that he is fighting for a great cause, that he must expose himself to danger, and that he needs to feel free to travel when it is called for. Perhaps he is also something of an adventurer. The novel gives no other clues to his behavior. All in all, he looks like some stock figure out of a three-penny novel rather than a real person. Dina's young *farmhand* and former lover, Tomas, is far more satisfactory as a character; his desire, humiliation, and thwarted expectations are very well rendered.

The Authors and Their Female Protagonists

The express intentions of Aksel Sandemose and Herbjørg Wassmo seem not to have been to "mirror life," but rather to create protagonists

"larger than life." In the case of Herbjørg Wassmo, this intent is in accordance with the genre she has chosen. In the historical novel the heroines are often created on a grander scale than in novels of a contemporary setting, maybe because history gives more scope for imagination. Historical realities are more distant and perhaps not so easily controlled.

In an interview Sandemose gave when *Varulven* first appeared on the market, he said: "... the female protagonist, Felicia, I have never met. I have created her with diligence and hard work; she is a female counterpart to Gullhesten [male protagonist in Sandemose's novel *Vi pynter oss med horn*, 1936; tr. *Horns For Our Adornment*, 1938]. She has everything, strength, intelligence, courage, ability to love; she is too strong, too genuine not to challenge evil."

When *Dinas bok* had just been published, Herbjørg Wassmo, on the other hand, emphasized in an interview that Dina was true to life and not unique: "There were quite a few prosperous skipper's widows in the North of Norway in the last century. They married younger men; they ruled despotically and without mercy." But she added that Dina was the strongest and toughest woman she had ever "met," and she asked the interviewer whether he was not afraid of Dina. So there is still in what she said the strong implication that Dina is neither very womanly nor even realistic, but rather a feminist construction. However, Herbjørg Wassmo also stressed that the novel is about the ways in which parents let their children down, and, as this betrayal is repeated in following generations, it becomes a vicious circle.

Herbjørg Wassmo's conclusion is that, however strong Dina may be, she is also a victim, and this view is in accordance with the portrait she actually gives of her in the novel. Sandemose underplays this more negative aspect of his heroine, at least in the interview, but it is equally obvious in his actual rendering of her character.

Society and Psyche

Despite their difference in background, breeding, and time period, the two women, Felicia and Dina, have had something important in common. They were both betrayed and suffered a great loss when they were most vulnerable. Herbjørg Wassmo finds such a defenseless and decisive period to lie in childhood, while Sandemose places it in the teens. Actually this is rather surprising in Sandemose, who knew his Freud. He was well aware of the importance Freud attached to early childhood with regard to the later psychosexual development of a person. In many of his earlier books, Sandemose had circled around oedipal conflicts and bonds, perhaps most particularly in *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* (1933; tr. 1936). But he does not give much information about Felicia's past before she meets Erling.

In consequence of Felicia's and Dina's sudden loss of love and affection in the past, both have a very strong reaction when facing a repetition of that early loss. They are bound by a force that they cannot control, however strong and independent they may seem, and this restriction is what finally dooms them.

As will have become evident, neither of these two novels, *Varulven* or *Dinas bok*, is primarily concerned with women's conditions, social or otherwise, in the Norway of the 1850s or the 1950s. Both Aksel Sandemose and Herbjørg Wassmo are more interested in the psychological aspects of their heroines than in the material circumstances in which their heroines live. But, since both women are situated in realistic settings, the novels do reveal something of the material conditions of their lives. More significantly, these conditions are decisive for the development of some of their psychological characteristics.

Neither Felicia nor Dina seems to be a typical woman of her time, when one compares the circumstances of each of them to the general conditions of other women.

A Real Woman—Or an Ideal One?

There is nothing average in the outer circumstances of Felicia's life, though her wealth and her secure social position were of course real enough for some women in postwar Norway. Her marital arrangement, with a lover that was accepted as such by her husband, is special, however, and is described as something never heard of before. The novel more than suggests that there is a strong connection between her privileged social background, her independence, and her disregard for other people's opinions.

Felicia's personal independence is emphasized as something quite uncommon for women. It was also unusual for a woman to liquidate people during the war, even though quite a few women of Felicia's age had experienced resistance work. Killing was primarily a man's job, and we are told that both Erling and Jan had liquidated people. In several ways Felicia is more like a man than a woman.

On the other hand, she is described as a "family woman," who takes care of her daughters and the large household of the farm. She makes jam and knits and tends her rose garden and her greenhouse. Her care is extended to some people outside the strict family circle as well, like Erling's daughter, Julie, and old "Aunt Gustava," but she scorns charity, a traditional feminine occupation. She is also feminine in that, wanting to be attractive, she is concerned with her looks and even teaches Julie some tricks she knows regarding men.

She is described as self-reliant, outspoken, and wise, but, as already mentioned, Erling sees some serious flaws in her character as well. Some of these must be assessed in the light of Erling's deep distrust of women. In his opinion women generally are gossipy, envious, curious, scheming, and promiscuous. Even though Felicia is better than most in these respects, she is still a woman and therefore, he feels, cannot be fully trusted.

It must be added, though, that most of the women Erling knows, he has picked up at restaurants, and they seem to be interested in him mostly because he is famous and has an exciting reputation. There is

also his early experience with an upper-class girl to consider, a parallel to Felicia's experience with Erling when she was seventeen. Gulnare, the later Mrs. Kortsen, who was Erling's first love, disappeared mysteriously out of his life when he was sixteen. That event played an important part in forming his view of women.

On the whole Felicia may be regarded as a realistic portrait of an unusual woman. The way in which Sandemose describes Felicia's obsessive repetition of a psychosexual pattern seems to be in accordance with psychoanalytical theories, as is her inability to stop this destructive behavior by herself. But it is hard to see her as an "ideal" woman, even though she is generous and grand in some respects, for she is also described as having quite a few of the "catty" qualities often attributed to women. She is unusual less in her human or female qualities than in her marital arrangement and her disregard for other people's opinions and prejudices. Maybe it is exactly this aspect of Felicia that Sandemose views as "ideal," at a time when the sexual mores and norms were far more restricted and hypocritical than they are today.

A Real Woman or a Utopian Fantasy

Even more than Felicia, Dina is portrayed as manlike. She is very often dressed in leather breeches, instead of full skirts sweeping the floor; she rides her horse astride like a man, goes hunting, smokes cigars, drinks, swears, discusses business with the men, and lives out her sexual drives.

At the same time, Dina cares nothing for womanly tasks. She does not know how to run a household or take care of a child. When her child, Benjamin, was a baby, she was unable to nurse him, even though she is described as full-bodied and buxom. She never put him to bed or played with him; in fact she only takes an interest in her son when he is old enough for her to teach him to sail and shoot, activities to which a father usually introduces his boys. But Dina forgets Benjamin the moment she sees her Russian. In other words, she is no genuine

mother. In contrast, Felicia is described as being most solicitous for her two daughters.

Neither does Dina know how to perform any of the feminine niceties that women of the better classes were supposed to cultivate in the middle of last century, like embroidering, reading poetry, or conversing in French. The only thing of this kind that she knows how to do, is playing the cello. But there is nothing charming or ingratiating about her music; it is raw and violent. She plays to fill an inner need, not to entertain. The only thing she reads besides business accounts is her mother's Bible. But she regards it less as a book of devotion than as a collection of wonderful tales, more fantastic than Asbjørnsen and Moe's collection of fairy tales, which her mother-in-law once gave her. She is not religious in any common sense of that word, as good women were supposed to be in the last century.

In fact, Dina falls short of most standards of womanly behavior of the 1850s. She is uncouth, outspoken, commanding, self-assertive, sexually aggressive, and ungovernable. On the other hand, she does not suffer from the "sins" for which women were usually blamed, like vanity, coquetry, laziness, self-centeredness, ill-timed curiosity, and talkativity. She is a challenge to most ideas of what women are or ought to be.

Dina's character and fate seem improbable, even if compared to many of the Norwegian novels from the middle of the last century, in which a lot of unexpected, but not unrealistic or marvelous, events took place. The events of *Dinas bok* are of a different kind than the strange events of those older works. The old novels, by, for example, Maurits Hansen, Niels Mathias Aalholm (Theodor Reginald), and Hanna Winsnes (Hugo Schwartz), are full of wondrous coincidences, hidden treasures, gruesome secrets, exchanged babies, and gangs of gypsies.

This is not the case in *Dinas bok*. The emphasis is on psychological reactions and behavior rather than on "plot," even though the story includes many melodramatic elements. Therefore the crucial point is whether Dina's psychic development is rendered probable or not.

Measured against realistic norms it may seem plausible up to a certain point, but it appears exaggerated and excessive.

One may ask, perhaps, why a female (and feminist?) author of today would want to create a fictional character like Dina. She could hardly be a role model for women of the 1990s, for all her attractive manly qualities and her sense of justice. She lacks too many of the good traditional female qualities, like solicity, sensitivity, and a feeling for other people's needs. And above all—she is too fantastic and fanciful and seems to have lost touch with reality in some very important areas, for example, in her dealings with people. Her reactions border on insanity.

On the other hand, Dina has been given mythic dimensions not only through her fate, but also through her name, which is a distortion of the name of the antique hunting goddess Diana, as well as through her intimate connection with Biblical figures and other elements from the Bible. In this respect, she looms larger than life.

Critics have assumed that Herbjørg Wassmo by creating Dina intended to produce an optimistic contrast to the victimized heroine of the Tora trilogy of the 1980s, that she wanted to thematize the strong, indomitable woman. Wassmo's protagonist may perhaps be regarded as a protest against a male-dominated society, and Dina's violence and mental instability as an outcry against the atrocities of such a society.

A comparison between, let us say, Herbjørg Wassmo's Tora and Aksel Sandemose's Susanne from *Det svundne er en drøm* (1946; tr. The Past Is But a Dream) should doubtlessly have reached the conclusion that Herbjørg Wassmo's rendering was the truer of the two. In this case, however, the perhaps rather unexpected conclusion seems to be that the male author, Aksel Sandemose, despite his previous merits and despite the fact that he was a very manly man, by ordinary, realistic standards, has given a truer and keener portrayal of a woman's life and psyche than has the female author Herbjørg Wassmo. But, as

pointed out earlier, he did not do so without substantial assistance from his wife, Eva.

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