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Nora's Ironic Longing for Christlike Love: Self-Sacrifice, Self-Love, and the "Religion of Torvald" in Ibsen's *A Doll House*

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Abstract: This essay argues that in Ibsen's *A Doll House*, both Nora and her husband, Torvald Helmer, exhibit a "religion of Torvald" characterized by their respective devotion to Torvald himself. However, while Torvald's devotion to himself is characterized by self-love and self-centeredness, Nora's "religion of Torvald" is based on her expectation that Torvald will exhibit the Christlike office of bearing Nora's sins by proclaiming himself guilty of her crime of forgery, thus rendering her blameless. After Torvald shatters Nora's expectations by reacting with abuse and cowardice to the news of Nora's forgery and Krogstad's consequent blackmail, Nora loses her previous faith in Torvald and instead exhibits a preoccupation with her own self that, ironically enough, imitates the self-love of the "religion of Torvald" that Torvald has practiced all along.

Keywords: Ibsen; Doll's House; Nora; Torvald; Helmer; Christianity; Christ; religion; sacrifice; idealism; Calvin

In the final scene of *A Doll House* (1879), soon after Nora announces that she is leaving Torvald Helmer and their children, Torvald protests: "[I]sn't there one everlasting guide you can turn to? Where's your religion?" (p. 193).¹ The religion he speaks of is Christianity, toward which Nora now expresses great uncertainty, responding "Oh, Torvald, I'm really not sure what religion is" (p. 193). But if Nora has suffered a loss of faith, it is Torvald's own lethargy toward Christian practice that largely precipitates Nora's religious confusion. Indeed, Torvald's essentially imperceptible Christian piety is dwarfed throughout the play by his devotion to himself—a habitual self-focus, quite opposed to Christianity, that I will call the "religion of Torvald". Significantly, Nora also practices a "religion of Torvald"—albeit, as we shall discuss, one whose perspective is substantially different from her husband's—before Torvald's cowardly response to Krogstad's blackmail shatters her faith in him. But while Nora, like her husband, lacks serious Christian commitment, a closer examination of her faith in Torvald reveals that her finally jettisoned "religion of Torvald" was ironically dependent on his presumed adherence to New Testament teachings commanding husbands to sacrificially love their wives, teachings Torvald fails to follow when Nora most expects and needs such sacrificial devotion, a failure which precipitates Nora's devastating decision to imitate, however unconsciously, the self-focused version of the "religion of Torvald" that her husband has practiced all along. Throughout this essay, I will use a broadly Reformed Christian perspective to analyze the play's different manifestations of the "religion of Torvald," seeking to understand Nora and Torvald from the framework of traditional continental Protestantism and beyond the immediate context of contemporary Norwegian Lutheranism.

¹ All references to *A Doll House* are from Fjelde's translation ([Ibsen 1978](#)) and will be cited parenthetically.

Throughout nearly all of the play, Nora demonstrates a deep and abiding faith in Torvald; indeed, we may rightly suggest that “Nora has ensconced Torvald as her god” (Lavender 2008, p. 122). One example of such faith is evident late in Act I while Nora trims the Christmas tree, emotionally flustered by Krogstad’s having just confronted her with his knowledge of the forgery by which she obtained a loan from Krogstad years ago. Nora’s fearful response to his confrontation is to call on Torvald in his absence, implicitly hoping that her pleasing appeals to him will be efficacious and move him to shield her from danger. Joshua Lavender observes, “As Nora trims the Christmas tree, the traditional emblem in the modern Western world for the birth of Jesus Christ, her private musings resemble an adulatory prayer or chant: ‘I’ll do anything to please you Torvald. I’ll sing for you, dance for you’ [p. 150]” (Lavender 2008, p. 120). The irony of Nora’s Christmastime faith in someone other than Christ himself strikingly cuts against contemporary European culture’s expectation that the “domestic hearth” cultivates an explicitly Christian feminine spirituality; indeed, far from Nora’s exemplifying the Victorian ideal of the “Festival of Christmas” “lift[ing] woman to her supreme place in the family circle in the reflection of the glory of the Virgin Mother” (Hastie 1890, p. ix), Nora’s devotion to Torvald here effectively replaces what would ordinarily be presumed to be a homemaker’s feminine devotion to the savior Christ.² Rather, Nora, while trimming her Christmas tree, cultivates her devotion to the one she believes will be her savior, Torvald. Another example of Nora’s faith in Torvald appears in Act II, just after Krogstad informs Nora of his scheme to blackmail Torvald lest Krogstad reveal her crime. Overcome with fear as she prepares to practice her dance for the masquerade party they will attend the next evening, Nora tells Torvald, “I can’t get anywhere without your help. [. . .] Direct me. Teach me, the way you always have. [. . .] You’ve got to teach me to the very last minute” (pp. 172–74). Here, Nora’s faith in Torvald expresses her reverent dependence on him in the face of danger even as it satisfies his desire for such reverence, a satisfaction expressed when Torvald says he’ll “gladly” fulfill Nora’s request that he “[d]irect” her (p. 173), telling her, “I’m totally at your service—you little helpless thing” (pp. 172–73). Indeed, Torvald’s response perhaps suggests that he will demonstrate the kind of sacrificial servant-leadership for which Nora, as we shall see, longs.

In any case, although Nora and Torvald each demonstrates a “religion” that focuses on Torvald, Nora holds a significant point of “doctrine” that Torvald does not. For while Torvald’s devotion to himself, as we shall soon discuss, centers on his own happiness and reputation, Nora’s faith in Torvald is based largely on her belief that he will sacrifice himself completely for her. However erroneously, she is convinced that his loving selflessness will transcend the sacrifice she made early in their marriage when she worked secretly—and illegally—to obtain from the disreputable Krogstad, via the aforementioned loan, the money needed to save Torvald’s life through a vacation to a warmer climate. And, although Nora has long been celebrated as a “romantic standard bearer of the feminist cause” (Tufts 1986, p. 140), her idealized perception of Torvald, ironically enough, strongly resembles the Christian Scriptures’ model for husbands. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Saint Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25).³ Nora first demonstrates such belief in Torvald in Act II, when, just before Dr. Rank confesses his love for her, she tells him, “You know how deeply, how inexpressibly dearly Torvald loves me; he’d never hesitate a second to give up his life for me” (p. 165). Here, Nora’s expectation of Torvald’s sacrifice for her is in keeping with a traditional Reformed Christian understanding of a husband’s sacrificial duties to his wife. As John Calvin comments on Ephesians 5:25: “Let husbands imitate Christ in this respect, that he scrupled not to die for his church” (Calvin n.d., p. 259). Significantly, at least on a material level, Nora’s belief in Torvald can be seen as largely accurate. William A. Johnsen notes that the industrious Torvald “worked himself into a state of self-sacrifice in their first year of marriage” (Johnsen 2011,

² See also Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Christmas Eve* dialogue for laudatory descriptions and portrayals of such feminine Christian spirituality, best exemplified by the homemaker Ernestine (Schleiermacher 1890, passim).

³ All biblical quotations are from (Bible 1984).

p. 196), a self-sacrifice that, according to his physician, almost cost the exhausted Torvald his life and necessitated the couple's vacation to Italy.⁴

Nora's faith in Torvald, however, also includes her belief that, because of his superlative love for her, he would for her sake sacrifice both his life *and his reputation*—the latter being something, as we shall presently discuss, that Torvald will absolutely refuse to do. (Significantly, Nora's aforementioned sacrifice to save Torvald's life via an illegal loan from Krogstad—what we might call her “secret redemption” of Torvald—arguably demonstrates her own willingness to sacrifice her reputation for his sake, a sacrificial act she expects Torvald to match or transcend for her benefit.⁵) Moreover, Nora's longing for such Christlike sacrificial love from Torvald is so great that, when he fails her “religious” expectations of him, Nora abandons him. These dynamics are supremely evident in the couple's final conversation. Shortly before leaving Torvald, Nora reveals to him the “miracle” she had expected would deliver her from Krogstad's blackmail: “I never for an instant dreamed that you could give in to his terms. [. . .] I was so utterly sure that you'd step forward, take the blame on yourself and say: I am the guilty one” (p. 194). Contrary to Nora's hopes, Torvald responds to Krogstad's first letter by rejecting her, blaming her for his lost happiness, and announcing that her fraud “has to be hushed up at any cost” (p. 188), a petty tirade that reveals both “the smallness of Torvald's character” (Brooks 2013, p. 15) and “the different codes under which [Nora] and her husband had been living” (Mahaffey 2010, p. 58). But Nora's initial expectation that Torvald would take her guilt and shame upon himself to clear her name is curiously reminiscent of Paul's depiction of Christ's loving sacrifice for the church—something Paul calls husbands to imitate—in order to render his church “blameless” (Eph. 5:27). Nora's desire also recalls Paul's teaching that Christ, “who had no sin”, chose to “be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Ironically, the impious Nora articulates a now-destroyed hope that Torvald would act in a way that resembles Christ's model for husbands and indeed Christ himself,⁶ even as she expected that the god whom she served in her misguided “religion of Torvald” would offer himself as a kind of substitutionary atonement for her sake.

For his part, Torvald demonstrates stunning ignorance toward the crux of the Christian religion he professes at the end of the play. Replying to Nora's revelation of the “miracle” she was expecting, Torvald responds incredulously to the idea that he would sacrifice his reputation for her sake. He says, “I'd gladly work for you day and night, Nora—and take on pain and deprivation. But *there's no one who gives up honor for love*” (p. 194, italics added). But this specific sacrifice is exactly what Paul reports Jesus doing: He gave up the honor he shared with God the Father and chose instead to die an accursed death because of love for his church (cf. Philippians 2:6–8, Galatians 3:13–14, Eph. 5:25–27), and such is the kind of self-giving love Nora expected from Torvald.

Reflecting on Torvald's subsequent hollow declaration of his superlative love for Nora, Toril Moi affirms that Nora “demands nothing short of a revolutionary reconsideration of the meaning of love” (Moi 2006, p. 278). Moi is undoubtedly correct that Nora demands a definition of love radically different from Torvald's understanding of love's meaning. Even though Nora is not thinking in Christian terms,

⁴ Speaking to Torvald's devotion as a provider for Nora, Evert Sprinchorn writes that Torvald “has given Nora all the material things and all the sexual attention that any young wife could reasonably desire” (Sprinchorn 1980, p. 121). A similar understanding of Torvald was offered by Royal Shakespeare Company actor Barrie Ingham, who played Torvald in a 1979 University of Texas production of *A Doll House*. According to Yvonne Shafer, “Ingram played Torvald as a character who loved his wife [. . .] who viewed himself as a strong man protecting his lovely, charming wife” (Shafer 1985, p. 31).

⁵ Emphasizing the irony of Nora's saving the life of her “self-aggrandizi[ng]” husband, Chengzhou He suggests that in her role as Torvald's savior, Nora “turns out to be more masculine than feminine” (He 2008, p. 143).

⁶ Nora's longing for the superlative demonstration of a husband's self-sacrifice for his wife is germane to the subject of the “logic of complementarity” that Adam Beyt addresses in his article for this Special Issue (Beyt 2019). While I will not here address Beyt's critique of this subject, I will point out that the notion of the “logic of complementarity” is complicated in Torvald and Nora's relationship both by Nora's stated desire to imitate and indeed supersede Torvald's anticipated self-sacrificial love for his wife and by her subsequent, however unconscious, imitation of her husband's self-love that transcends his love for his wife.

she states the desire that Torvald demonstrate love like Christ's sacrifice for his beloved. This is the sort of sacrifice that calls husbands, in Calvin's words, to "cherish" their wives with "no ordinary love" but one that follows Christ's sacrificial "example" (Calvin n.d., p. 258). I argue that framing Nora's ironic longing in dialogue with a Reformed Christian understanding of self-sacrifice complicates the feminist reading that Moi offers and the play's ending invites. Indeed, "religion" plays a role in her decision. Nora's choice to leave comes only after Torvald fails to offer such love, thus shattering her faith in him. It is fitting, then, that Nora's admission of the anticipated "miracle" closely follows Torvald's question, "Where's your religion?"⁷ Her immediate answer, "Oh Torvald, I'm really not sure what religion is" (p. 193), is entirely appropriate for someone whose faith has just been shattered by the object of that faith, for in his petty tirade, Nora has recognized Torvald's "inadequacy as her god" (Lavender 2008, p. 124).

Nora's response horrifies Torvald, but were he to examine himself honestly, he would recognize that he himself has demonstrated no tangible evidence of Christian faith. Indeed, Torvald's appeal to "religion" rings embarrassingly hollow—a mere ineffectual exercise of "patriarchal power" (Langås 2005, p. 150)⁸—in light of his behavior throughout the play. Significantly, Torvald showed no concern for Christian religion before their conflict, even though he had numerous earlier opportunities, which I shall outline below, to demonstrate Christian faith were Christianity truly important to him. Strikingly, the play takes place on Christmas Eve, Christmas, and the day following, but neither Christ nor church are mentioned in the Helmer household, even when Torvald and Nora discuss matters of Christmas early in the play. Later in Act I, Torvald lectures Nora about the moral failings of Krogstad, now Torvald's employee in his new job as a bank manager, but Torvald never articulates religiously based concerns. After the masquerade party, Torvald's best friend, Dr. Rank—who is dying of "inherited syphilis" (Mahaffey 2010, p. 70) passed on by his sexually reckless father—announces his imminent death through a calling card with a black cross over his name, but the indifferent Torvald offers no religious utterance. As Vicki Mahaffey notes, "There is something Christlike about Rank's suffering 'for another man's sins,' but Torvald's mentality is not that of Jesus" (Mahaffey 2010, p. 60). Similarly, when Torvald reads Krogstad's letter of blackmail, he does not pray about his and Nora's desperate situation. Finally, when he receives Nora's fraudulent note back from Krogstad, along with Krogstad's renunciation of his previous threats, Torvald does not thank God, despite exclaiming "I'm saved!" (188)—an exclamation that indeed might suggest the speaker's awareness of the work of a savior, especially when spoken, as it is here, on the night after Christmas.⁹

And tellingly, in each above situation, Torvald's absence of Christian expression contrasts sharply with his explicit preoccupation with himself. Nora and his discussion of the Christmas season early in Act I focuses on Torvald's new job as a bank manager and other economic matters. At one point, Torvald says, "Ah, it's so gratifying to know that one's gotten a safe, secure job, and with a comfortable salary. It's a great satisfaction, isn't it?" (p. 129). Remarkably, even at Christmas, he betrays no sense that his recent occupational success should be celebrated as a blessing from God. Later in the act, Torvald's expressed indignation toward Krogstad's moral failings stems from his own personal

⁷ The pathetic impotence of Torvald's last-ditch appeal to religion here is observed by Robert W. Haynes, who notes "Torvald's only statement regarding religion is his effort to control Nora by appealing to the conventions of her upbringing" (Haynes 2007, p. 73).

⁸ Unni Langås discusses a parallel between Torvald's expectations regarding religion and gender with the views of the Norwegian Hegelian philosopher and theologian Marcus Jacob Monrad (1816–1897) (Langås 2005, pp. 149–51). See also (Moi 2006, pp. 274–78), which argues that Torvald's understanding of gender articulated in this conversation reflects Hegel's generic categories for gender, categories that deny women the right to "become self-conscious, concrete individuals" (Moi 2006, p. 276).

⁹ We might also add that although the Helmers own a piano that Torvald adeptly plays, the only music heard during this Christmastime play is near the end of Act 2 when Torvald plays the tarantella while Nora rehearses her dance for their neighbors' masquerade party. The absence of any Christmas music is noteworthy, even as we may recognize that the music for the dance serves to advance Torvald's religion of self-exaltation, in that it helps exhibit before his friends Nora as, in Torvald's words, "a dream of loveliness"—a description of her that Torvald says was shared by "everyone [. . .] at the party" (p. 180).

discomfort in Krogstad's presence, not genuine ethical concerns. Torvald tells Nora, "I literally feel physically revolted when I'm around such a person" (p. 152), later admitting that Krogstad was actually "a crony of mine back in my teens" (p. 160), a fact so embarrassing to Torvald that he fires Krogstad from the bank. In Act III, Torvald describes Rank's approaching death as "ugliness" that comes between his and Nora's blissful marriage. Seemingly oblivious to the significance of the black cross on Rank's calling card, Torvald tells Nora how Rank, "with his suffering and loneliness", was "like a dark cloud setting off our sunlit happiness" (p. 186). A bit later, Torvald responds to Krogstad's blackmail with more self-love as he blames Nora: "Now you've wrecked all my happiness—ruined my whole future" (p. 187). Finally, Torvald's joyful "I'm saved!" ignores Nora, something she points out when she responds, "And I?" (p. 188). Clearly Torvald's highest devotion is to Torvald, not to the Christian religion to which he appeals. Indeed, in the words of Kristan Gjesdal, Torvald displays "a pathological solipsism, a thinking that places the individual ego in the centre of the world and deems whatever event it faces beautiful or ugly depending on whether it satisfies its own, aesthetically bolstered subjectivity" (Gjesdal 2010, p. 8).¹⁰ Ignoring Christ's costly example of painful, sacrificial love, Torvald, in his self-love, falls far short of the ideal of the self-sacrificial husband of Nora's "religion of Torvald", an ideal that better fits the Christian religion Torvald professes than the religion of self that he actually practices.

Ironically—but strangely appropriately—Nora's stated disregard for the Christian "religion" is predicated on Torvald's own self-idolatry. Indeed, we may argue that Nora's momentous decisions and actions at the end of the play are essentially determined by her changed perception of Torvald from that of a husband characterized by sacrificial love—a love she had intended to imitate to the point of her own death—to one characterized by self-centeredness, a characterization that she ironically then takes upon herself in the final portion of the drama. Significantly, after Nora informs Torvald that she had expected him to take her guilt upon himself, she tells him, "You're thinking I'd never accept such a sacrifice from you? No, of course not. But what good would my protests be against you? That was the miracle I was waiting for, in terror and in hope. And to stave that off, I would have taken my life" (p. 194). Here, Nora clearly states that she intended to match and indeed supersede Torvald's expected sacrifice with her own act of supreme selflessness, resolving to "kill herself and prevent Torvald from assuming the burden of sin" (Northam 1965, p. 105). Although Nora's willingness to commit suicide for Torvald's sake clearly differs from Christ's self-sacrifice, her words nevertheless recall Christ's teaching, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), and, ultimately, his sacrificial death. As Johnsen writes, albeit somewhat cynically, Nora had planned to supersede Torvald's anticipated sacrifice "by taking it definitively from him with an ultimate transcendent sacrifice, redeeming his sacrifice with her own greater sacrifice" (Johnsen 2011, p. 196).

But Johnsen's implicit cynicism also suggests the problematic nature of Nora's understandings of sacrifice. Kristin Ørjasæter notes that both Nora's illegal efforts to save Torvald's life and Mrs. Linde's marriage to a man she did not love to provide financially for her family demonstrate "that sacrificing one's own happiness for the sake of other people's well being was regarded as a female duty" (Ørjasæter 2005, p. 34).¹¹ It is against such a problematic notion of sacrifice and its attendant "gender hierarchy" that Nora rebels at the play's end (He 2008, p. 139), but her rebellion and departure are arguably based upon her responses to her other problematic understandings of sacrifice. Indeed, we also may rightly question Nora's idealistic expectation of Torvald's sacrifice, her firm belief that Torvald would for Nora's sake proclaim himself guilty of Nora's crime. For if Nora's expectation

¹⁰ Similarly, Moi considers Torvald an "aesthetically inclined egoist" (Moi 2006, p. 261).

¹¹ Chengzhou He observes that "Helmer's story of success is actually dependent on Nora's sacrifices" (He 2008, p. 140), a matter that makes his both verbally abusive and self-centered response toward the revelation of her earlier efforts to save his life and his patronizing attitude toward Nora after Krogstad relents of his blackmail all the more problematic. Anticipating Johnsen's critique, Moi objects to Nora and Torvald's "taking themselves to be starring in various idealist scenarios of female sacrifice and male rescue" (Moi 2006, p. 257).

on one hand suggests a husbandly love that imitates Christ's sacrifice for his church, it also exceeds the Pauline mandate for husbands. Surely a theological distinction must be made between Christ's "becom[ing] sin" for humanity's sake in order to offer himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for his church and thus rendering believers "blameless" because of his sacrifice (cf. 2 Cor 5:21 and Eph 5:27), and a husband's appropriate life-giving for his wife's sake. Many Christian theologians hold that Christ's substitutionary atonement made him "sin" in the judicial sense, taking upon himself the punishment for humanity's transgressions, but in no way ultimately suggesting that Christ performed those transgressions himself.¹² Nora's expectation is that Torvald would lie to assert that he was guilty of Nora's actual crime. Nora's expectation finds no biblical mandate but effectively transgresses the ninth commandment against bearing false witness. As we have noted above, Nora affirms that to prevent such a "sacrifice" from Torvald, she "would have taken [her own] life," but her suicidal notion of sacrifice is ultimately more problematic than the above examples of female sacrifice that Ørjasæter decries, and it invites the cynical response Johnsen offers.¹³

Of course, misunderstandings of Christian doctrine abound in the "religion of Torvald". One might argue that Nora's misguided expectation of Torvald's taking upon himself of her guilt and her own misguided willingness to sacrifice her life for the sake of her husband's reputation are in fact Nora's misguided appropriations of the misguided doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement of which she must have learned during her youthful catechesis and confirmation (p. 193). Mary H. Streufert speaks for many in articulating the oft-stated concern that the image of Christ's "violent sacrifice" brings problematic "Christian images of God" and resultant destructive "practical implications for adherents' lives" (Streufert 2006, p. 113), including the notion that a proper "interpretation of Jesus' obedient self-sacrifice" mandates that a Christian woman must "sacrifice her own personal safety" by staying in an abusive marriage (Streufert 2006, p. 114).¹⁴ Perhaps Nora's willingness to sacrifice her life for Torvald's sake is her own perverse desire to imitate the "violence of the atonement" (Streufert 2006, p. 113) that Streufert and others decry.

But I instead argue that Nora's expectation for Torvald, albeit problematic, demonstrates an authentic longing for sacrificial love, a love exemplified by the Christ she does not worship,¹⁵ a love she believed was embodied by the husband who has become her god, a love she was willing to demonstrate herself. Indeed, Nora had intended to imitate Torvald's anticipated Christlike love to the greatest degree. But when Torvald fails Nora's hopes and instead demonstrates self-centeredness, Nora follows Torvald's example of self-love. Nora begins to proclaim her "duties to [her]self" to be, essentially, her "most sacred vows" (p. 193), and she abandons not only Torvald but also her children.¹⁶ Whereas Nora's previous willingness to give up her life for Torvald recalls Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of love, her departure recalls scriptural texts that portray a mother's abandonment of her children as contradicting God's faithful love for his people (Isaiah 49.15, Psalm 27.10). The consequence of

¹² For one such discussion of this theme in the context of Reformed Christianity, Luther, and Calvin, see (Huggins 2013, p. 75). For an extended discussion of substitutionary atonement, including objections to it and alternative theories of atonement, see (Erickson 1986, pp. 801–23).

¹³ Carol Strongin Tufts argues that Nora's desire "to prevent [Torvald's] sacrifice with a more daring one of her own" demonstrates her "narcissistic affirmation of an idealized self" that, through her sacrificial death, will never face the possibility of Torvald's rejection when she gets older but "forever" remain "the perfect object of his love" (Tufts 1986, p. 156).

¹⁴ Streufert draws upon (Parker and Brock 2001, pp. 15–19), which tells the story of Anola Dole Reed, whose insistence of staying with her violent husband, who eventually murdered her, was grounded in such a belief.

¹⁵ In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin discusses at length how Christ's substitutionary atonement is motivated by God's love (Calvin 1960, 2.16.3–4 [pp. 505–7]).

¹⁶ The degree to which Nora's abandonment of her children potentially compromises her heroism has concerned various critics. In his defense of Nora, Daniel J. Brooks argues that, in the face of Torvald's implicit accusation of Nora's "moral disease" and her consequent concern about "its possible transmission to her children", Nora "feels impelled to leave, and her decision is less an act of defiance against her husband and society than an attempt to save the lives of her children" (Brooks 2013, p. 17). Thus, "her leaving is an act of love and sacrifice rather than irresponsibility and selfishness" (Brooks 2013, p. 15). Brooks' statement is another example of how prevalent various notions of "sacrifice" are within various critical discussions of Nora's character.

Torvald's failure to meet Nora's desire for Christlike love is that Nora now follows in a truly devastating manner Torvald's own egocentric practice of the "religion of Torvald" and its characteristic self-love.

Our recognition of Nora's decision to follow the egocentric religion of Torvald—now manifesting itself in her newly declared superlative devotion to herself—will likely significantly affect our perception of Nora as the play concludes, and we do well to consider how this reading situates itself amid other interpretations of her character. Since the nineteenth century, Nora's departure has been portrayed as victorious by numerous productions and critics. In the past decade, Johnsen has argued that *A Doll House* is truly "liberating" because it demonstrates "that Nora *can* walk away" and "slam the door on this wretched potlach of serial self-sacrifices" (Johnsen 2011, p. 196). And Abdur Rahman Shahin and Rizwan ul-Huq have affirmed that, because of her solitary exit, "Nora is nothing less than a hero who should be adored for such an act of bravery" (Shahin and Huq 2012, p. 294).¹⁷ By contrast, I suggest that Nora's self-focused abandonment of her family both imitates Torvald's religion of self-love and inverts the Christlike love Nora expected from Torvald. And my theologically informed reading of Nora's character differs significantly from the one offered by Mahaffey. In her article, Mahaffey offers a sustained comparison between Nora and Christ, arguing for "a fundamental rereading of Christian doctrine" that suggests, in light of the glorious bodily "transformation" and "transfiguration" of the resurrection, that "Jesus' sacrifice" of the crucifixion "is not selfless; it is instead a model for the changing of the self, for facilitating its evolution [. . .] the crucifixion and the resurrection show that Jesus was modeling a program of metamorphosis" (Mahaffey 2010, pp. 69, 62, 69). Mahaffey writes that "Nora's dancing is her Passion, her agony and ecstasy", and that her departure marks her "personal resurrection, which will not come without sacrifice (she will leave her children, at least temporarily), but what she will no longer sacrifice is her own potential for growth" (Mahaffey 2010, pp. 63, 68). But Mahaffey's reading of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection cannot justify Nora's self-focused destruction of her family, and Mahaffey's implicit suggestion that Nora can both continue her pursuit of such self-focused "growth" and perhaps even reunite with her children frankly ignores the legal and social realities of divorce and child custody in Nora and Torvald's contemporary situation.¹⁸ By contrast, I contend that Nora follows Torvald into both his spiritually disastrous self-love and what Gjesdal calls Torvald's "illusion of being absolutely autonomous and self-sufficient and the idea that such autonomy and self-sufficiency is a necessary condition for a free and beautiful existence" (Gjesdal 2010, p. 11).

My view that Nora has embraced such self-love and delusionary autonomy also resists the overly optimistic reading of Kristin Ørjasæter, who asserts that Nora's leaving Torvald "initializes the necessary process which eventually might make them both develop into free human beings fit for a true loving union with an equally free partner" (Ørjasæter 2005, p. 32). Nora's exit does not lend itself to the kind of relational negotiation that would enable her and Torvald to reunite in the manner Ørjasæter postulates. Rather, as Joel Shatzky and Sedwitz Dumont plausibly contend, "the uncompromising

¹⁷ We should note, in fairness, that many critics since the play's first production to the present have criticized Nora. In the words of Joan Templeton, writing more than thirty years ago, "for over a hundred years, Nora has been under direct siege as exhibiting the most perfidious characteristics of her sex" (Templeton 1989, p. 28). Particularly memorable criticisms have been offered by June Schluter, who, having suggested that "Nora is deceitful and manipulative from the start", writes that Nora's departure "reflects only a petulant woman's irresponsibility" (Schluter 1985, pp. 64–65); and by Tufts, who argues that, throughout the play, Nora displays the diagnosable criteria of a narcissistic personality (Tufts 1986).

¹⁸ Moi notes that "the law of [Nora's] day made it impossible for a woman who left her home to keep her children" (Moi 2006, p. 278). See (Melby et al. 2000), which observes that even after Norway's 1888 "property acts", passed to afford married women a greater legal standing, husbands maintained "the entire disposal over [a couple's] joint property and had legal custody of the children" (Melby et al. 2000, p. 14). Hanne Marie Johansen notes that until 1909, the Lutheran divorce rules from the Ordinance of 1582 "remained the valid divorce law", with spousal desertion being treated "as adultery" (Johansen 2018, p. 42). Moreover, "Equality in marriage was not established until 1927 when a statute on property relationships between spouses made the wife a partner with equal rights and responsibilities" (Heffermehl 1972, p. 631). Admittedly, my approach also differs from Nora and Torvald's "contemporary situation" by reading the play's themes through Reformed Christianity rather than contemporary Lutheran sources, but in any case it is anachronistic to suggest that the deserting Nora might be reunited with her children without returning submissively to Torvald.

idealism that leads Nora to abandon her children” demonstrates Ibsen’s desire that “his audience” would “weigh the consequences of holding to an idealistic view above everything else, the ‘all or nothing’ mentality that would result in the horrors of idealistic, uncompromising absolutism that is even now a threat to humanity” (Shatzky and Dumont 1994, p. 83).¹⁹ Significantly, Moi, who affirms Nora’s departure, calls Torvald “a card-carrying idealist aesthete if there ever was one” and critiques “Nora’s unthinking echoing of” his “idealism” (Moi 2006, p. 257). Moi implies that Nora’s departure is her breaking free from such idealism (Moi 2006, pp. 274–78), whereas I argue that her departure is another manifestation of such problematic idealism, which disregards the complexity and fragility of human beings and their relationships in favor of an all-encompassing and unattainable ideal. Although Moi rightly decries aesthetic forms of problematic idealism, she affirms on her concluding page that “[a]s long as marriage and motherhood are incompatible with women’s existence as individuals and citizens, Nora will have none of them” (Moi 2006, p. 278). Moi’s statement recalls “the ‘all or nothing’ mentality” of the “uncompromising idealism” that Shatzky and Dumont warn against.

Although she does not engage Shatzky and Dumont’s objections to Nora’s departure, Moi briefly references their article in an endnote, simply and perhaps dismissively writing that they “reduc[e] idealism to a moral and political position” (Moi 2006, p. 279, n. 3). But Moi herself asserts that “idealist aesthetics” also “seamlessly merge aesthetics and ethics (Moi 2006, pp. 256–57), a merging exemplified in Torvald’s “sense of beauty,” which “admits no separation between ethics and aesthetics (Moi 2006, p. 262). And the Reformed theological critique of the “religion of Torvald” I have discussed throughout this essay prompts new questions. Indeed, I put forward that the well-founded moral concerns that inspire Moi’s objections to Torvald’s intolerant, aesthetically and ethically idealistic mistreatment of Krogstad and Nora (Moi 2006, pp. 262–63, cf. p. 274) should also extend further and inspire objections to Nora’s idealistic abandonment of her young children. Remarkably, we may recognize that both Moi’s regarding Torvald as a “brutish” and “petty-minded” “aesthetically inclined egoist” (Moi 2006, p. 261) and Gjesdal’s aforementioned description of Torvald’s “aesthetically” based “pathological solipsism” (Gjesdal 2010, p. 8) testify to the horrors of the self-focused “religion of Torvald”. Moreover, I assert that Nora’s idealistic “all or nothing” decision to abandon her family in favor of her “duties to [her]self” demonstrates her following Torvald’s example of “pathological solipsism” as she now embraces his solipsistic “religion of Torvald”.²⁰

Similar to Shatzky and Dumont, I argue that idealistic or heroic interpretations of Nora’s severance from Torvald are far too simple, for they reject one harmful paradigm only to embrace another. Indeed, if we are inclined to view Nora’s departure from her husband as the triumph of a newly autonomous woman, we might more accurately reconsider Nora as a woman who, however physically separated from Torvald, now, at the play’s conclusion, ironically and disturbingly imitates him—and his “religion”—more fully than ever before.

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¹⁹ Shatzky and Dumont support their contention by noting that Ibsen’s subsequent “social plays”—*Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck*, as well as *Hedda Gabler*—each also warn against such “uncompromising idealism” (Shatzky and Dumont 1994, p. 83).

²⁰ The notion that Nora follows Torvald into “pathological solipsism” coincides well with Tufts’ assertion that Nora’s exit demonstrates her “new narcissistic self-image” (Tufts 1986, p. 157).

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