In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the act of eating as one of the most significant and enduring preoccupations of the human imagination:

The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. (281)

The wealth of cultural, psychological, political, and religious symbolism that has accrued around this most basic of human activities has, especially in the past few decades, provided fertile ground for literary scholarship. Works like John Wilkins’s *Food in European Literature* (1996) offer broad historical overviews of the relationship between food and literature, while others, like Chris Meads’s *Banquets Set Forth: Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama* (2001) and Sarah Sceats’s *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2000), illuminate the significance of eating in the literary works of specific authors, groups of authors, or time periods. Despite the upsurge in critical interest, surprisingly little has been written on the relationship between literary genre and the ways in which physical consumption is portrayed or discussed. For most genres, this is perhaps not a significant oversight; descriptions of food appear on the page much as any other words do, requiring a reader’s imagination to transform them into the physical objects they represent.

In drama, however, the act of eating takes on new layers of significance: it becomes at once the literal action of a human being onstage and a ritualized performance prescribed by the words of an unseen text and author.
To stage physical consumption is to remind an audience of what Bert States calls an “elementary” but often disregarded fact:

[T]heater – unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film – is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be. In theater, image and object, pretense and pretender, sign-vehicle and content, draw unusually close. (20)

For States, the history of theatre is shaped by its successive incorporation of recognizable objects from everyday life, its “progressive colonization of the real world” (36). The first introduction of such an object produces shock, forcing the audience to re-examine the line between stage performance and daily life and to consider what significance this familiar object may have as a theatrical image. This is the “cutting edge” of any new theatrical movement – when it subverts what has gone before by defamiliarizing the stage space. States argues that the creative height of any such movement occurs after the initial shock has worn off but before the new image has become a familiar theatrical device:

To the extent that something on stage arouses awareness of its external (or workaday) significations, its internal (or illusionary) signification is reduced . . . Theater is intentionally devoted to confusing these two orders of signification, if not trying to subjugate one to the power of the other. (36)

As theatrical movements take on new, previously neglected areas of the outside world, they blur the line between external and internal, between object and symbol.

States’s description of theatre’s “progressive colonization of the real world” sounds strikingly similar to the act of physical consumption itself. Theatre grows and develops by taking more and more of “the real world” into itself. In From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation (1990), Maggie Kilgour uses Freud and Derrida to describe eating as an expression of the fundamental inside/outside binary:

The relation between an inside and an outside involves a delicate balance of simultaneous identification and separation that is typified by the act of incorporation, in which an external object is taken inside another. The idea of incorporation . . . depends upon and enforces the absolute division between inside and outside; but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce. (4)

Like eating, theatre depends on this binary, bringing objects into itself that initially surprise audiences by reminding them of the outside world, but
that eventually dissolve, becoming an expected part of the theatrical world itself.

One of the most significant forays in theatre’s “colonization of the real world” took place in the late nineteenth century, in the plays and theatrical theory of writers like August Strindberg, Émile Zola, and most influentially, Henrik Ibsen. These pioneers of theatrical naturalism and realism shocked audiences by bringing contemporary bourgeois social problems into the theatre. As George Bernard Shaw writes, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, “Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespear [sic]. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations” (182). This sense that Ibsen showed audiences their own situations was achieved not simply through plot devices but through his innovative, minutely detailed living-room sets. Audiences entering a theatre set up to perform one of Ibsen’s plays would have been surprised to see, not the standard, interchangeable throne room or peasant cottage sets of melodrama but individualized middle-class rooms that looked much like the houses they had just left behind for a night at the theatre. What audiences and critics may have been less likely to consciously notice is the fact that these realistic sets were accompanied by a heightened awareness of the importance of eating and drinking, of what characters chose to consume and how they talked about those choices.

English-language critics have taken only passing notice of the significance of food and drink in Ibsen’s drama; most, like John Northam (16–17), including food items in a long list of other symbols used by the playwright. Michael Zelenak, founder of the American Ibsen Theatre, targets food items specifically in his claim that overly realistic settings distract from Ibsen’s psychological drama: “The disservice that the drawing-room, teacups, wallpaper productions do to Ibsen is that the drama becomes invisible. It gets lost in the teacups and the ‘pass the butter’ and so on” (qtd. in Marker and Marker 191). In one of the few articles addressing the importance of food and drink to Ibsen’s dramaturgy, Dutch critic Henk Schouwvlieger reads *Peer Gynt* as a tale that centres on alcoholic consumption. He concludes that, when read in the context of the Norwegian tendency toward alcoholism, the play stands in a new light (3). Peer is an alcoholic; the play details his vivid hallucinations: “Peer proves to be neither a dreamer nor an artist, but a typical Norse alcoholic” (3; my translation). This conclusion, while questionable, considering the almost hallucinatory nature of the Norse legends that provided Ibsen’s source for the play, is certainly intriguing and highlights the undeniably central role that drink plays in *Peer Gynt*.

For Ibsen, detailed settings that included such everyday minutiae as food and drink were not simply a matter of verisimilitude. In his realistic plays, objects onstage are phenomenologically significant, serving to make the onstage world real to the audience. Much of the original shock value of *A Doll’s House* (1879) or *Ghosts* (1881) arose from the detailed realism of the

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set, as contemporary audiences saw their own living rooms revealed as hotbeds of deception, incest, venereal disease, and a variety of other unspeakable social ills. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, “The things that happen to his stage figures are things that happen to us, [thus] they are capable both of hurting us cruelly and of filling us with excited hopes of escape” (183). Yet objects on Ibsen’s stage are often equally important semiotically, revealing the unspoken inner life of individual characters or pointing to the archetypal and metaphoric weight of their experiences. Virginia Woolf aptly describes this quality of Ibsen’s plays:

A room is to him a room, a writing table a writing table, and a waste paper basket, a waste paper basket. At the same time, the paraphernalia of reality have at certain times to become the veil through which we see infinity. (168)

The “paraphernalia of reality” is, for Woolf, a vital part of Ibsen’s dramaturgy, enabling the stage to encompass an ordinary, believable world, shot through with sudden glimpses into hidden truths.

This use of onstage objects, both as realistic props and as symbols that provide insight into the characters and their psychological development, is one of the primary techniques that John Northam highlights in *Ibsen’s Dramatic Method*. According to Northam, Ibsen’s insistence on realistic dialogue in his social dramas led him to seek new techniques of character development. While abandoning the lengthy soliloquies of poetic drama and limiting his characters to “broken, repetitive, incoherent utterances,” Ibsen began to develop implicit, often non-verbal techniques to replace or supplement explicit character revelation (16). In *A Doll’s House*, for example, Ibsen exposes Nora’s true nature and her emotional state less through her spoken words than through “the method of ‘concealed psychology’ according to which an action or a gesture ‘will realize inevitably the character’s state of mind in a given situation.'” (16). Ibsen uses a rich variety of non-verbal indicators to reveal his characters’ internal states, ranging from the more obvious costumes and gestures to nuances in lighting and staging.

In Ibsen’s mid-career plays, food and drink frequently become some of the most important symbols through which he reveals the psychology of his characters and the dynamics of their community. While such symbols as Nora’s shawl or the mill-race in *Rasmersholm* ultimately remain distinct from the characters whose psychology they reveal, food and drink, like Nora’s macaroons, or Hjalmar Ekdal’s bread and butter in *The Wild Duck* (1884), are incorporated into the body of the character. Ibsen’s use of food onstage thus becomes one of the clearest incarnations of his realistic dramatic technique. Bread and butter, physical symbols of Hjalmar’s greed, literally become part of him, blurring the line between the theatrical symbol and the psychological truth it reveals.
Ibsen’s symbolic technique, in which stage props are simultaneously themselves and more than themselves, recalls the pre-modern attitude toward symbolism that Adolph Harnack finds in the early church’s understanding of the Eucharist: “What we nowadays understand by ‘symbol’ is a thing which is not that which it represents; at that time ‘symbol’ denoted a thing which is in some kind of way really what it signifies” (qtd. in Kilgour 80). According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the symbolic Eucharistic meal actually becomes what it represents: the body and blood of Christ. Ibsen’s social dramas use food and eating to enact a kind of theatrical transubstantiation. As characters eat onstage, what and how they eat reveals unspoken truths about them. As they chew and swallow, the symbol becomes what it has symbolized. In both A Doll’s House and The Wild Duck, the symbolic and the physical significances of food overlap on the stage, as Ibsen’s theatrical realism creates a space in which material and symbolic realms coexist.

The act of eating onstage, in front of a live audience, may either enhance or destroy the illusion of reality. On the one hand, an actor’s eating may threaten an audience’s suspension of disbelief, reminding them of the literal physicality of the actor onstage whose character is a pretence but whose body is real. Audiences may become distracted by wondering whether the beverage the actor is consuming is really alcoholic, or whether she will be able to finish chewing her mouthful of bread in time to deliver her next line. Actors frequently recount the difficulty of eating onstage, having to choke down cold food designed to look, but not taste, like a real meal. A stage world without food, however, can make the characters seem inhuman. The very same act of eating that threatens the theatrical illusion can simultaneously enhance the illusion that the character onstage is an actual human being, going about the physical business of daily life.

Of course, realistic plays were not the first to experiment with eating onstage – one has only to think of the macabre feast in Titus Andronicus, the haunted banquet in Macbeth, or the illusory meals in The Tempest to appreciate the importance of food to Shakespeare’s drama. Nor is Ibsen the first realistic playwright whose characters snack onstage. A decade before the production of A Doll’s House, English playwright Tom Robertson became famous for his creation of “cup-and-saucer” dramas, which began to take basic, everyday activities as their subject matter. In his 1866 comedy, Ours, two characters fall in love while assembling a roly-poly pudding onstage. The recognizability and simplicity of such an activity shocked audiences used to melodramas; Maynard Savin calls Robertson the first man “to have created a tempest with a teapot” (viii). For Ibsen and his audiences, the presence and consumption of everyday food onstage may have been less surprising, but it was still novel enough to maintain its physical significance while providing a variety of symbolic insights into the characters and their social milieu.
Ibsen recognized eating as one of the most common actions by which human beings come to understand each other. His own eating (and drinking) habits were the subject of much speculation; contemporary accounts vary wildly, some suggesting alcoholism while others detail an abstemious daily routine. While Ibsen’s fame motivated such polarized accounts, it seems likely that Ibsen, like many people, lived a fairly moderate lifestyle punctuated by moments of excess. Michael Meyer cautions that “the idea that Ibsen was a semi-alcoholic for most of his life is another of the myths that need to be exploded,” citing a medical doctor, Ibsen’s daughter-in-law, and William Archer as reliable witnesses on this point (516). Demonstrating his own interest in the connection between character and eating habits, Ibsen wrote, in a letter to his wife Suzannah, of his deep concern for a young painter friend, Marcus Grønvold, a concern based largely on his gastronomic excesses: “It is not just that he eats excessive quantities; everything must be of the best and most expensive, and that for both lunch and dinner; he spends twice as much each day as I do” (qtd. in Meyer 529). The very food that Grønvold chooses to consume becomes shorthand for a weak and excessive personality.

Ibsen’s attention to eating as a non-verbal indicator of personality extends into his plays, where the food that characters choose to consume becomes a part of them both literally and metaphorically, revealing aspects of their personalities that might otherwise remain hidden. In A Doll’s House, Nora’s first major onstage action, after she pays for a delivery of things bought on her Christmas shopping trip and tips the delivery boy, is to consume a few macaroons furtively, taking great delight in her secrecy:

NORA shuts the door. She continues to laugh quietly and happily to herself as she takes off her things. She takes a bag of macaroons out of her pocket and eats one or two; then she walks stealthily across and listens at her husband’s door. (201)

According to Northam, through this simple action, Ibsen “tells us in a matter of seconds several important things about Nora’s character: it is a childish one; it goes in awe of authority; it is willing to deceive” (16). Northam’s assessment seems oversimplified and unfair – what adult does not occasionally sneak bites of a favourite forbidden food? Yet it demonstrates the sheer number of assumptions an audience may make about a character based on a quick onstage snack.

Ibsen’s use of eating as an “illustrative action” capitalizes on the human tendency to judge others by what they eat in order to provide quick, realistic character exposition. Yet his technique is not limited to individual character revelation; it simultaneously provides insight into the social milieu of the play and into the characters’ relationships with one another. Nora’s behaviour in the first scene intrigues an audience, not because eating
macaroons is a curious habit, but because she does so furtively, wary of a person who has yet to appear onstage, but who apparently dictates her eating habits. Her initial dialogue with her husband is affectionate, if patronizing on Torvald’s part; yet the macaroons hint at a relationship that is almost entirely authoritarian. Not only does Torvald dole out money to Nora, a practice which would have been common between husbands and wives at the time, but also he attempts to regulate the food she puts into her own body.

Traditionally, the preparation and consumption of food has been, even in the most patriarchal relationships, an area in which women exert some measure of control over the family. Nora, although she apparently shops and attends to household needs, does not possess even this indirect power. Instead, Torvald subjects her to an insistent, if ostensibly playful, interrogation:

**HELMER**
Look me straight in the eye.

**NORA (looks at him)**
Well?

**HELMER (wagging his finger at her).**
My little sweet-tooth surely didn’t forget herself in town today?

**NORA**
No, whatever makes you think that?

**HELMER**
She didn’t just pop into the confectioner’s for a moment?

**NORA**
No, I assure you, Torvald . . . !

**HELMER**
Didn’t try sampling the preserves?

**NORA**
No, really I didn’t.

**HELMER**
Didn’t go nibbling a macaroon or two?

**NORA**
No, Torvald, honestly, you must believe me . . . !

**HELMER**
All right then! It’s really just my little joke. (205)

What may initially seem affectionate banter is rendered sinister by Torvald’s almost Pinteresque rapid-fire questioning, and his refusal to back down until Nora is obviously distressed. Seen in light of this relationship, Nora’s secret consumption of macaroons becomes, as Northam notes, a “revolt against the masculine control of her husband” (17).

Yet Nora’s revolt is not simply a petty gesture of defiance against an authority figure. On the second appearance of the macaroons, she reveals that Torvald’s ban against sweets is not arbitrary; she says, “He’s worried in case they ruin my teeth” (219–20). The rule is, thus, seemingly in Nora’s best interest, as a parental prohibition against candy may be for a child. It simultaneously, however, represents Torvald’s concern for his “property”; the pretty wife he delights in displaying would be considerably devalued by blackened or missing teeth. While, on Nora’s part, consumption of macaroons is largely a simple matter of pleasure, it reveals the dilemma of her

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situation. Because Torvald cares for her and wants to protect her, her acts of defiance against his “rules” are at least mildly self-destructive. The site for her resistance is her own body, as indicated both by her excessive, frenzied dancing of the tarantella, and more seriously, by her lengthy contemplation of suicide, near the end of the play. The one exception, of course, is her “really big thing,” her one secret venture into the business world for the loan that saved her husband’s life (212). This loan is Nora’s insurance policy against the inevitable process of aging; she tells Mrs. Linde that she will only inform Torvald about the loan when she is older and less physically attractive:

In many years’ time, when I’m no longer as pretty as I am now. You mustn’t laugh! What I mean of course is when Torvald isn’t quite so much in love with me as he is now, when he’s lost interest in watching me dance, or get dressed up, or recite. Then it might be a good thing to have something in reserve. (215)

Nora thus recognizes that, besides the secret loan, her body is the only area through which she exerts control over her husband.

As symbols of resistance, Nora’s macaroons initially seem frivolous and harmless, much like her character. Yet, as she swallows the sweets that Torvald has “forbidden,” her resistance becomes a literal part of her, inseparable from her body and her character (219). Ibsen deliberately parallels her situation to that of Dr. Rank’s father. Though all of the play’s major characters are aware that Rank is dying of inherited syphilis, they euphemistically circumvent the uncomfortable fact by linking the disease to his father’s fondness for rich foods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ブランド</th>
<th>Yes, really the whole thing’s nothing but a huge joke. My poor innocent spine must do penance for my father’s gay subaltern life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ノーラ(by the table, left)</td>
<td>Wasn’t he rather partial to asparagus and pâté de foie gras?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ブランド</td>
<td>Yes, he was. And truffles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ノーラ</td>
<td>Truffles, yes. And oysters, too, I believe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ブランド</td>
<td>Yes, oysters, oysters, of course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ノーラ</td>
<td>And all the port and champagne that goes with them. It does seem a pity all these delicious things should attack the spine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ブランド</td>
<td>Especially when they attack a poor spine that never had any fun out of them. (246)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The detail with which Nora and Rank describe his father’s gastronomic excesses seems odd, at first glance, even when considered as part of their
covert flirtation. Since Nora has already revealed to a shocked Mrs. Linde her knowledge that Rank’s disease stems from his father’s penchant for “mistresses and things like that,” her persistence in listing food after food seems singularly insensitive (237). The scene, however, demonstrates the importance of food to the play, not just as a useful tool of character revelation, but as a symbol of choices which become part of the body, with profound and irreversible effects. The exchange prefigures the similar use of food – and more significantly, drink – in *Ghosts* (1881), in which Oswald’s near-constant consumption of champagne, his frequent queries to his mother about when dinner will be ready, and his request to have both white and red wine at dinner hint at his indissoluble connection to his profligate father, from whom he has inherited syphilis.

The account of Dr. Rank’s father goes a long way toward explaining one of the critical quandaries of the play, the seeming suddenness with which Nora is transformed from a childish nibbler of forbidden sweets to a tormented adult woman, able to contemplate suicide and to choose, instead, to walk out on her husband and children. Errol Durbach notes that Nora’s rapid change particularly troubled early critics of the play: “Nora’s transformation was pronounced an impossibility, a ridiculous and ill-prepared transition from ‘a little Nordic Frou-Frou’ . . . into a ‘Søren Kierkegaard in skirts’” (16). Durbach cites Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker’s observation that this impression may be traceable to the first Nora, Betty Hennings, who “failed to rise to the challenge of discovering the mature and self-respecting woman in the frivolous macaroon-nibbling child-wife of act 1” (16). Implicit in this statement is the assumption that the macaroons clearly belong to the “old Nora,” that they are no more than symbols of her childishness.

Yet the macaroons, despite their obvious connotations of a childish selfishness, provide the play’s first hint that Nora is capable of a surface resistance to Torvald and the doll house, and that the more important resistance must also take place within herself, resistance to the doll-like ideas and behaviour she has embodied. Terry Otten argues, by examining the changing role of Dr. Rank in various drafts of the play, “that the real ‘villain’ in the work is not Helmer, or even the patriarchal system he represents, but Nora herself, and that she must shatter her own ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ before she can gain a measure of freedom” (510). Nora must struggle, Otten continues, against prostitution, “the *willful* selling of one’s self to gain some advantage,” the means by which she relates to both Torvald and Rank (515). When Torvald unwittingly convinces Nora that her secret forgery has tainted her irredeemably, that, like Dr. Rank’s father, her choices have become so much a part of her that her presence may “poison” her children, she begins to contemplate suicide (233). This dark transformation, felt as a shock by so many critics and audiences, is rendered more psychologically convincing by the continued presence of the macaroons. As Nora plans to
kill herself following her tarantella, she does not discard her macaroons as symbols of her doll’s life; rather, she brings them into the house openly, ordering the maid to prepare a party “with champagne flowing until dawn. (Shouts.) And some macaroons, Helene . . . lots of them, for once in a while” (260). With “thirty-one hours to live” (261), she demands a party with rich food, a subtle reminder that, since the first scene, Nora’s resistance has been localized in her body. By having his heroine eat “forbidden” sweets onstage in the first scene, Ibsen makes rebellion, however petty or sugar-coated, a literal, embodied part of her. Attention to the symbolic significance of food and eating in the play thus reveals that her profound change is not one of character, but of degree.

Nora, of course, does not go through with her suicide, unlike Hedda Gabler, Rebecca West, or Hedvig Ekdal. Yet, as eating in the play is simultaneously an assertion of self and a potentially self-destructive act, so her departure at the play’s end is ambivalent. In one sense, her exit asserts the importance of community, of egalitarian relationships that combine self-knowledge and mutual understanding. Her doll house with Torvald is not “a real marriage” (286); by leaving it, she expresses hope for a better kind of marriage and community. Her departure, however, simultaneously destroys a community, leaving her husband and children with painful psychological scars. The ambivalent balance between destruction and creation within the community of the play is powerfully foreshadowed and paralleled by the play’s portrayal of the effects of eating on the individual.

The food symbolism of A Doll’s House is further and more complexly developed in The Wild Duck, where Ibsen uses gustatory devices even more clearly to provide insight both into individual characters and the wider psychological, social, and religious significance of their actions. As in the earlier play, eating habits allow for quick character exposition, without awkward or unrealistic conversation. Early in Act One of The Wild Duck, Hjalmar reveals his status as an uncultured outsider at Werle’s fashionable dinner party by expressing his ignorance of wine vintages:

WERLE (by the fireplace) I can certainly vouch for the Tokay you had today, at any rate; it was one of the very finest vintages. Of course you must have seen that yourself.

THE FAT GUEST Yes, it had a wonderfully delicate bouquet.

HJALMAR (uncertainly) Does the vintage make any difference?

THE FAT GUEST (laughing) By Heavens, that’s good!

WERLE (smiling) There’s obviously not much point in putting good wine in front of you. (140)

Although in the context of the play as a whole, this interchange seems slight, Ibsen’s surviving notes suggest that this was the first bit of dialogue
he penned for the play. Hjalmar’s lack of knowledge about wine effectively reveals his social distance from his host and links him, immediately, to the far more obviously pathetic Old Ekdal, whose precipitous social decline is marked by his willingness to accept cheap alcohol. Shortly after Hjalmar’s *faux pas*, his father makes an embarrassing entrance into the party but is quickly dismissed with a bottle of brandy:

Mrs. Sörby (softly, to the servant who has returned) Well, did the old fellow get anything?  
Pettersen Yes, I slipped him a bottle of brandy.  
Mrs. Sörby Oh, you might have found him something a bit better than that.  
Pettersen Not at all, Mrs. Sörby. Brandy is the best thing he knows. (143)

Ibsen wrote this exchange on the same early sheet of notes as the previous conversation about wine vintages, indicating the importance of food and drink within the play as a gauge of both social status and relationships.

The dinner party, where the sumptuous meal is followed by courses of coffee, liqueurs, and punch, provides a startling contrast to Act Two, which opens with Gina and her fourteen-year-old daughter Hedvig sitting in their modest attic studio. There is no food in sight; Gina and Hedvig have foregone dinner, since Hjalmar is out. Yet, though absent from the stage, food dominates the conversation as much or more than at the dinner party. Gina is tallying up the grocery bill for butter, salami, cheese, ham, and beer, dismayed by “the amount of butter we go through in this house” (152). Hedvig is clearly hungry, and though she puts a brave face on it, offhand-edly mentioning that she “might even be a little bit hungry” (152), her comments return inexorably to the dinner party and the treats her father has promised to bring her. When Old Ekdal returns, Gina coaxes him to eat, but he “can’t be bothered with any supper” (154) and retires to his room to nurse his newly acquired bottle of brandy.

The insistent presence of food and drink in the Ekdals’ thought and conversation prepares the audience for Ibsen’s characterization of Hjalmar. Despite his ignorance of wine vintages and his complaint that the dinner party guests do “nothing but go from one house to the next, eating and drinking, day in and day out” (156), Hjalmar is a voracious consumer. Throughout the play, he eats bread and butter almost constantly, beginning only moments after the lavish dinner party. His most idealistic or impasioned speeches are consistently interrupted by stage directions indicating that he “helps himself to another sandwich” (173). The audience is thus never allowed to forget that Hjalmar’s primary loyalty is to his body. His greedy appetite shapes his character, much as the bread and butter shape his body, which, as Gregers notes, is growing “stout” (134).
Beyond simply revealing Hjalmar’s self-centeredness, a character trait which could hardly go unnoticed, his consumption of bread and butter reveals the underlying relational structure of his community. Hjalmar never eats unless his wife brings him food, a fact that highlights the dynamics of their relationship. Gina acts as a servant to her husband, catering to and often anticipating his needs and whims. Yet her practicality makes her the more powerful figure in the relationship; not only does she make and serve the bread, but she is, despite Hjalmar’s misplaced pride, the bread-winner. Throughout the play, she and Hedvig do most of the photographic work that brings money into the household, a fact of which Hjalmar, ever an idealist, seems blissfully unaware. Seated passively at the table, awaiting the arrival of his lunch, Hjalmar tells Gregers, “I am an inventor, you know . . . and a breadwinner too. That’s what keeps me above all these petty things – Ah! Here they are with the lunch!” (190). The irony of his attitude, while lost on Gregers, does not go unnoticed. When Hjalmar boasts to Relling about his devotion to his “splendid mission,” Relling reminds him, “And then you’ve also got your clever little wife to look after you, pottering about in her slippers all nice and cuddlesome, and making the place all cosy” (193).

By unobtrusively providing and serving food, Gina sustains the comfortable fictions that make up Hjalmar’s life. During the same lunch scene, Hjalmar’s dreams of being an inventor and a breadwinner are paralleled to his father’s fantasy world in the loft and opposed to Gina’s actual, practical provision. Hjalmar has just demanded that Gina replenish the butter on the table, when, out of the loft, “OLD EKDAL enters carrying a fresh rabbit skin”:

**EKDAL**

Good morning, gentlemen! Had some good hunting today. Bagged a big ‘un.

**HJALMAR**

Have you gone and skinned it without me . . . !

**EKDAL**

Salted it, too. It’s good tender meat, rabbit-meat. And sweet. Tastes like sugar. Enjoy your lunch, gentlemen! (192).

Hjalmar’s eagerness to join in his father’s “hunting” indicates that both men operate under delusions as to their own roles as providers. Old Ekdal hunts animals stocked and confined in his attic, unaware that, directly outside of his fantasy world, his family is sitting down to a meal of herring salad obviously not provided by his hunting prowess. Hjalmar, similarly, believes himself to be the family “breadwinner,” but has little concept of where his food comes from. He blithely assumes that inviting Gregers, Molvik, and Relling to lunch will pose no difficulty to Gina, even directing her not to be “too stingy about it” (176). He also appears ignorant of the strain his voracious consumption of bread, butter, and beer places on the family finances and of the fact that his wife and daughter neglect their own meals when he is out.
Gina and Hedvig are, in fact, the only two major characters who never eat or drink onstage. During the lunch scene, the stage directions read: “The men sit down at the table, and eat and drink. GINA and HEDVIG go in and out, waiting on them” (190). Though Gina never complains of the arrangement, when Hjalmar confronts her about her affair with Werle, she reveals that she had just begun to hope that her deprivation was coming to an end: “And we’d made things so nice and cosy, and Hedvig and me were just starting to manage a little bit extra for ourselves in the way of food and clothes” (204). As previously noted, Hedvig begins the play hungry, waiting anxiously for her father to bring her “something nice” from Werle’s dinner party (152). He disappoints her, understandably distracted by his dishevelled father’s unexpected appearance at the party, but then unfeelingly compounds his mistake by handing her the menu and promising to describe how the dishes taste. Toril Moi perceptively points to this scene as “the ethical, emotional, and philosophical center of The Wild Duck” (676), noting that “Hjalmar gives Hedvig words instead of food, and expects her to be as delighted with one as with the other” (679). This confusion of words and food is at the heart of Ibsen’s symbolic technique in the play and eventually becomes one of the major factors leading to Hedvig’s suicide.

Significantly, Gina’s restraint is self-imposed; Hjalmar seems unaware of her eating habits and would probably coax her to feast on bread and butter if he sensed her hunger. Yet her self-control indicates, unlike Nora’s rebellious macaroons, her influence over her husband and household. Nowhere is this power more apparent than in Act Five, when Hjalmar confronts Gina with his intentions of leaving. Calm as always, she offers him a tray of breakfast, at the sight of which he exclaims, “Meat? Never again under this roof! I don’t care if I haven’t had a bite for nearly twenty-four hours –” (230). Inexorably, however, he begins to eat, and the food weakens his resolve until he is unable to leave:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gina</th>
<th>What are you looking for?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hjalmar</td>
<td>Butter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>I’ll get some straight away. (Goes out into the kitchen.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hjalmar (calls after her)</td>
<td>Oh, you needn’t bother. I can just as well eat it dry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina (brings a butter dish)</td>
<td>There you are, now. Supposed to be freshly churned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(She pours him a fresh cup of coffee; he sits down on the sofa, spreads more butter on the bread, eats and drinks in silence for a moment or two.)

| Hjalmar | Would I, without being disturbed by anybody – anybody at all – be able to move into the living-room for a day or two? (232–33) |
As in the myth of Persephone, food becomes a trap for Hjalmar. Yet Gina’s power is no supernatural mystery; she merely knows her husband’s desires and is willing to work and sacrifice to see them met, thereby maintaining her own comfortable household.

Gina’s pattern of control through sacrifice is unremarkable enough, until Hedvig adopts and magnifies it, committing suicide in a desperate attempt to secure her father’s love. Moi reads *The Wild Duck* as a depiction of the struggle between the metaphysical language of Gregers and Hjalmar, who “do their best to empty words of meaning” (658) and “[o]rdinary forms of life, everyday activities” that “give meaning to our words” (661). Gina, of course, represents “the everyday”; her constant attention to the details of the household grounds her and makes her aware of the needs of others. Hedvig’s suicide is one of the “disasters that ensue when we turn our backs on the everyday”; it is ultimately Gregers’s use of metaphysical and metaphorical language that is to blame, for he “shows Hedvig the way out of the ordinary, and so lays the foundation for her ultimate suicide” (671).

This argument is compelling; yet it neglects Gina’s role in modelling self-sacrifice to her daughter. Moi blames Gregers for “preaching sacrifice to Hedvig” and she may be right; yet his sermons only build on a lifetime of Gina’s lessons (672). Hedvig has grown up in a home where love is demonstrated through hunger, where her mother neglects her own meals, not just to sustain Hjalmar, but to support his excess. Long before Gregers’s extravagant talk of “the genuine, joyous, courageous spirit of self-sacrifice,” Hedvig has adopted her mother’s pattern of demonstrating love through physical self-denial (227). When Hjalmar disappoints her by forgetting to bring her a treat from Werle’s party, she reacts not by assuaging her own hunger but by offering to bring her father a bottle of beer (160). Remaining hungry while ensuring that her father is completely satisfied is the clearest proof that Hedvig knows how to offer her love and forgiveness.

Gina’s self-sacrifice provides a model for her daughter’s, but it is ultimately Gregers’s metaphorical confusion that prompts Hedvig to enact that sacrifice as suicide. Prior to Gregers’s entrance, Hedvig lives in a world in which symbol and physical object are treated as equally real and allowed to coexist. She helps her mother in the kitchen, aware of the household expenses and the financial strain caused by her father’s gluttony. Yet she also plays with her father and grandfather in the fantasy world of the loft, which she fancifully calls “the briny deep” (183). Perhaps because of the opposite influences of her practical mother and her idealistic father, Hedvig sees no problem in allowing these two worlds to exist side by side. Hedvig can imagine that the attic is “the briny deep,” but it is also simply the loft, until Gregers suggests that it must be one or the other, either symbol or fact:
Hedvig has grown up believing that things can be both themselves and more than themselves, juxtaposing her mother’s insistence on the practical meaning of objects with her father and grandfather’s penchant for the symbolic. For Gregers, on the other hand, the wild duck or the attic loft, once they become symbols, lose any significance as physical objects. As Hedvig says after their first meeting, “All the time it was just as though he meant something different from what he was saying” (172; my emphasis). She is surprised not, as some have argued, because she is a stranger to symbolism but because she is unfamiliar with symbolic language that must operate “all the time,” to the exclusion of lived reality.

Disoriented by Gregers’s separation of symbol and physical reality, Hedvig confuses the two in her suicide. Whereas Gina had gone hungry to ensure that Hjalmar’s appetite was fully satisfied, Hedvig offers her own body in a misguided attempt to satisfy her father. It is deeply significant that Hedvig’s suicide takes place in the loft, where her grandfather plays at being a hunter and providing food for the family. Trapped between the world of the kitchen, from which her mother literally feeds the family, and the fantasy world of the loft, in which her father and grandfather play at being “breadwinners,” Hedvig commits a literal act of sacrifice in the symbolic world of the attic. As she stands in the sitting-room, holding her grandfather’s pistol and contemplating the sacrifice of “the wild duck,” her mother enters and admonishes her, “You’d better go into the kitchen, and see if the coffee’s keeping hot; I’ll take his breakfast on a tray, when I go down to him” (339). Instead of preparing food for her father, Hedvig sacrifices her own body. By her suicide, Hedvig brings the daily sacrifices of her mother into her father’s symbolic realm, confusedly attempting to “feed” her father’s affection with her own death.

Hedvig’s attempt to feed her father with her own body recalls one of the most symbolically laden meals in western culture: the Last Supper, the model for the communion ritual. The Last Supper takes place as Christ and his disciples are celebrating the Jewish Passover, in which the angel of the Lord passed over the Jewish homes but killed the first-born children and animals of their Egyptian captors, thereby ensuring the release of the
Israelites. As Christ breaks bread in celebration of this occasion, he says to his disciples, “Take, eat; this is my body” (NRSV, Matt. 26.26), instructing his followers to repeat the ritual meal in his memory, after he is gone. In a play centring on the sacrifice of a first-born child, Ibsen clearly intends this allusion. Early in the play, Werle complains to his son that Hjalmar’s presence at the dinner party has put them in the awkward position of having “thirteen of us at table,” a number that is not only unlucky but that recalls the thirteen men present at the Last Supper (134). Speaking the final words of the play, Gregers reveals to Relling that his destiny is “to be thirteenth at table,” leaving the audience to decide whether Gregers’s thirteenth man is Jesus or Judas (242). That decision depends largely on whether one sees Hedvig’s sacrifice as an effective one: will her death, as Gregers believes, nourish the greatness in Hjalmar? or will it, as Relling argues, simply dissolve, swallowed up as fuel for Hjalmar’s “sentimentality and self-pity”? (242).

In From Communion to Cannibalism, Kilgour uses communion and cannibalism as two models for understanding the physical act of eating. “Even the most apparently benign acts of eating,” she writes, “involve aggression, even cannibalism” (7). Eating is “an act that involves both desire and aggression, as it creates a total identity between eater and eaten while insisting on total control – the literal consumption – of the latter by the former” (7). The communion ritual, she writes, is an attempt to circumvent the violent loss of the identity of the eaten. When the worshipper takes the metaphorical body of Christ into herself, she becomes part of Christ’s body, even as the host becomes part of hers: “The [communion] act is one of reciprocal incorporation, as both are identified by the single word and substance, the Host, so that the absolute boundary between inside and outside, eater and eaten, itself appears to disappear” (15). Ibsen’s allusion to the communion ritual in The Wild Duck raises profound questions about the potential for transformation in the Ekdal household. Hedvig’s sacrificial death reveals the flaws in the aggressive, one-sided model of consumption enacted by her mother and father, wherein one eats and the others starve. By killing herself, she misguidedly hopes to achieve a more reciprocal relationship; by showing her father the vast extent of her love, she hopes that his own love for her will be reawakened. Yet it is difficult not to remain sceptical about the potential for Hedvig’s sacrifice, like the communion meal, to transform her father from within. As Kilgour notes, “In the struggle between desire and aggression, between identification and the division that creates power over another, a struggle which is finally that between communion and cannibalism, cannibalism has usually won” (7). Hedvig’s death will most likely result in a kind of cannibalism, as Hjalmar devours her tragedy to feed his own self-pitying life lie.
The Wild Duck represents the pinnacle of consumption on Ibsen’s stage. With the notable exception of the punch scene in Hedda Gabler (1890), in Ibsen’s later plays his characters drink infrequently and almost never eat. This fact may partially account for the dreamier, less realistic feel of plays like The Lady from the Sea (1888) or Little Eyolf (1894), in which characters like the Rat Wife and the Stranger seem more like otherworldly apparitions than human beings who eat and drink. States might argue that Ibsen’s theatre, having colonized the dinner table, moved beyond it once the element of surprise had worn off. Yet attending to the importance of eating and drinking in Ibsen’s earlier plays of social realism reveals the complexity of his innovative dramatic technique. Both the Ekdals’ attic apartment and the Helmers’ doll house are rendered more vividly realistic by the fact that their inhabitants eat onstage. Nora’s macaroons and Hjalmar’s bread and butter retain their realistic status as food objects, physically present onstage and literally incorporated into the bodies of the actors. Yet, simultaneously, they serve as symbols: of the psychological state of individual characters and of the nature and quality of their relationships. By allowing fact and symbol to coexist onstage, without according primacy to either, Ibsen creates space for objects to be both themselves and more than themselves, a space that deserves a second look before the teacups and butter of Ibsen’s dramaturgy are dismissed as insignificant clutter.

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the significance of food and drink in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll House and The Wild Duck, arguing that Ibsen’s staging of physical consumption is an integral part of his innovative realistic dramatic technique. In both plays, food, literally incorporated into the bodies of the actors, functions as an insistent reminder of physicality. Yet, simultaneously, food items like Nora’s macaroons and Hjalmar Ekdal’s bread and butter serve as symbols of the psychological state of individual characters and of the nature and quality of their relationships. Nora’s consumption of macaroons in defiance of her husband’s ban on sweets indicates the potential for resistance in the charmingly shallow housewife and locates the site of that resistance in her body. Unlike Nora, Gina Ekdal denies herself food and drink in order to serve and subtly manipulate her voracious husband. Her model of gustatory self-sacrifice leads to her daughter Hedvig’s misguided attempt to feed her father’s affections with her suicide.

KEYWORDS: food, Doll House, Wild Duck, Ibsen, drama, realism, Eucharist

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