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When the Novel or the Play's the Thing – *Fin de Siècle* Meets Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition

Abstract: The *fin de siècle* had been stirring writers to engage artistry in depicting class permeating society and the oppression of women under Victoria's regime. E.M. Forster's and John Galsworthy's lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorians had hidden: disparities between working-class England and upper-crust, and women's lives subjugated to the Empire's demands. In 1879, Henrik Ibsen had published *A Doll's House*, a precursor of what was to come. Forster and Galsworthy were more subtle and yet equally stark in incorporating society and politics into their art. The skilfulness of their invention lies in the ability to cover class, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness while beguiling their readers into a state of unwariness and then confronting them with the unexpected. In *Howards End*, published as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, Forster explores class, subterfuge, social borders and boundaries so as to incorporate into his lyricism the crushing of a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter, all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and purportedly happy families and marriages. Nobel Prize winner Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (the first book in what became known as *The Forsyte Saga*) was published shortly before *Howards End* – similarly combining the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations that come with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: 'my property', 'my own', 'my wife', 'my life', 'my family', the 'my' being foremost, yet challenged by the changes brought by the *fin de siècle*.

Keywords: Society. Class. Women's status. *Fin de siècle*. Henrik Ibsen. E.M. Forster. John Galsworthy.

1. *Introduction*

The *fin de siècle* stirred late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers to debate the oppression of women and dominance of class permeating British society. Class stratification was firmly fixed, and women, whatever their class, were subservient in law, politics, and society. Industrialisation brought change through the influx of trade and 'new money'. Decline of aristocratic families' wealth meant that, despite resistance, industrialists gained a foothold through marrying their daughters into established families, creating a solid upper middle class founded on wealth accumulated through acquisition of property. For women, the struggle for property and divorce rights had met with some success.[1] Yet, apart from a few who escaped through inherited

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[1] See D.M. Stetson, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1982; L. Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth Century England*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983; M.L. Shaley, *Feminism, Marriage and Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 2020. See also Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, Married Women's Property Act 1870, and Married Women's Property Act 1882: Married Women's

vol. IV, 2023, pp. 163-186
DOI: 10.4454/syn.v4.904

wealth or by defying cultural (and sometimes heterosexual)[2] diktat, women remained subject to fathers and husbands. Sex-based suppression reached ungovernable heights under Victoria Regina's repressive hand, and status based in class remained transcendent. Nevertheless, E.M. Forster's and John Galsworthy's lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorian era had attempted to keep hidden: the gross disparities between working-class England and the upper-crust, and the way demands of Empire subjugated women and denied them freedom.

Class and women's oppression were not limited to the British Empire. Nor was critical literary exposure. In 1879 Henrik Ibsen had published *A Doll's House*,[3] which immediately went into stage production at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen. Ten years later it first played in its original form in London,[4] one production seeing Krogstad, the villain, played by George Bernard Shaw.[5] Another, opening as the 'official' production midway through 1889, enjoyed a seven-day run in 1897. Janet Achurch, the actress who played Nora, was adjudged a brave woman indeed: at the end of the drama, Nora abandons her husband and children to 'find herself', leaving audiences outraged at a woman's desertion of her role, her place, her responsibilities, her very place in society.[6] Finding herself was, for Nora, to station herself outside the boundaries not only of husband, hearth, and home, but to live as an outlaw in defiance of the laws of society.

A Doll's House was a precursor of what was to come. Forster and Galsworthy were more subtle, and yet equally stark in their incorporation of society, politics, and law into their art. The skilfulness of their invention is displayed in an ability to write of class, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness in a way that beguiled their readers into a state of unwariness followed by a confrontation with the unexpected (in each case a death resolving a dilemma), albeit it was this that lay at the heart of their writing.

Property Act, 1870 and 1882 | Towards Emancipation? (unc.edu); Married Women's Property and Divorce in the 19th Century – Women's History Network (womenshistorynetwork.org); Divorce – The National Archives; Obtaining a divorce – UK Parliament (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

[2] This included famous lesbian couples such as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and other prominent women. See G. STEIN, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, London and Stockholm, Zephyr Books/ Continental Book Company, 1947; Gertrude Stein | Poetry Foundation; R. HALL, *The Well of Loneliness*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1928; The Well of Loneliness: The book that could corrupt a nation - BBC Culture; V. GLENDINNING, *Vita – The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, London, Penguin Books, 1984; The Paris Review - The Fabulous Forgotten Life of Vita Sackville-West - The Paris Review; Trefusis, Violet (1894–1972), writer | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (oxforddnb.com); The True Story of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West | Time (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

[3] See H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, in ID., *Four Major Plays*, Oxford, OUP, (1879) 1981.

[4] After much prompting, Ibsen wrote an alternative ending (with the implication that Nora did not leave) for the German production – a concession he much regretted. See Henrik Ibsen | Nasjonalbiblioteket (nb.no) (last accessed on 1 August 2023).

[5] See the following studies by M. HOLROYD: *Bernard Shaw – 1856-1898: The Search for Love*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1988; *Bernard Shaw – 1898-1918: The Pursuit of Power*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1989; *Bernard Shaw – 1918-1950: The Lure of Fantasy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1991; *Bernard Shaw – 1950-1991: The Last Laugh*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1992. See also The quintessence of Ibsenism: Shaw, Bernard, 1856-1950: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

[6] Achurch, Janet (1864–1916) | Encyclopedia.com; Janet Achurch - Oxford Reference (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

Following Ibsen, in *Howards End*, published in 1910, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth,[7] Forster explores class, subterfuge, social borders and boundaries – incorporating the acquisitive destroying of a vital codicil to a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter,[8] all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and happy (or at least settled) families and marriages. Nobel Prize winner Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (the first book in what became *The Forsyte Saga*)[9] was published in 1906 – shortly before *Howards End* – similarly combining the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations that come with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: 'my property', 'my own', 'my wife', 'my life', 'my family', the 'my' being foremost, and yet challenged by the changes brought by the *fin de siècle*.

2. *Here Come the Writers/The Writers and their Times*

Son of a Norwegian merchant, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was descended from shipowners and merchants on both sides of his family. There are conflicting assessments of his early history, some recounting a decline in the family's fortunes from Ibsen's age of about 7 years, others contradicting this and the tale of his father's slide into alcoholism and brutality.[10] It remains uncontroverted, however, that from 15 years of age he trained as a pharmacist whilst developing his skills as a writer, his first play – a tragedy – published in 1850 but not produced, although another was performed that same year. A dramatist, director and producer, Ibsen was propelled into this life when his desire to enter university was foiled by his failing the entrance examinations. His marriage in 1858 lasted four years in straitened financial circumstances, and he lived for the following three decades in Italy and Germany, rarely visiting Norway. Further dispute surrounds whether or how far his writing was influenced by his family circumstances and is biographical, but there appears to be agreement that, despite resisting the characterisation initially, he fell under the spell of Kierkegaard. His European sojourn – or exile, as some described it – ended after some thirty years, when he returned to live in Norway.

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) studied History and Classics at King's College, Cambridge. He was a pacifist, conscientious objector and met Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf. This scant recitation of Forster the man conveys little of his personality and contribution as a writer – albeit Strachey, famous for his *Eminent Victorians*

[7] E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, London, Penguin Books, (1910) 2012.

[8] This depends upon the character's intention: no one is more surprised than Charles Wilcox, with the self-assurance of class and position, when facing arrest and imprisonment.

[9] J. GALSWORTHY, *The Man of Property*, 1906, Vol. I; *In Chancery*, 1920, and *To Let*, 1921, published with Vols II and III in ID., *The Forsyte Saga*, London, Penguin/Random House, (1922) 2001.

[10] See R. FERGUSON, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*, New York, Dorset Press, 2001; I. DE FIGUEIREDO, *Henrik Ibsen: The Man and the Mask*, Engl. trans. R. FERGUSON, New Haven, CT, Yale U.P., 2019; Henrik Ibsen summary | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

and relationship with the artist Dora Carrington,[11] and Woolf[12] were public figures with publishing profiles. His mother Anglo-Irish, his father Welsh, Forster became a child of a single parent when, shortly before his second birthday, his architect father, suffering from tuberculosis, died at the age of 32.[13] Nonetheless, Forster had no need for paid employment. He and his mother inherited sufficient wealth from his father to enable him to travel to Europe (mainly Italy) and India – both providing him with inspiration and copy for his essays, novels, and other literary works. This included literary criticism and co-writing the libretto for Billy Budd, the opera created by Benjamin Britten. Committed to democracy, Forster was described as a 'liberal humanist', and Virginia Woolf wrote of him that he "says the simple things that clever people don't say; I find him the best of critics for that reason".[14]

Playwright and novelist John Galsworthy (1867-1933) was born in Surrey, England, the son of a solicitor, his mother and father divided by twenty years and status. Galsworthy's grandfather was of the *nouveaux riches*, his wealth coming from trade – as a ship chandler providing goods and supplies in the shipping industry, then invested into real estate. Galsworthy's mother saw this as setting her husband (his father) below her in the class hierarchy, despite his substantial inherited wealth and professional standing as a solicitor. Like Forster, Galsworthy junior had no need for earning a living, being in receipt of a sizable allowance from his father. Nor did he desire to enter the legal profession. Yet, as his father wished, in 1890 he was called to the Bar, having matriculated from New College, Oxford, and entered Lincoln's Inn as a Reader. Rather than taking on briefs, however, he travelled through Canada inspecting his father's property holdings, later touring through the Pacific, Australasia, and South Africa.[15] History shows him as encouraged into writing by his wife, with the added fortification coming from two of her friends. Yet writing must have intrigued him earlier, for he hoped to meet Robert Louis Stevenson when arriving in Samoa (the hope was not fulfilled) and, when travelling from Adelaide to South Africa and Cape Town, became friends with Joseph Conrad, then in the British Merchant Navy and working on board as first mate.[16]

[11] See L. STRACHEY, *Eminent Victorians – Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold, General Gordon*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1918; Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon: Strachey, Lytton, 1880-1932: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive (last accessed on 4 May 2023); M. HOLROYD, *Lytton Strachey – The New Biography*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994; G. GERZINA, *Carrington – A Life of Dora Carrington, 1893-1932*, London, Pimlico, 1995; Dora Carrington 1893–1932 | Tate (last accessed on 4 May 2023).

[12] See V. GLENDINNING, *Leonard Woolf: A Biography*, New York, Free Press, 2006; I. COATES, *Who's Afraid of Leonard Woolf? A Case for the Sanity of Virginia Woolf*, New York, Soho Press, 2022.

[13] For further details see Edward Morgan Llewellyn Forster (1847 - 1880) - Genealogy (geni.com); E M Forster | The British Library (bl.uk); E.M. Forster | Biography, Books, & Facts | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023); J.R. ACKERLEY, *E.M. Forster: A Portrait*, London, Ian McKelvie, 1970; D. BRADSHAW (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, Cambridge, CUP, 2007; W. MOFFAT, *E.M. Forster: A New Life*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010.

[14] Virginia Woolf Reviews E.M. Forster (Atlantic Monthly, 1927) (oldmagazinearticles.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023). See also Forster, Edward Morgan (1879–1970), novelist and essayist | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (oxforddnb.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

[15] See S. KAYE-SMITH, *John Galsworthy*, London, Nisbet, 1916; H.V. MARROT, *The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy*, London, Heinemann, 1935; D. HOLLOWAY, *John Galsworthy*, London, Morgan Grampian, 1968.

[16] See J. ALLEN, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad*, New York, Doubleday, 1965; J. BAINES, *Joseph Conrad: A*

Ibsen died in the year *The Man of Property*, the first book in Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, was published, four years before the publication of Forster's *Howards End*, whilst *A Doll's House* appeared more than twenty-five years before either. This did not detract from the powerful similarity of their themes. Nor did the period of their publication diminish it, *A Doll's House* being printed during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), *Howards End* appearing during Edward VII's rule (1901-1910), with *The Forsyte Saga*'s issue spanning Edward VII through to George V (1910-1936), the final book, *To Let*, published in 1921.[17]

The Victorian era spanned more than sixty years, the heir to the throne succeeding at 18 years, reigning from June 1837 to January 1901 as 'Monarch of British Dominions and Empress of India', and enforcing strict standards of private and public morality. The far shorter reign of Edward VII began when he had reached 60 years and was tumultuous compared with that of his predecessor. He toured Europe, became embroiled in scandals, and died in the middle of a constitutional crisis involving a struggle between the Commons and the Lords over Prime Minister Asquith's budget.[18] George V lost the titles signifying 'ownership' of the Dominions and India, saw the House of Commons finally establish supremacy over the House of Lords,[19] lived through the First World War (1914-1918), witnessed the fall of the German Empire under his cousin Wilhelm II, observed his relatives – Tsar Nicholas II (another cousin) and the Tsarina of Russian and their children – slain when the Russian Revolution gave rise to the USSR under Communism, and ruled when the first Labour government came to power.

The campaign for women's rights ran through the decades headed by Victoria, Edward and George, the right to vote finally being allowed to a restricted group of women in 1918 (all women over 21 years not succeeding to suffrage until 1928 – seven years after the final book of *The Forsyte Saga* appeared).[20] The class system remained entrenched, despite trade union activism, worker agitation and the founding of the Labour Party (originally as the Labour Representation Committee) in 1900, an alliance between the trade union and socialist movements.[21]

Property lies at the heart of *A Doll's House*, *Howards End*, and *The Forsyte Saga*. Class is central to each tale, with women's lot as the subtext providing the underlying tension. In each book law and money, class and death, or the threat of it, propel the action and its resolution.

Critical Biography, London, Weidenfeld Collection, (1960) 1993.

[17] Several stories based on the Forsyte family appeared later, the whole then becoming known as the 'Forsyte Chronicles'.

[18] Edward VII | Parents, Children, Successor, & Facts | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

[19] See Parliament Act 1911.

[20] See Representation of the People Act 1918 (suffrage for women over 30 years, being on the Local Government Register or married to a man on it – signifying ownership of land with a rateable value of £5 or upwards, and men over 21 with no property requirement), and Representation of the People Act 1928 (all over 21 years).

[21] Labour Party | History, Facts, Policies, & Leaders | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

3. *The Law and the Turn of the Century*

A Doll's House revolves around a loan contract and guarantee, blackmail, marriage and separation rights, husband right, father right, child custody and 'ownership' of children. *Howards End* sources property rights, marital power and the re-balancing of power through the impact of age and astute pragmatism, spinsterhood and survival without marriage, rescue of the 'wanton woman' and of the child born out of wedlock. *The Forsyte Saga* references rape in marriage, husband right, adultery, separation and divorce, and the law and society's condemnation of a child conceived out of wedlock – even though followed by the errant couple's marriage. Themes are thus common to each of these stories, themes that address the role and rights of women, the potential trap of marriage yet the fate of the woman who refuses to enter it or determines at what cost to leave it, the advantage that marriage may have for the judiciously incisive wife, and the place of children in the social order.

In 1879 a woman had few property rights, despite changes to the law.[22] The Married Women's Property Act 1870 granted married women a right to their own wages and property inherited or gained from their own earnings. The Married Women's Property Act 1882 confirmed married women's rights as equal to single and widowed women. Thus, the 1882 Act acknowledged all income and property accrued by a woman, whatever her status, as her own legally and able to be dealt with as she wished. The changes resulted from campaigns that had faltered in 1857 when a Married Women's Property Bill, seen as 'too radical', disappeared from the Order Paper upon the proroguing of Parliament. So, dissatisfied and still determined, ten and twenty years later women succeeded in having the Parliament pass legislation focus on overturning the great lie of the traditional marriage ceremony, when the putative husband declares 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow'. Truth was that the female partner gave up all her 'worldly goods' to her husband's ownership. Coverture governed all married women: in the words of *Blackstone's Commentaries*, upon marriage husband and wife "become one, that one is the husband".[23] Unmarried women were considered legally to be under the care of their fathers. Although single women did have contract and property rights, once married the 'care' was reposed in the woman's husband, coverture depriving her of all independent rights. This left her with no right to enter into contracts, own

[22] Similarities existed at least in the Western world, with married women equally deprived of rights (including property rights, voting rights etc.) in Norway and the United Kingdom. The law in England is addressed here. For Norway, see I. BLOM, "The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in Norway, 1885-1913", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 5 (1-4), 1980, pp. 3-22, The struggle for women's suffrage in Norway, 1885–1913: Scandinavian Journal of History: Vol 5, No 1-4 (tandfonline.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023); I. BLOM, "Nation – Class – Gender: Scandinavia at the Turn of the Century", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 21 (1), 1996, pp. 1-16, Nation – Class – Gender: Scandinavia at the turn of the century: Scandinavian Journal of History: Vol 21, No 1 (tandfonline.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023); I. FLOYSTAD, "Women's History in Norway", in K.M. OFFEN, R. ROACH PIERSON AND J. RENDALL (eds), *Writing Women's History – International Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, pp. 221-30.

[23] William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* appeared in four volumes, published by Oxford's Clarendon Press over the years 1765-1770. A barrister, Blackstone's career as a jurist saw him appointed as Vinerian Professor of English Law at the University of Oxford, elected a Conservative MP, and appointed a justice of the Court of the Kings Bench.

land or income, or cease cohabiting with her husband, she bound to reside with him wherever the matrimonial home might be. A woman's right to property ownership was limited once she became engaged: if she gifted property to another, once married the husband was entitled by law to recover it, renouncing the gift.

This impacted on Nora. Married to Torvald Helmer, she learns that he is threatened with an early death. A warmer climate is proposed as life-saving treatment, but the family cannot afford this expense. Women had no right to borrow money independent of a man, but Nora cannot stand by. She borrows from Krogstad, a money lender of doubtful repute, forging her father's signature as guarantor. "Twelve hundred dollars. Four thousand eight hundred crowns. That's a lot of money", Nora a year or so later tells an old school friend, swearing her to secrecy. The family travels south, spending a year in Italy, Torvald recovers, and now – the reckoning. Krogstad, a bank functionary whose job is at risk, knowing the signature is forged threatens Nora with exposure. The dilemma she faced which led to her doing the original forgery – how else would she save her husband when the law saw women's signatures as lacking legal status without a male guarantor and her husband opposed borrowing as morally wrong? – returns in another guise. Will she confess to Torvald, or submit to Krogstad's blackmail?

The changes wrought by the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 are reflected in *Howards End*, though a husband's ability to overrule his wife's wishes by ignoring the law remains unchallenged. When Ruth Wilcox dies, having consolidated a friendship with the older of the Schlegel sisters Margaret and Helen, her widower Henry considers whether or not to honour Ruth's last request. She has signed a codicil to her will, leaving Howards End to Margaret Schlegel. Prior to the 1870 and 1882 reforms, married women could own neither property nor income, nor bequeath property by will or otherwise. Though the Married Women's Property Acts now confirm that Ruth is entitled to do this in law, if the property were hers legally, her signature counts for nothing in the face of fixed patriarchal assumptions about family, property and inheritance. Charles Wilcox, Ruth and Henry's son, takes the lead. Deciding that Margaret is an acquisitive, manipulative young woman, he persuades his father that Ruth has been led into error, and the family must retain Howards End whatever Margaret's legitimate claims. At the heart of the exchange is Charles's expectation that the property will come to him, ultimately, as the oldest son and hence entitled by birth to inherit. It is, therefore, "natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it onto their dining-room fire […]. The woman who had died did say to them, 'Do this,' and they answered, 'We will not'".[24]

Property is at the heart of *The Forsyte Saga*, too, though here it is sought to be used as a bribe and absolution from husband to wife. Soames, married to Irene, has made the match of his dreams, though she does not concur. Six overtures it took to have her accept his proposal, Irene's agreement contingent on Soames' acceptance that if the marriage should not work out for them both, it will be ended amicably. Yet once he has won her (as Soames persuades himself he has), he forgets this condition. As, realising her error, Irene withdraws more and more from his company, Soames becomes

[24] E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, p. 102.

more and more irritated and angry at her failure to be his model of what a wife should be. Far from exhibiting deference, she ignores his overtures, growing more remote. Irene's coldness toward him, when Soames sees himself as having rescued her from penury (she had £50 a year when he married her into a life of more than relative comfort) becomes intolerable. In an infamous scene in *A Man of Property*, the first book of the *Forsyte Saga*, Soames wakes to contemplate his actions of the night before:

> The morning after a certain night on which Soames at last asserted his rights and acted like a man, he breakfasted alone.
> He breakfasted by gaslight, the fog of late November wrapping the town as in some monstrous blanket till the trees of the Square even were barely visible from the dining-room window.
> He ate steadily, but at times a sensation as though he could not swallow attacked him. Had he been right to yield to his overmastering hunger of the night before, and break down the resistance which he had suffered now too long from this woman who was his lawful and solemnly constituted helpmate? He was strangely haunted by the recollection of her face, from before which, to soothe her, he had tried to pull her hands – of her terrible smothered sobbing, the like of which he had never heard, and still seemed to hear; and he was still haunted by the odd, intolerable feeling of remorse and shame he had felt, as he stood looking at her by the flame of the single candle, before silently slinking away. And somehow, now that he had acted like this, he was surprised at himself.[25]

Before this – the rape of Irene – Soames had embarked on the building of a house, a magnificent mansion designed as the putative matrimonial home, constructed on a hill overlooking a meadow and stream. There, he imagines he and Irene will live, raising the family he wants, to establish himself even more securely in the upper-middle class world he and his extended family now inhabit. Yet in this he is mistaken. His conclusion that the events of "that night" constitute "an incident […] really not of great moment" is misplaced. Soames errs in his contention that

> women made a fuss about it in books; but in the cool judgement of right-thinking men, of men of the world, of such as he recollected often received praise in the Divorce Court, he had but done his best to sustain the sanctity of marriage, to prevent her from abandoning her duty.[26]

The wedge between the married couple is irreparable. Indeed, it is the house building and accompanying fantasy of marital bliss that precipitate the resolution of the Soames-Irene marriage. Bosinney, the architect of the property designed to consolidate the marriage, is the architect of the ending of it. Having formed an adulterous relationship with Bosinney, upon his death when trampled on by a carriage and horses on a dark and blustery night, Irene leaves Soames.

Why this focus by all three writers on the law and, at the heart of the stories, women's disadvantage under it? Being admitted to the Bar, it is unsurprising that Galsworthy peppered the *Forsyte Saga* with allusions to reported cases, though not naming them. Fifteen years before *The Man of Property* was published, rape in marriage arose as a side issue in *R v Clarence* when the husband was alleged to have infected his wife with gonorrhoea. Transmission of this and other sexually transmitted diseases from

[25] J. GALSWORTHY, *A Man of Property*, in ID., *The Forsyte Saga*, Chapter 4, "Voyage into the Inferno", p. 264.
[26] *Ibidem*.

husbands to wives was not uncommon at the time:[27] repressive attitudes toward sexual intercourse in marriage meant men, married as well as single, frequented brothels or exploited street walkers. *R v Clarence* saw the House of Lords address whether Clarence was guilty of inflicting grievous bodily harm upon his wife. She contracted the gonorrhoea through sexual intercourse with him. He, suffering from the disease, did not tell her of his condition. This was the issue: did the failure to advise render Clarence guilty. If she knew, would she have submitted? Rape was not directly before the court. Prosecutors bowed to Chief Justice Hale's diktat from centuries earlier – that rape in marriage was no crime, consent to sexual intercourse with the husband being pre-determined by consent to marriage: no reneging was allowed.[28] Only one judge agreed inflexibly with Hale. The others in varying degrees questioned or said the matter should be left for the future.[29] Women activists were not persuaded. Josephine Butler and her cohort campaigned unremittingly for women's right to bodily integrity and relief from maltreatment and abuse through laws that oppressed women.[30]

Crusaders were making their mark in other areas, their concerns taken up by perceptive turn of the century writers. Ibsen focused not on contract and property rights alone. *A Doll's House* also underscored women's lack of rights regarding children. Thus when Nora leaves Torvald behind, closing the door on her marriage, she leaves behind the children, too. This meant that when the play was performed, not only did deserting a husband play ill with audiences. So did Nora's child desertion. Yet Nora had no choice. Children born in marriage became the property of the father: he held all rights to custody; his wife, their mother, held none. Women activists did not stand for this, either. Like the Butler campaign for women's rights against male sexual supremacy, Caroline Sheridan Norton and women like her fought for women's rights against omnipotent fatherhood.[31] Like Nora, Caroline Norton separated from her husband. She then spent years fighting to change laws that obliged her to abandon her children to a man whose rights were sacrosanct, however he treated the children and however he had treated her. Ironically, however, had she not married George Norton, the children she bore would have been safe from his paternal rights. This theme of the 'fatherless' child was taken up by Forster in *Howards End* and Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga.*

Like Irene, Margaret and Helen Schlegel are daughters of a deceased academic. Though being financially independent at a modest level and not as poorly off as Irene,

[27] Syphilis is, for example, at the heart of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. See H. IBSEN, *Ghosts*, 1881, in ID., *Four Major Plays*.

[28] See *Hales History of the Pleas of the Crown* (also *Hales Pleas of the Crown or, A methodical summary of the principal matters relating to that subject*), 1680, first published 1736, Pleas of the crown: or, A methodical summary of the principal matters relating to that subject (archive.org) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[29] See *R v Clarence* (1888) 22 QBD 23; J.A. SCUTT, "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract", *Monash University Law Review*, 3 (4), 1977, pp. 255-88, Scutt, Jocelynne A --- "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract" [1977] MonashULawRw 5; (1977) 3(4) Monash University Law Review 255 (austlii.edu.au) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[30] See J. BUTLER, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, Cambridge, CUP, (1896) 2011; BBC - History - Josephine Butler (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[31] See C. SHERIDAN NORTON, *Observations on the Natural Claim of the Mother to the Custody of her Infant Children: As Affected by the Common Law Right of the Father*, Cambridge, CUP, (1837) 2012. See also J. BAILEY, *Parenting in England 1760-1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation*, Oxford, OUP, 2012.

marriage is the conventional solution for all of them. Nonetheless, each takes a very different path when it comes it comes to matrimony and maternity. Irene marries Soames to save herself from penury, unwisely thinking that a prenuptial agreement to end it if she wishes will be honoured. As for Margaret, despite the philosophical differences between them, she becomes Mrs Wilcox, a supportive yet quizzical wife to Henry. This marital alliance makes her stepmother to his and Ruth's children, bearing none of her own. Much earlier, Helen falls madly in momentary love with Paul, the younger Wilcox son but the Wilcoxes cannot abide the notion of her coming into their family, seeing her as an acquisitive social climber endeavouring to inveigle Paul into an unwelcome alliance. Yet the Schlegel sisters are united in their belief in women's rights and most particularly women's suffrage, viewing women's independence as central to women's existence. Nevertheless each in her own way tolerates Henry Wilcox's disregard for – even despising of – the women's vote. As Helen writes in a letter to Margaret, when staying at Howards End as a guest at the opening of the novel:

> I am having a glorious time. I like them all […]. I do really feel that we are making friends. The fun of it is that they think me a noodle, and say so – at least, Mr Wilcox does – and when that happens, and one doesn't mind it's a pretty sure test, isn't it? He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've never had […]. I couldn't point to a time when men had been equal, nor even to a time when the wish to be equal had made them happier in other ways. I couldn't say a word. I had just picked up the notion that equality is good from some book – probably from poetry or you. [32]

Despite this self-abnegation of her commitment to women's rights, Helen reveals her capacity for liberated thought and action when she decides to bear a child out of wedlock. The father is a young man whom the sisters befriend after a musical performance and a misunderstanding about a mislaid umbrella. Helen makes her decision, embracing the law that makes full responsibility for the pregnancy, the birth and the child fall upon her as the mother. On the one hand, this relieves her of the quandary that faced Nora and Caroline Norton in lack of mother-right. On the other (being unmarried) Helen must battle social opprobrium of a different kind, and must find financial support independent of a man. Although acting outside the social norms of the *fin de siècle*, Irene is far more conventional. Separated from Soames, she becomes enamoured of his cousin, 'Young' Jolyn. Her son Jolyn, known as Jon, is a consequence of their affair and is born before Soames divorces her and before she and Jolyn marry. Jon, like Helen's son, 'Baby', is a bastard but, unlike the latter, he grows up in a conventional family setting of father and mother without knowing of his irregular status. Marriage of the parents did not make an illegitimate child legitimate until the Legitimacy Act 1926 and by adoption that same year under the Adoption Act. Children of single parent mothers remained 'illegitimate' until legislative change toward the end of the twentieth century.[33]

[32] E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, pp. 3-4.

[33] See J.M. EEKELAAR, "Reforming the English Law Concerning Illegitimate Persons", *Family Law Quarterly*, 14 (1), Spring 1980, pp. 41-58, and K. GIBSON, *Illegitimacy, Family, and Stigma in England, 1660-1834*, Oxford, Oxford Academic Books, 2022.

At the time, laws – whether governing children born in wedlock or out of it – favoured male interests. For the male child born in marriage, inheritance rights followed. The male child born outside marriage (like the female child) gained no rights in relation to his father. For women, bearing children during marriage left them without rights whilst bearing them outside it left them in a state of practical and social disapprobation. Unmarried mothers were despised and cast out of society. The 'fallen woman' was a standard trope in nineteenth-century literature just as it was a reality for women who, often, labouring as servants in aristocratic or upper-class households fell victim to the predations of the head of household or the household sons. Bastard children were also born by women labouring in factories or serving in shops, or to women of higher social standing who fell victim to philanderers. The family's solution for the latter was to consign them to an asylum or convent.[34] For working-class women the solution was infanticide or going on the streets to work as prostituted women, for getting a job as the mother of an infant or small child was difficult in the absence of childcare or stay-at-home relatives to take responsibility with the mother out at work. Baby-farming might be a possibility but too often led to babies being starved or otherwise illtreated, so was no real option at all.[35]

Women bore the burden of opprobrium surrounding foundlings, or bastard or illegitimate children, and as baby-farmers were subject to criminal action for failure to care properly for them. Abortion was illegal, resorting to killing a child for whom the single mother had no resources to care was murder,[36] and charges of murder, manslaughter and criminal neglect dogged women in the baby-farming industry, with Margaret Waters, Amelia Dyer, Amelia Sach and Annie Walters, and Rhoda Willis executed respectively in 1870, 1896, 1903 and 1907, and in the colonies (Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand) Frances Knorr and Minnie Dean in 1894 and 1895.[37] The

[34] See for example J.J. MATHEWS, *Good and Mad Women – The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1984; R. RICHARDSON, "Foundlings, Orphans and Unmarried Mothers", 15 May 2014, Foundlings, orphans and unmarried mothers | The British Library (bl.uk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023); K. ROUSER, "A Young Woman's Delicate Reputation", Heroes, Heroines, and History: A Young Woman's Delicate Reputation (hhhistory.com) and "Plight of the Unmarried Mother in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century", 21 March 2016, Heroes, Heroines, and History: Plight of the Unmarried Mother in the late 19th and Early 20th Century (hhhistory.com) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[35] See for example B. WAUGH, *Baby-Farming*, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London, Kegan Paul, 1890; A. COSSINS, *The Baby Farmers: A Chilling Tale of Missing Babies, Shameful Secrets and Murder in 19th-Century Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2014; M. HILTZ, "A 19th Century Nightmare: Victorian Baby Farms", 1 June 2021, A 19th Century Nightmare: Victorian Baby Farms | The Vintage News (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J. STUART-BENNETT, *Motherhood, Respectability and Baby-Farming in Victorian and Edwardian London*, London, Routledge, 2022.

[36] Infanticide as an alternative to murder (reducing murder to manslaughter) was introduced by the Infanticide Act 1922 (causing newly-born child's death when 'not fully recovered from the effect of giving birth' to the child and 'balance of her mind was then disturbed'), Infanticide Act 1922 (vlex.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023), repealed by the Infanticide Act 1938, which amended the definition to include killing during lactation and limited the age of the 'newly-born' child to 12 months after birth, Infanticide Act 1938 (legislation.gov.uk) (last accessed on 5 May 2023). See also K.-A. COUZENS, "'Under the act … it was not necessary to put a girl on trial for murder': The Infanticide Act (1922)", 31 October 2022, Infanticide Act (1922) and the Emma Temple case (ltomhistory.org) (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

[37] See K. LASTER, "Knorr, Frances Lydia (Minnie) (1867-1894)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Biography - Frances Lydia (Minnie) Knorr - Australian Dictionary of Biography (anu.edu.au) (last accessed on

Infant Life Protection Act 1872 was introduced as a direct consequence of the predations of baby-farming and a Select Committee on the Infant Life Protection Bill of 1896 heard evidence on the industry resulting in the Infant Life Protection Act 1897. The Children Act 1908 followed. Focusing attention on baby and children's vulnerability and need for protection from exposure to the rapaciousness of 'carers' desirous of making money out of women needing somewhere to place their illegitimate children was vital. At the same time, women had to wait until the Abortion Act 1967 for some relief from the criminalisation of abortion under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861.[38] As for employment, childcare, and wages, despite women's industrial rights being strongly pursued by women and women's organisations, few women were as advantaged as Irene and Helen in giving birth to children when unwed. The struggle for equal pay in the forefront of claims for equality figured highly from at least the middle and late nineteenth century, as did the right to vote.[39] Legislation to enable women to enter Parliament and public office came in the early part of the twentieth century, but in the United Kingdom the Equal Pay Act 1974 and the Equality Act 2010 have still not ended the pay gap and the pensions gap is even less ameliorated.[40]

How, then, do Ibsen, Forster, and Galsworthy resolve the dilemmas they visit upon their protagonists in plotting *A Doll's House*, *Howards End*, and *The Forsyte Saga*?

4. *Class and a Mystery – Why? Who? And How?*

The similarities in pursuit of making transparent the politics of women's position in law and society at the *fin de siècle* are reflected, too, in the resolution featuring in each of the authors' tales. In *A Doll's House* it is Krogstad, the villainous blackmailer; in *Howards End* it is Leonard Bast, in so many ways an innocent abroad; in the *Forsyte Saga* it is the renegade architect Bosinney. Contrasting with these men of indeterminate but lesser social class, the plot of each work sees middle-class men of property in control. Helmut Torvald rules the household that populates *A Doll's House*. Soames, the 'Man of Property', is the anchor holding together the Forsyte family. In *Howards End* Mr Wilcox is in charge. Yet their existence, and the hold each has on his kingdom

29 May 2023); L. HOOD, "Story: Dean, Williamina (1844-1895)", Dean, Williamina – Dictionary of New Zealand Biography – Te Ara (last accessed on 29 May 2023); K. LASTER, "Frances Knorr: 'She Killed Babies, Didn't She?'", in M. LAKE and F. KELLY (eds), *Double Time: Women in Victoria, 150 Years*, Melbourne, Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 148-56; J.A. ALLEN, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1880*, Sydney, OUP, 1990.

[38] The Abortion Act 1967 requires two medical practitioners to authorise termination of pregnancy. Otherwise, pregnancy termination is unlawful and the criminal provisions of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 remain in England, Wales and Scotland but are repealed for Northern Ireland, although abortion services remain limited there, so most women continue travelling to England. See my following contributions: J.A. SCUTT, Abortion rights – and wrongs (eastangliabylines.co.uk) (last accessed on 18 July 2023); Abortion, infanticide, murder – does the legal system differentiate? (eastangliabylines.co.uk) (last accessed on 18 July 2023); *President's Report – CEDAW People's Tribunal*, 20-23 June 2020, https://www.cedawinlaw.com/_files/ugd/99a552_211b3ad2c4ae41d588a668613a86532b.pdf (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[39] See Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J.A. SCUTT, *Wage Rage for Equal Pay – The Long, Long Struggle*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan [forthcoming].

[40] See The Judge's Report 2022 (cedawinlaw.com) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

or castle, is made less secure by women whose family origins lie in the gentility of academe (Irene and Margaret) or government bureaucracy (Nora), each possessing no or lesser finance. This destabilising of the household head comes despite women's lack of formal power, their lower legal and financial status, their social status dependent upon the principal man who governs their lives and their world. Irene, Nora and Margaret bring into the lives and hence into the world of Soames, Torvald and Henry Wilcox a man of lesser or indeterminate social class and status (Krogstad, Bast and Bosinney), disrupting their security in their own position and unbalancing their universe.

Torvald Helmer's attitude toward his wife is one of tolerant though patronising indulgence, especially when it comes to money. Borrowing money to save Torvald's life means Nora must repay it. With no income of her own, she must juggle housekeeping monies to cover repayments. This she does with great flair combined with abstemiousness when it comes to her own needs. The discussion between her and Torvald in the context of Christmas present purchases illustrates this well. To Torvald's acknowledgement that he knows "only too well how Christmas runs away with the housekeeping", Nora gratefully accepts "Ten, twenty, thirty, forty", declaring effusively "thank you, thank you, […]. This will see me quite a long way". She displays "all the things" she has bought for the children and servants, "And so cheap!" (whilst acknowledging that beyond the "dress material and some handkerchiefs for the maids […] dear old Anne Marie should have had something better"). For herself, she "doesn't really want anything". Yet, when Torvald presses her, she, "toying with his coat buttons, and without looking at him", says hesitatingly that he "could always give me money […]. Only what you think you could spare. And then I could buy myself something with it later on". This is her way of securing more – not a gift for herself, but money to repay the loan. Yet, because she must maintain the loan as a secret to preserve Torvald's role as provider, he accuses her (albeit in jocular fashion) of "frittering [it] away on all sorts of useless things". Accusing her of spending his money on sweets and turning her into a brainless spendthrift, he tells her she cannot deny her inability to "hold on to the money" he gives her: "You can't deny it, Nora dear. [*Puts his arm around her waist.*] My pretty little pet is very sweet, but it runs way with an awful lot of money. It's incredible how expensive it is for a man to keep such a pet".[41]

Her desperation is covered up by her efforts to play the ingenue, lacking financial good sense and imbued with feminine wiles and smiles concealing her deception. Her eagerness to fulfil the commercial obligation of the loan, to retrieve the IOU through paying it off, is now compounded by having to deal with the greater danger posed by the moneylender. Back before the lifesaving trip south, when Nora is forced to forge her father's signature, it is to Krogstad the loan shark she goes, never anticipating that he might know full-well what she has done and use it against her as leverage, in turn, against her husband. Torvald is about to take up the lucrative post of bank manager, a career advance that will see the family secure and settled financially. Krogstad, his modest little job at the bank under threat, threatens Nora with exposure unless she uses her influence to prevent her husband's kicking him off the ladder he has begun to

[41] H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, pp. 3-4.

climb through his employment at the bank, rehabilitating his lost respectability from having some years ago "got himself mixed up in a bit of trouble". Nora resists. She will not be blackmailed. Believing her husband will recognise her fidelity as a wife whose sole purpose was to save him, she rejects Krogstad's demand. Far from understanding, Torvald charges Nora with wilfulness and a criminal disposition, so lacking in character that she is unfit to rear his children. Suddenly, her eyes are opened to Torvald's vision of who she is: a plaything fit for nothing other than feeding his desire, the keeper of the house through her dependency upon his financial bounty, the mother to 'his' children. No recognition of her steadfast will in seeking to save his life, her ingenuity in financing the trip south, her resistance to Krogstad's pressure. When she declares she is leaving to find herself, Torvald cannot believe she will go:

Helmer: I just can't understand it, it's so incredible. But we must see about putting things right. Take that shawl off. Take it off, I tell you! I must see if I can't find some way or other of appeasing [Krogstad]. The thing must be hushed up at all costs. And as far as you and I are concerned, things must appear to go on exactly as before. But only in the eyes of the world, of course. In other words you'll go on living here; that's understood. But you will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can't trust you with them […]. Oh, that I should have to say this to the woman I loved so dearly, the woman I still […]. Well, that must be all over and done with. From now on, there can be no question of happiness. All we can do is save the bits and pieces from the wreck, preserve appearances.[42]

When the reprieve comes, Krogstad returning Nora's IOU, Torvald thinks they can go on as before. Nora's error will be covered up, Torvald's reputation will be safe and saved. For Nora, this is not enough. Her life as the doll in the doll's house is ended.

What of Irene? Soames' desire to penetrate her iciness and lack of desire for him through building a wondrous house overlooking an expanse of land and forest and stream is foiled. Bosinney is the architect he employs to fashion the design and oversee construction. Yet Bosinney is ultimately the architect of Irene's journey out of Soames' life. Initially resisting her attraction to him, eventually Irene succumbs to Bosinney's buccaneer character, his poetic demeanour, her romantic illusion of him as an antidote to Soames' sewn-up starchiness. Soames sues Bosinney for a minor sum of money owed on the building contract, knowing that Bosinney cannot possibly pay. Despairing, walking in the fog, Bosinney dies under the wheels of a horse-drawn carriage, a collision that finishes whatever alliance there was between Soames and Irene. She leaves him:

He entered, pale, his hands moist with perspiration, dreading to meet her, burning to meet her, ignorant of what he was to say or do.
The maid Bilson was in the hall, and in answer to his question: "Where is your mistress?" told him that Mrs Forsyte had left the house about noon, taking with her a trunk and bag.
Snatching the sleeve of his fur coat away from her grasp, he confronted her:
"What?" he exclaimed; "what's that you said?" Suddenly recollecting that he must not betray emotion, he added: "What message did she leave?" and noticed with secret terror the startled look of the maid's eyes.
"Mrs Forsyte left no message, sir."

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 76.

"No message; very well, thank you, that will do. I shall be dining out."[43]

And so, the marriage ends – or at least by separation, until Soames initiates divorce much later, having employed private detectives to spy on Irene.

For *Howards End*, the resolution comes not with marriage breakdown, but with a wife in ascendancy, the marriage intact. Margaret, having been wrongly robbed of Howards End, the house bequeathed to her by Ruth Wilcox at her death, succeeds to the property by the will of her husband, Henry (the husband of them both, seriatim):

"Then I leave Howards End to my wife absolutely," said Henry. "And let everyone understand that; and after I am dead let there be no jealousy and no surprise."
Margaret did not answer. There was something uncanny to her triumph. She, who had never expected to conquer anyone, had charged straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives.[44]

Yet, what price the winning?

"In consequence, I leave my wife no money," said Henry. "That is her own wish. All that she would have had will be divided among you. I am also giving you a great deal in my lifetime, so that you may be independent of me. That is her wish, too. She also is giving way a great deal of money. She intends to diminish her income by half during the next ten years; she intends when she dies to leave the house to her – to her nephew, down in the field. Is all that clear? Does everyone understand?"[45]

It is here that Leonard Bast's role in Howards End finally coming back to Margaret as it ought to have, those years ago, comes into view. The nephew "down in the field" is Helen's illegitimate child by Leonard: Leonard who, from an indeterminate background and 'lower' class, had a wish to join the cultural ambience of the Schlegel sisters and their ilk. Leonard who, honourably, married a fallen woman he sought to save from dependence on streetwalking for money and survival. Ironically, Henry Wilcox is implicated in Mrs Bast's downfall: he employed her services when abroad in Cyprus. He is implicated in Leonard's loss of a position, too: acting upon Wilcox's advice, Leonard left a secure post to take another on Wilcox's recommendation, only to find the advice misguided. In the upshot, egged on by Helen and accosting the Wilcox family at Howards End, Leonard in pursuit of justice is killed by Henry's son Charles. To his shock and horror, Charles is charged, convicted, and sentenced to prison. Thus it is that Leonard's death brings about resolution.

Margaret secures Howards End. Helen can live there, rather than in ignominy and penury as an unmarried mother. Leonard Bast's son becomes secure in the Schlegel embrace and gains status as the inheritor of Ruth Wilcox's beloved property, which becomes in turn the beloved property of his aunt Margaret. And, at last, Margaret learns the truth as the family members say goodbye, following Henry Wilcox's revelation that Howards End will come to her:

Then it was Dolly's turn. Anxious to contribute, she laughed nervously, and said: "Good-bye, Mr

[43] J. GALSWORTHY, *The Forsyte Saga*, p. 286.
[44] E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, p. 360.
[45] *Ibidem*.

Wilcox. It does seem curious that Mrs Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she gets it, after all."
From Evie came a sharply drawn breath. "Good-bye," she said to Margaret, and kissed her.
And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea.
"Good-bye."
[…] Margaret saw their visitors to the gate. Then she returned to her husband and laid her head in his hands. He was pitiably tied. But Dolly's remark had interested her. At last she said: "Could you tell me, Henry, what was that about Mrs Wilcox having left me Howards End?"
Tranquilly he replied: "Yes, she did. But that is a very old story. When she was ill and you were so kind to her she wanted to make you some return, and, not being herself at the time, scribbled 'Howards End' on a piece of paper. I went into it thoroughly and, as it was clearly fanciful, I set it aside, little knowing what my Margaret would be to me in the future."
Margaret was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered.
"I didn't do wrong, did I?" he asked, bending down.
"You didn't, darling. Nothing has been done wrong."[46]

And yet – and yet, had Margaret secured Howards End way back then, at the death of Ruth. If she and Helen had moved in, to make a life of their own, independent of reliance upon men, if …:

From the garden came laughter. "Here they are at last!" exclaimed Henry, disengaging himself with a smile. Helen rushed into the gloom, holding Tom by one hand and carrying her baby on the other. There were shouts of infectious joy.
"The field's cut!" Helen cried excitedly – "The big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!"[47]

5. *Conclusion – Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition*

At the *fin de siècle* and for decades before, women's activism was pronounced. Women were agitating for marital property rights, separation and divorce rights, married women's rights in relation to child custody and access, equal pay, the right to stand for public office and voting rights.[48] In 1861 Sophia Jex Blake and six other women had run a case up to the House of Lords demanding that they be allowed to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh.[49] Jex Blake had already completed her first year successfully, an initiative that led the six other women to enrol. Initially, the notion that a woman should qualify for university study was accepted. Yet with six more women this was then renounced. Hence, the need for women's legal action. The court said 'No', claiming that as no woman had sought to enter university before, it was evident that

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 361.
[47] *Ibidem*, p. 362.
[48] See statutes and sources cited earlier.
[49] See *Jex Blake and Ors v Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof* (1873) 10 SLR 549, Jex-Blake and Others v. Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof [1873] ScotLR 10_549 (27 June 1873) (bailii.org) (last accessed on 29 May 2023); Jex-Blake and Others v. Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof | [1873] SLR 10_549 | Scottish Court of Session | Judgment | Law | CaseMine (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J.A. SCUTT, "Sexism in Legal Language", *Australian Law Journal*, 59 (10), 1985, pp. 163-64.

universities were 'not a place for a woman'. This proposition was, of course, logically unsustainable – for it meant that never could women be admitted as always, it would be said, no woman had applied. The decision led to that inevitable outcome. Richard Pankhurst, husband to Emmeline Pankhurst and father of Christabel, Sylvia and Adela – all of whom figured in the struggle for women's enfranchisement – was junior counsel on the *Jex Blake Case*.

This was not the only instance where women's rights were fought through the courts. Galsworthy's centring of women's rights and the wrongs visited upon women by violent and errant husbands in *The Forsyte Saga* led to his referencing (though not by name) *R v Jackson* as well as *R v Clarence*.[50] The latter was taken up in the Soames-Irene clash resulting in Soames' rape of his wife, whilst the former was alluded to though did not feature in the action. There, a husband engaged in an attempted exercise of forced cohabitation when he kidnapped his wife – although in that case, the court said he had no right to do so. Husband right did not extend to the right to capture a wife and hold against her will, simply because she had consented to marriage and, hence, to living with her husband. The House of Lords in its discussion in *R v Clarence* some twenty-five years later did not observe the contradiction that sexual intercourse against a wife's will in marriage was purportedly validated by her consent to wed.[51]

Forster's focus on property and women's rights or lack of them in marriage, and Forster and Galsworthy's inclusion of illegitimacy and its impact on women reflected women's activism of the time which was gaining traction world-wide. Albeit twenty years earlier, similarly for Ibsen, his work evidently influenced by local women's agitation. In Norway, the 1840s saw the number of single women rise substantially, nationally registered at 42%, with an associated campaign for women's right to enter trades. This was reflected in the passage of the Crafts Act 1839 and the Trade Act 1942, granting single and married women the right to engage in trade and crafts until then reserved for men of a certain class.[52] The legislative change is seen as generated to relieve fathers and husbands of the financial responsibility for their daughters and wives. At the same time, women's voices were not absent from the debate. Women are recorded as campaigning from at least 1814, the date Norwegian researchers Eirinn Larsen, Hide Danielsen, and Ingeborg W. Owesen set as key in the struggle for Norwegian women's equality. The Norwegian Association for Women's Rights was established in 1884, its origins in women whose activism predated founding of that national organisation.[53] A century earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft travelled for three months through Scandinavia, in Norway visiting Risor, Helgerae, Larvick, Tonsberg,

[50] See *R v Clarence* (1888) 22 QBD 23; *R v Jackson* (1891) 1 QB 671, 1891_1_q.b._671.pdf (warwick.ac.uk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023), and J.A. SCUTT, *Women and Magna Carta – A Treaty for Rights and Wrongs*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

[51] See J.A. SCUTT, "Consent in Rape – The Problem of the Marital Contract", *Monash University Law Review*, 3 (4), 1977, pp. 255-88, Scutt, Jocelynne A --- "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract" [1977] MonashULawRw 5; (1977) 3(4) Monash University Law Review 255 (austlii.edu.au) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[52] See E. LARSEN, H. DANIELSEN and I.W. OWESEN, *Norsk Likestillingshistorie 1814-2013*, Bergen, Fagbokforlaget, 2013; The history of Norwegian equality (kjonnsforskning.no) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[53] See The Borgen Project, "Blog – Latest News", 1 April 2022, Women's Rights in Norway - The Borgen Project (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

and Oslo (at that time Kristiana), Moss, and Friedriksten, searching for her former partner Gilbert Imlay's lost ship's treasure.[54] Years before *A Doll's House* was published, in her socio-political commentary Wollstonecraft ruminates on prison reform, divorce law, and the discriminatory repudiation of Queen Caroline upon her being accused of adultery during her marriage (1776-1782) to the mad King Christian VII of Denmark and Norway. All this was well known to Ibsen, most particularly through playwright Michael Beer's *Struensee*, written in 1827 and finally reaching the stage in 1856, having been banned by King Frederick William III of Prussia.[55]

Feminist activism in Italy and Germany was a likely inspiration for Ibsen, too. He spent the years from 1862 to 1889 with intermittent journeys, only, to Norway from Sorrento and Rome (1862-1868) and Dresden and Munich (1868-1889). Laws governing woman's place in Europe mirrored those in Scandinavia and Britain. Activism was afoot, there, too, with an impressive pedigree. *The Book of the City of Ladies*, one of Christine de Pizan's many works, was published in 1405, along with *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, advocating for women's recognition as ethical beings and rights in education and commerce.[56] Her books were popular, remaining in publication despite her death, estimated as 1430. Her aphorism "Every kingdom divided in itself will be made desolate, and every city and house divided against itself will not stand", reflecting upon the French Civil War, appeared in *The Book of Peace*.[57] For Ibsen, this struck close to home, the essence of the resolution of *A Doll's House*. His sojourn in Germany also exposed him to feminism located in the advanced industrialisation of Germany. Women played a role in trades and professions, particularly prominent in education as schoolmistresses.[58] It should not go unnoticed that Mrs Linde discloses at her meeting with Nora that she (like Galsworthy's Irene) married not for love but for survival then upon her husband's death "had to fend for [herself], opening a little shop, running a little school".[59]

Personal relations played a part in these three's lives as writers, too. Female influence for Galsworthy lay in his wife's persuasion, along with two female friends, that he pursue writing. Forster's relationship with his widowed mother was reputedly close (as an adult, when not travelling he lived with her until her death at 90 in 1945), so that

[54] See M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, London, Cassell & Company, (1796) 1889, The Project Gutenberg eBook of Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, by Mary Wollstonecraft (last accessed on 5 May 2023); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. C.H. Poston, Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, (1796) 1976.

[55] See Queen Caroline Mathilde – The Royal Danish Collection (kongernessamling.dk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[56] See C. DE PIZAN, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or the Book of the Three Virtues*, London, Penguin Classics, (1405) 1985, and *The Book of the City of Ladies*, London, Penguin Classics, (1405) 1999.

[57] C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of Peace*, eds K. GREEN, C.J. MEWS and J. PINDER, University Park, PA, Penn State U.P., (1412-1414) 2008. See also P. ALLEN, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, Vol. II; K. GREEN, "Preface", in C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of Peace*, University Park, PA, Penn State U.P., 2010.

[58] See R.J. EVANS, *Feminism and Female Emancipation in Germany 1870-1945: Sources, Methods, and Problems of Research*, Cambridge, CUP, 2008, Feminism and Female Emancipation in Germany 1870–1945: Sources, Methods, and Problems of Research | Central European History | Cambridge Core (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

[59] H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, p. 11.

this surely influenced his literary work. Ibsen's personal history includes fathering an illegitimate child (Hans Jacob Henriksen [Birkendalen], 1846-1914), whom he is said to have supported financially despite not meeting him,[60] and his son, Sigurd, born in wedlock, became Prime Minister of Norway in Stockholm, leading the political movement that resulted in Norway's independence from Denmark and Sweden.[61]

Not only women's rights and the playing out of sexual relations through discriminatory practices and sexual intimacy created the climate for these writers of imagination as the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth. Class as represented by the propertied solid middle-class was juxtaposed against class – indeterminate, for those men who did not 'fit' into the social stratum programmed for 'all' men (Bosinney, Bast, Krogstad), and determined by marriage for women who fitted into their husband's position or, like Irene before entering into matrimony with Soames and when she left it until regaining her class position when marrying Jolyn (albeit he resisted categorisation as middle-class, propertied, orthodox – unlike Soames), 'betwixt and between' in the hierarchy of position. This 'betwixt and between' role applied to Margaret and Helen, too – Margaret ultimately entering the solid, middle-class, propertied set through marriage, and Helen retaining her dubious class categorisation through unconventional motherhood, though saved by her sister and, ironically, her sister's marriage.

Therefore, Galsworthy, Forster, and Ibsen drew upon universal themes of women's rights – and wrongs. In this, they chronicled their times with perceptive invention. They narrated the growth of the propertied classes through a trajectory dictated by an unimaginative claim to identity and power. Middle-class identity and power were built on the accumulation of land, houses, and assets, overriding personal politics where they might challenge cultural and class advancement. Masters of their time, these writers understood the way in which their age denied to women the autonomy they enjoyed as men of their world. Not content with this as women's lot, they employed their art to parallel women's political demands for freedom.

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[60] See Why do Ibsen's children die? | Tidsskrift for Den norske legeforening (tidsskriftet.no) (last accessed on 29 May 2023). See also T. VAN LAAN, *Life and Works: A Biographical Essay*, Life and Works: Ibsen Society of America (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

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