

4. Dominance and Deviance: *Hedda Gabler* (1890)

Introduction

Hedda Gabler presents us with a narrative of degeneration focusing on what Ellen Mortensen has singled out as a “degenerate femininity [...]” (Mortensen 2007, 186 n. 22) Hedda’s rejection of traditional femininity is enacted through her embrace of male symbols and behaviour, her desire for exerting dominance over men, and in her repudiation of the ideals of bourgeois domesticity. Hedda acts to benefit herself and refuses to give of herself to others, a tendency which manifests in a distaste for motherhood. Mortensen argues that Hedda’s denial of motherhood serves as an indictment of the limited roles afforded to women by bourgeois patriarchy. Mortensen’s commentary is one example of a tradition in scholarship of framing Hedda’s actions as a form of protest against societal norms prevalent at the time. Jenny Björklund identifies Hedda’s “emotional unavailability, distance, and desire for power” (Björklund 2016, 5) as attributes that stand in contrast to conventional gender roles, which are represented by the characters of Frøken Tesman (referred to as aunt Julle) and Thea Elvsted. Not only does Hedda refuse to accept the societal constraints imposed on her, she also displays a variety of masculine attributes that allow for a reading of her as an example of what Björklund, building on Jack Halberstam, designates as “female masculinity.” (Björklund 2016, 2) To this can be added the intriguing possibility that Hedda may be experiencing a same sex desire directed toward Thea, as Mortensen argues (2006).

Hedda Gabler thus presents us with a female variation of the trope of the degenerate aristocrat previously explored in *Gengangere* and *Rosmersholm*. Much like the childless Rosmer, Hedda embodies the Gothic trope of the fading family line. Dipsikha Thakur’s observation that Hedda “reeks of a formerly glorious genealogy” (Thakur 2018, 452) is borne out not only by Hedda’s actions but also, as Robin Young observes, by her physical appearance, her thin hair suggesting “cultural exhaustion, the decay of the line [...]” (Young 1989, 144) And as in *Rosmersholm*, we find a bourgeois wastrel, Løvborg, whose thoughts on the future are reminiscent of the idealism of Rosmer and Rebekka (Brandell 1993, 60). Moreover, Rosmer and Hedda both seek to enact a Romantic idealism which is critical of the physical reality of human existence. Such ideals can be expected of the last scions of noble houses who have been left behind by the march of time. Having been relegated to the position of the wife of a bourgeois pedant, Hedda finds herself in the same situation as did Alving, that of an individual whose inability to find a vocation in life leads to ruin. These intertextual echoes to Ibsen’s earlier works, taken together with Ibsen’s notes and the play’s reception, call for a reading of *Hedda Gabler* as a narrative of degeneration.

Initial support for such a reading can be found in the contemporary reception of the play, which tended to portray Hedda as a degenerate.²²⁸ An early example is Georg Brandes’ review in *Kjøbenhavns Børs-Tidende*: “Hedda is a true degenerate type, without skill, without

²²⁸ I will in the following limit myself to commentary on Hedda’s degeneracy. For a general overview of the play’s reception, see (Shepherd-Barr 1997).

real ability, without even the capacity for spiritual or sensual devotion; she *cannot* even momentarily enter into another.”²²⁹ Brandes does not find Hedda to be an interesting character precisely because he can find no redeeming qualities in her, and he therefore finds her death inconsequential. Gerhard Gran adopts a more sympathetic stance toward Hedda in his review in *Samtiden*, but also faults her for her lust for power: “she feels empty and tired, like a slightly older danced-out lady, to whom life has given no content; no kind of relationship with other people entices her, not without her being able to have the pleasure of tinkering with the thread of a human destiny with her cruel hands [...]”²³⁰ A similar view of Hedda as an egotist who deviates from societal norms can be found in an anonymous pamphlet written by Hanna Andresen Butenschøn. Butenschøn attributes Hedda’s lack of purpose to her circumstances and personality, describing her as a woman “who, through her own fault and the misfortune of fate, has her deepest female instincts distorted and displaced and comes to breathe in an air where all her peculiar faults come out like large, smelly poison flowers that end up killing her.”²³¹ The commentary by Brandes, Gran and Butenschøn is relatively brief in comparison to Herman Bang’s lengthy essay in *Tilskueren*. Bang’s reading focuses on Hedda’s self-absorption and employs an imagery of overcultivation and familial decay to illustrate Hedda’s degeneracy. Bang’s comment on Hedda being born in the better part of “a large and old society, where the life of the nerves is refined, where the life of the senses is refined, where desires have had time to tire themselves out”²³² establishes her as belonging to a social order that has expended its vital force. Hedda has from an early age been subjected to approving comments on her appearance, which have taught her to overvalue her beauty (Bang 1892, 833). Her self-admiration causes her to turn inward and distance herself from everyday life. Wilting from disuse, her capacity for translating inner potential into external action atrophies:

As Narcissus withered over the spring, Hedda Gabler has slowly withered from life, behind her mirrors. Every ability that we do not use withers and dies. It is law. But all the abilities in the soul that turn outwards, that turns eagerly to act or yearningly towards other people, towards fellow human beings – all those abilities have remained unused in Hedda: the ability to become tied in friendship, the ability of devotion, the ability to sacrifice, the ability to help, to give – – they have not been used and they have died out. She was not in any real spiritual relationship with any fellow human being, and now she can no longer do that at all.²³³

²²⁹ “Hedda er da en sand Degenerationstype, uden Dygtighed, uden virkelig Evne, uden Evne til aandelig eller sanselig Hengivelse engang; hun *kan* ikke engang momentvis gaa op i en Anden.” (Brandes 1891, n.p.; emphasis in original)

²³⁰ “hun føler sig tom og træt, som en lidt ældre uddanset dame, hvem livet ikke har givet noget indhold; intet forhold til andre mennesker lokker hende, ikke uden at hun kan have den fornøjelse at pille i en menneskeskjæbnens traade med sine grusomme hænder [...]” (Gran 1891, 76)

²³¹ “der ved egen skyld og skjæbnens ugunst faar sine dybeste kvindeinstinkter forvredet og forrykket og kommer til at aande i en luft, hvor alle hendes særegne fejl slaar ud som store, ildelugtende giftblomster, der ender med at dræbe hende selv.” (Butenschøn 1891, 7; emphasis in original) The author’s name is simply given as “A Woman’s Voice” (*En kvinderøst*) on the title page. The imagery of poisonous flowers, possibly echoing Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), suggests that Butenschøn regards the play as an example of *fin-de-siècle* decadence.

²³² “et stort og gammelt Samfund, hvor Nervalivet er forfinet, hvor Sanselivet er raffineret, hvor Drifterne har haft Tid til at løbe sig trætte” (Bang 1892, 832)

²³³ “Som Narciss visnede hen over Kilden, er Hedda Gabler langsomt visnet for Livet, der bag sine Spejle. Hver Ævne, som vi ikke bruger, sygner hen og dør ud. Det er Lov. Men alle de Ævner i Sjælen, som vender udad, som

Bang links Hedda's narcissism to the issue of childbearing and regards Hedda's refusal of motherhood as the play's central theme. The Gabler line ends due to Hedda's egotism, "the disease which, in the guise of self-worship, denies the reproduction of the family."²³⁴ Bang's reading is an eloquently formulated interpretation of *Hedda Gabler* as a narrative of degeneration in which Hedda's cultural exhaustion brings about the end of the family line: "The ability to love is dead, desire is subdued, the continuation of the family is denied."²³⁵

Similar readings of Hedda as a degenerate can be found in a broader European context.²³⁶ Camille Bellaigue's review in *Revue des Deux Mondes* frames Hedda as a threat to civilization itself, as a representative of "an evil from which centuries of culture and refined civilization such as ours suffer and may die from: the perversion of the moral sense by the intellectual sense [...]."²³⁷ Bellaigue clarifies this evil as "the subordination, which is to say, the sacrifice of the Good [...] to all the fantasies, to all the mirages, the most insane and the most criminal, which diseased minds and deranged imaginations, under the pretext of aesthetics and art, can become enamored with."²³⁸ While Bellaigue locates the cause of Hedda's degeneracy in her own self, Maximilian Harden focuses on the impact of Hedda's social milieu in his review in *Die Gegenwart*. Harden argues that any degeneracy on Hedda's part is due to society having prevented her from finding a vocation: "Up to this point, not a trace of a 'hereditary burden' or a unique abnormality can be discovered; we have all seen dozens of such higher daughters, unoccupied all their lives, irritable, miserable and unhappily coquettish, who, cleverer and cooler than the hetaeras, know how to acquire [financial] support for all times through what remains of their beauty."²³⁹ Harden expands his argument in a later essay in which he locates the roots of Hedda's degeneracy in her familial inheritance, comparing Hedda to Julie in Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (1888): "They are both descended from the old warrior nobility and have in common a depravity, derived from generational degeneration, a lust for dangerous play with prickly words, with loose love-

vender sig handlelysten eller længselsfuld mod andre Mennesker, mod Medmennesker – alle de Ævner er jo hos Hedda forblevet ubrugte: Ævnen til at forbinde sig i Venskab, Ævnen til Hengivenhed, Ævnen til at ofre, Ævnen til at hjælpe, give – de har været nyttede og de er døde ud. Hun stod ikke i noget virkeligt Sjælsforhold til noget eneste Medmenneske, og nu kan hun slet ikke mere gøre det." (Bang 1892, 834)

²³⁴ "den Sygdom, der i Selvtilbedelsens Skikkelse nægter Slægtsforplantningen." (Bang 1892, 838)

²³⁵ "Kærlighedsævnen er død, Driften ligger døvet, Slægtsfortsættelsen nægtes." (Bang 1892, 838)

²³⁶ I will not examine the tradition of medical practitioners analyzing Ibsen's characters. This tendency can be exemplified by Robert Geyer's assessment of Hedda: "Hedda Gabler is a classic degenerate type with moral idiocy." ("Hedda Gabler est un type classique dégénérée avec idiotie morale." [Geyer 1902, 70]) On readings of Hedda as a hysteric, see (Bondevik 2006), (Tjønneland 2006).

²³⁷ "un mal dont souffrent et peuvent mourir les siècles de culture et de civilisation raffinée comme le nôtre: la perversion du sens moral par le sens intellectuel [...]." (Bellaigue 1892, 220)

²³⁸ "la subordination, que dis-je, le sacrifice du Bien [...] à toutes les fantaisies, à toutes les chimères, les plus folles et les plus criminelles, dont peuvent s'éprendre, sous prétexte d'esthétique et d'art, des cerveaux malades et des imaginations détraquées." (Bellaigue 1892, 220)

²³⁹ "Bis hierher ist nicht die Spur einer 'erblichen Belastung' oder besonderen Abnormität zu entdecken; solche ihr Leben lang unbeschäftigte, reizbare, unfrohe und unbefriedigt gefallsüchtige höhere Töchter, die, schlauer und kühler als die Hetären, durch ihre Schönheitsreste sich eine Versorgung für alle Zeiten zu erlisten wissen, haben wir Alle zu Dutzenden gesehen." (Harden 1891, 125)

affairs, with bare weapons. Julie is a miss, Hedda is not a woman.”²⁴⁰ Harden elaborates on the point of Hedda not being a woman by asserting that her disdain for motherhood marks her as a degenerate: “She was not a woman, she did not want a child, she could not even nourish a single thought of her own. She was barren, unfit for life, the tragic type of a degenerate and impoverished feudal family which is no longer capable of fighting in the struggle of life.”²⁴¹ Harden’s use of darwinian imagery perhaps suggests that he regards Hedda’s death as a cause for celebration. Even more condemnatory is Lou Andreas-Salomé’s chapter on the play in *Henrik Ibsens Frauen-Gestalten* (1892). Andreas-Salomé portrays Hedda as selfish and destructive and as “a distorted, malformed exceptional creature”²⁴² who does not deserve our sympathy. Andreas-Salomé describes Hedda as a void, devoid of hidden depths, and whose lack of vocation in life compels her to manipulate others in order to overcome “the ennui of total inactivity.”²⁴³ If Hedda were to gaze inward she would simply see “a dark emptiness out of which pure negation stares back at her.”²⁴⁴ Following her burning of Løvborg’s manuscript and his death, Hedda comes to realize that she has nothing to contribute to the lives of others; she has become “completely superfluous.”²⁴⁵ At this point it no longer matters if she lives or dies. Andreas-Salomé finds nothing heroic or tragic in Hedda’s suicide. It is merely the end result of her emptiness: “a shot – a nothing.”²⁴⁶ Andreas-Salomé’s reading, while highly critical of the Hedda character, is nonetheless philosophically grounded. In my view, Andreas-Salomé is the first critic to pinpoint the nature of Hedda’s existential despair, which emanates from a suspicion and then realization that she has wasted her life and that her existence benefits no one. Andreas-Salomé’s reading prefigures later interpretations (cf. Lisi 2018) of Hedda’s suicide as a wasteful, essentially nihilistic act. This line of interpretation forms the basis of my reading of *Hedda Gabler*, and stands in contrast with a tendency in earlier Ibsen scholarship to view Hedda as a heroic figure.

The character of Hedda has been subjected to extended critical analysis, often focusing on to what degree she should be considered either a villain or a victim. Two overarching trends can be identified in this regard. The first is a tradition of depicting Hedda as scheming, useless, and vain. Hermann J. Weigand describes Hedda as an empty human being: “Now, what characterizes Hedda more than anything else is a complete dearth of inner resources. Hers is a barren nature on which no seed has been able to thrive.” (Weigand 1925, 248) Oscar Olsson condemns her and the entirety of her class: “Hedda Gabler is thus the aristocratic luxury and society woman analyzed and found useless, totally. She is altogether simple, therefore also completely ridiculous [...]”²⁴⁷ Charles R. Lyons describes her as a narcissist

²⁴⁰ “Vom alten Kriegeradel stammen sie Beide ab und gemeinsam ist ihnen auch die aus langer Generationentartung stammende Verderbtheit, die Lust am gefährlichen Spiel mit stacheligen Worten, mit losen Liebeshändeln, mit blanken Waffen. Julie ist ein Fräulein, Hedda ist keine Frau.” (Harden 1896, 52)

²⁴¹ “Sie war keine Frau, sie wollte kein Kind, nicht einmal einen eigenen Gedanken konnte sie nähren. Sie war unfruchtbar, lebensunfähig, der tragische Typus eines entarteten und verarmten, zum Lebenskampfe nicht mehr kriegstüchtigen Feudalgeschlechtes.” (Harden 1896, 57)

²⁴² “et forvrængt, misdannet Undtagelsesvæsen” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 169)

²⁴³ “den fuldstændige Uvirksomheds Lede.” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 153)

²⁴⁴ “en mørk Tomhed, ud af hvilken den rene Negation stirrer hende imøde.” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 166)

²⁴⁵ “fuldstændig overflødig.” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 173)

²⁴⁶ “et Skud — et Intet.” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 175)

²⁴⁷ “Hedda Gabler är således den aristokratiska lyx- och societetskvinnan analyserad och befunnen värdelös, totalt. Hon är simpel alltigenom, därför också genomslöjlig [...]” (Olsson 1937, 385)

unable to find interest in anything outside her own self: “the text of this play reveals no aesthetic or intellectual interests on the part of this heroine. [...] Hedda’s aspirations encompass only a vision of herself as the center of an elite salon in this city and her efforts of self-formation remain limited to that role.” (Lyons 1991, 89) Against this tradition of negative appraisals stands a moderating approach which apportions some measure of blame to societal factors that have shaped her character. John Northam maintains that Hedda “has nothing – no respect for husband, no liking for love, no joy in maternity, no relationship, not even such as that offered by Brack, that she can enter into” (Northam 1973, 156), but goes on to argue that “Hedda is a poet deep down because that is where social conditioning has driven her poetic impulses.” (Northam 1973, 181) Janet Garton adopts a similar approach when linking Hedda’s ennui to her sex: “The cause of Hedda’s frustration – put in more modern psychological terms – is not the facts of sexuality but the fact of being a woman, with all that implied at that time both physically and socially in terms of submission and dependence.” (Garton 1994, 122) These readings of Hedda are difficult to reconcile. Either she has certain inner qualities that have been suppressed, or she is emptiness incarnate. Either Hedda is responsible for her own actions, or society is to blame. I will attempt to bridge such differences by drawing attention to a variety of internal and external factors which all contribute to explain Hedda’s behaviour. I find it useful to ask a question of degree; to what degree has Hedda been deformed by society, and how much responsibility does she bear for her actions? It is reasonable to argue that the influence of bourgeois patriarchy, which does indeed limit her freedom through the imposition of an ideal of domesticity, interacts in a highly destructive fashion with certain aspects of her personality that are uniquely her own.

I will pursue my reading of Hedda as an instance of degenerate femininity within the framework of a set of interrelated thematic concerns: an economic logic centred on the conflict between saving or spending one’s energy and resources; Hedda’s lust for power and her idealism; and a dynamic of competition and rivalry which extends to the domains of labor and sexuality and which manifests most noticeably in a confusion of gender roles. I will argue that earlier research has tended to overlook the importance of economy as a determinant in relationships within the play. Characters make repeated references to money and the Tesmans in particular frequently converse on the topic of money. I will insert Hedda into an economic framework by arguing that aunt Julle regards her as an asset which will enhance the standing of the Tesmans, whereas Tesman thinks of her as increasing his standing among bourgeois men. By virtue of Hedda’s class background, status will accrue to the Tesman name over generations, provided that Hedda bears a child to continue the family line. Moreover, aunt Julle and Tesman are preoccupied with managing their resources and investing wisely. We can therefore identify a mode of thinking in terms of spending and saving that informs the Tesmans’ values and drives their actions. Degeneration factors into this thinking in that Hedda deviates from norms of motherhood and ideals of female self-sacrifice. Her antipathy toward childbearing counteracts aunt Julle’s hope of profiting from Hedda having entered into the household. This literally-minded mode of thinking on money and investments is complemented by a metaphorical imagery centred on overspending and wastefulness and which tends to be linked to the issue of non-expenditure of energy. Hedda’s ennui, which I understand as a barely concealed existential despair, derives from her lack of a vocation in life. Her ennui is in turn a contributing factor to her suicide, as noted by Ellen Mortensen:

“Utterly idle and useless, and with no prospects of a future, except as wife and hostess for her husband’s associates, she found her existence unbearably vacuous and boring. Her act of self-destruction becomes in this light a desperate heroic, but tragic gesture.” (Mortensen 2007, 181) The causal relationship between Hedda’s inability to channel her energy into a productive task and her sense of having wasted her potential establishes a clear link between her and the similar cases of Alving and Ulrik Brendel. Unlike these two, however, Hedda takes pleasure in manipulating and dominating others. Her interactions with Løvborg demonstrate how Hedda conceives of a meaningful task. As Leonardo F. Lisi argues, Hedda can only muster interest in a task that engages her. Lisi’s argument focuses on Hedda’s response to Brack’s suggestion that she might find a task with which to occupy herself:

In her reply, however, Hedda provides a crucial qualification to this notion when she adds that the task in question would also need to be “tempting [lokkende].” What this means is that boredom cannot simply be defeated by having activities available that we *can* perform – activities for which we possess the necessary skills and opportunities – but rather requires activities that, furthermore, we *want* to perform, something that involves our personal dispositions, inclinations and interests. [...] Temptation as personal involvement in a task thus means a task through which we can express our identity, our own personal presence in the world by means of the product that we bring about. If factory work is boring, it is precisely because it does not allow this kind of self-articulation through the task at hand. (Lisi 2018, 30; emphasis in original)

Moreover, Hedda defines a meaningful task as one that is also “courageous and beautiful.” (Lisi 2018, 34) In order to appreciate how Hedda understands the concept of a vocation in life one must therefore also examine her idealism.

Hedda’s idealism is intertwined with her lust for power, which above all extends to men whom Hedda seeks to dominate. It is this lust for power that Ibsen describes, in his draft notes, as demonic. Hedda’s desire for power can not simply be reduced to a compensatory reaction to a socially induced lack of power, as Kari Fjørtoft suggests (Fjørtoft 1986, 59). By identifying society as the culprit one invites interpretations of Hedda’s suicide as an act of heroic defiance, a tendency exemplified by Northam: “The power of society to invade and corrupt has been so strongly realised that any gesture of independence from that power seems almost miraculous.” (Northam 1973, 184) Going a few steps further, Toril Moi engages in an idealization of Hedda. Moi reads Hedda as a heroine whose tragic fate is due to her inability to accept the realities of contemporary society:

Apart from Hedda, nobody in this play appears to know what it might mean to have high ideals. Løvborg might have been an exception, but if so, his erstwhile idealism has not survived his self-destructive tendencies. *Hedda Gabler* thus inaugurates a new phase in Ibsen’s modernism, one in which idealism comes across as a baffling anachronism, yet, as in the case of Hedda, as an anachronism that has more splendor than the mediocrities that surround her. In *Hedda*

Gabler, moreover, the everyday is a negative force. More than anything else, Hedda's constant and intense sense of *boredom* signals the change. (Moi 2006, 318; emphasis in original)

This interpretation aligns with Moi's earlier reading of *Rosmersholm* as an indictment of bourgeois modernity and is equally problematic. Moi does not sufficiently take into account the possibility that Hedda's boredom may conceal an underlying malaise which has little to do with her circumstances. Similarly to Northam, Moi views Hedda as a victim of an oppressive society. Such readings deny Hedda's agency and absolve her of guilt. There is no contradiction in stating that Hedda's development has been stunted by her social milieu but that society alone can not account for the destructive aspects of her character. Returning to Hedda's lust for power, I see this as an intrinsic part of her personality which exists independently of external factors. I do not find it reasonable to regard Hedda's demonism, labeled as such by Ibsen, as a product of bourgeois patriarchy. I am more inclined to agree with James McFarlane's reading of Hedda's behaviour as a misguided attempt at satiating an emptiness in her own self: "The demonic in Hedda's character [...] is that she wants to control another's destiny. But her mischief is not mere villainy; in the last analysis, she does it in an effort to make good some inner deficiency in her own self, to give a kind of borrowed significance to her own life, or to achieve something she was by herself incapable of achieving." (McFarlane 1989, 289) Following this line of reasoning, the source of Hedda's desire for power can be located in her own existential despair.

Hedda's demonism is linked to her idealism. Her ideals can be summarized as a fascination with beauty, chivalry, and forceful action, and constitute a set of values that I will refer to using the shorthand of patrician ideals. Having been brought up in an upper class setting, Hedda is accustomed to those around her conforming to her wishes. She expects others to serve her while at the same time refusing all obligations and expectations imposed on her. Hedda's ideals are evidently incommensurate with her position as the wife of the bourgeois Tesman. Her marriage constitutes a fall from the upper echelons of society to a lower level and fits into a pattern of falling that signals the destruction of an old order. Errol Durbach points to Hedda surrounding herself with trappings of aristocracy which "all look back to an age of chivalry and nobility which Hedda *cannot* relinquish although she *knows* it is dead beyond recovery." (Durbach 1982, 37; emphasis in original) Similarly to her father's pistols, her ideals belong to the past. To borrow Jørgen Haugan's phrasing, Hedda lives "in a past world according to certain norms that are out of date."²⁴⁸ Caroline W. Mayerson argues that Hedda's ideals are based on her idealized conception of an aristocrat:

The aristocrat possesses, above all, courage and self-control. He expresses himself through direct and independent action, living to capacity and scorning security and public opinion. Danger only piques his appetite, and death with honor is the victory to be plucked from defeat. But the recklessness of this Hotspur is tempered by a disciplined will, by means of which he

²⁴⁸ "i en fortidig verden etter noen normer som er gått ut på dato." (Haugan 2014, 449)

“beautifully” orders both his own actions and those of others on whom his power is imposed. (Mayerson 1950, 156)

As we have seen in previous chapters, Alving and Rosmer failed to live up to similar ideals of self-discipline and continence of will. Much like these fallen patriarchs, Hedda represents a social order that has survived past its prime. She acts as though the patrician order were still intact and treats other members of her household as servants, as noted by Herbert Blau: “It is, for her, the others who are intruders, though she is living in a strange house, enjoying another woman’s servant, wheedling thrills from another’s experience, and making the worst of a life that is not hers.” (Blau 1953, 115) Her failure to realize the predicament of her class situates her in a similar position to Rosmer. The play thus enacts a struggle for supremacy between Hedda’s class, which belongs to the past, and the bourgeoisie of the Tesmans, which surrounds her in the present. The past, represented by visual cues such as the pistols and her father’s portrait, signify the lingering influence on Hedda of a set of values that can not be reconciled with her present situation. To borrow Evert Sprinchorn’s phrasing, we are witnessing the last gasps of an “aristocratic class that has been pretty much replaced by the bourgeoisie, leaving behind only a few relics like Hedda.” (Sprinchorn 2020, 461) The antiquated nature of Hedda’s ideals is another indication of the thematic proximity of *Hedda Gabler* to *Gengangere* and *Rosmersholm*, which similarly present us with a theme of the past returning in the present. The comparison can be extended by reframing the conflict between sets of ideals in darwinian terms as a struggle between the fit and unfit. Nantawan Soonthorndhai argues that Hedda’s privileged upbringing has instilled in her the “mistaken view that she is one of ‘the fittest,’ who need not engage in competitive struggle, whose survival is assured.” (Soonthorndhai 1985, 158) A reading of Hedda as unfit for life can be supported with reference to her inability to liberate herself from the baneful influence of her father as well as her dependence on the support or obeisance of others. The patrician order to which Hedda belongs is no longer capable of propagating itself and is therefore doomed to extinction. When read against a backdrop of a decrepit old order being replaced by a new and more energetic class, Hedda’s death is an end that precipitates renewal.

The replacement of the old order by the new plays out in a theme of competition which sees Tesman, Brack and Løvborg vying for sexual access to Hedda, with varying degrees of success. Hedda participates in this struggle for ownership and competition but does so by engaging in rivalry with Løvborg, using Thea as an instrument in her attempt to gain dominion over Løvborg. It is within this context that Hedda’s female masculinity manifests most directly. By challenging men to do her bidding, on occasion seeking to emasculate them outright, Hedda assaults a building block of bourgeois patriarchy. Hedda’s enactment of masculinity should be read in conjunction with the effeminacy of Tesman and Løvborg. Hedda engages in behaviour toward Thea with clear connotations of sexual dominance which can be interpreted as an expression of same sex desire, and which position Hedda as Løvborg’s rival for Thea’s affection. Hedda’s desire for domination is perhaps the most flagrant example of her deviation from bourgeois patriarchy. Ross Shideler reads Hedda’s actions as motivated both by her upbringing and her sense of being surrounded by weak men:

“Her ambition to dominate comes, first, from her upbringing in the General’s patriarchy and, second, from the vacuum surrounding her.” (Shideler 199, 93) She is at once reacting to what she perceives as the unmanliness of the bourgeoisie and restoring patriarchal authority by living according to patrician ideals of masculinity. She acts according to a dialectic of strength and weakness which prevents her from finding satisfaction in dominating the weak-willed Tesman. Joan Templeton argues that Ibsen, in his depiction of Hedda’s marriage to Tesman, “reverses traditional masculine and feminine qualities in Mr. and Mrs. Tesman more strongly than in any other of his couples [...]” (Templeton 1997, 230) Unable to view Tesman as a worthy rival, Hedda focuses on rehabilitating Løvborg and restoring his masculinity. By redeeming Løvborg from his status as a fallen male, she is making him into a man that she could take pride in dominating. The sexual component of her desire for power should not be overestimated, however, especially since Hedda seems uncomfortable with the physicality of the female body and loathe to engage in sexual relations with men. Her rejection of motherhood is a deviation from an imperative to propagate the family line shared by bourgeoisie and aristocracy alike.

August Strindberg’s “Mot betalning” as intertext

A reading of *Hedda Gabler* as a narrative of degeneration can be further supported on intertextual grounds. As has been noted in Ibsen scholarship (Shideler 1999, 191 n. 51; Hoel 1998, 272-3), the plot is reminiscent of August Strindberg’s short story “Mot betalning” [“For Payment”], published in the second volume of *Giftas* (*Getting Married*, 1886). Ibsen’s play forms a response to Strindberg’s story, with Ibsen borrowing plot elements from one of Strindberg’s most significant works on the topic of degeneration. Ibsen’s dependence on Strindberg’s text suggests that a comparative reading of the two works may shed some light on *Hedda Gabler*. The importance of Strindberg’s story to Ibsen’s play has not been the subject of close analysis and remains insufficiently acknowledged. Even a brief summary of “Mot betalning”, however, will demonstrate that the two texts are based on the same central trope: that of a degenerate aristocratic heroine who challenges the patriarchal order.

In Strindberg’s story the protagonist Helène, the daughter of a general, has grown up surrounded by men, her mother having died when Helène was young. Helène’s upbringing has been one of privilege, and his status has instilled in her a sense of superiority: “And as she was the general’s daughter, she was accorded the same honor as her father. She had the rank of general, and she knew it.”²⁴⁹ She has grown accustomed to men doing her bidding and is dismissive of tasks associated with femininity: “She was used to commanding and being obeyed, she could never obey anyone. The free male life among men had also given her a

²⁴⁹ “Och som hon var generalens dotter tillföll henne samma hedersbevisning som fadren. Hon hade generals rang, och hon kände det.” (Strindberg 1982, 231)

decided aversion to female occupations.”²⁵⁰ Her aversion toward femininity situates her in the category of an unnatural woman who does not conform to the roles assigned by nature to women. Helène’s degeneracy is explained as the impact of generations of her forebears having lived in such a manner as to invite degeneracy:

Belonging to an old family which on the paternal side had mismanaged its power on soulless military pursuits, night vigils, gluttony and drunkenness, and which on the maternal side had suppressed fertility to prevent division of the estate, nature seemed to have hesitated at the last moment in determining her sex, or perhaps not having enough force to decide on the continuation of the race. Her figure lacked a definite feminine character such as a healthy nature produces for its purposes, and she did nothing to remedy the defects by artifice.²⁵¹

The understanding of heredity underlying this passage distinguishes between sets of traits inherited from one’s forefathers and traits inherited from one’s foremothers. Helène’s forefathers have wasted their energy on fruitless pastimes, while her foremothers have sought to inhibit their fertility in order not to divide their family’s wealth among too many inheritors. These sets of traits, both having to do with the husbandry of vital energy, have not complemented each other to form a stable median, but rather combine to aggravate Helène’s inherited degeneracy, leading her to be born without the attributes required for childbirth.

Helène displays a disgust toward sexual activity which comes to the fore when she witnesses two horses mating. Her reaction is one of horror: “Helène wanted to flee, for the scene filled her with horror. She had never seen the fury of the forces of nature in living bodies, and she felt perturbed to the uttermost by this unveiled outburst.”²⁵² After this episode she immerses herself in Romantic literature, which allows her to engage in fantasies of living in a “dream world where souls lived without bodies.”²⁵³ She refuses to contemplate marriage and childbearing: “That she was called to live for the family, that she had an obligation to promote the germination and growth of the seeds nature had deposited in her body, this she rejected.”²⁵⁴ As an idealist who has never lived without the benefits of her father’s status she is ill-equipped to deal with his passing. Finding herself forced to consort with the bourgeoisie, she comes to understand that she must marry in order to retain some modicum of individual liberty. She is courted by a docent, Albert, who claims to share in her Romantic idealism and

²⁵⁰ “Hon var van att befalla och bli lydd, hon kunde aldrig lyda någon. Det fria manliga livet bland män hade dessutom givit henne en avgjord motvilja mot kvinnliga sysselsättningar.” (Strindberg 1982, 232)

²⁵¹ “Tillhörande en gammal ätt som på fädernet misshushållat med sin kraft på själlösa militära sysselsättningar, nattvak, frosseri och dryckenskap, och som på modernet undertryckt fruktsamheten för att hindra hemmansklyvning, syntes naturen hava tvekat i sista stunden vid bestämmandet av hennes kön, eller kanske icke ägande nog kraft att besluta sig för rasens fortsättande. Hennes figur saknade en bestämd kvinnlig prägel sådan en sund natur alstrar den för sina ändamål, och hon gjorde intet för att med konst avhjälpa bristerna.” (Strindberg 1982, 232)

²⁵² “Helène ville fly, ty scenen ingav henne fasa. Hon hade aldrig sett naturmakternas raseri i levande kroppar, och hon kände sig upprörd till det yttersta av detta obeslöjade utbrott.” (Strindberg 1982, 234)

²⁵³ “drömvärld där själarne levde utan kroppar.” (Strindberg 1982, 235)

²⁵⁴ “Att hon var kallad till att leva för släktet, att hon hade en skyldighet att befordra groning och växt av de frön naturen nedlagt i hennes kropp, det slog hon ifrån sig.” (Strindberg 1982, 236)

whom she marries. Helène, however, refuses to consummate the marriage, declaring that love is incompatible with carnal desire. Albert soon comes to despise Helène, but his love for her prevents him from leaving her. Helène longs to reclaim her place at the higher echelons of society and uses her connections to secure Albert a professorship and a place as member of parliament. She manipulates him into proposing a bill to criminalize prostitution, at which point he realizes that she is using him to advance her idealist agenda. He directs his rage not at her, but at the women's liberation movement, which he sees as an attempt to liberate one's self from nature: "What hellish rot lay beneath this mendacious morality, this insane rage to emancipation from healthy nature, the ascetic theories of idealism and Christianity implanted in the nineteenth century."²⁵⁵ When he threatens not to propose the bill, she secures his support by finally consenting to intercourse. He considers this to be a form of prostitution and is surprised when she appears to revel in her triumph rather than feel shame: "Then she appeared! Calm, smiling, triumphant; but more beautiful than he had seen her before."²⁵⁶ She reverts to refusing sex, thereby subjugating him further: "He crawled like a dog after her, obeyed her slightest beckoning, did everything she wanted, but in vain."²⁵⁷ To make matters worse, he discovers that she has been employing contraception without having informed him. He sees her rejection of motherhood as proof that the aristocracy has degenerated utterly: "Was the upper class degenerate as it no longer wanted to reproduce, or was it morally rotten."²⁵⁸ The story concludes with his realization that he will never be able to leave her, because he loves her.

This short plot summary should demonstrate that the similarities between "Mot betalning" and *Hedda Gabler* are far-reaching. In Strindberg's story, a manipulative upper class woman is labeled a degenerate and derided as unnatural. Her actions threaten the continuation of her family line and by extension the survival of the patrician order to which she belongs. There is nothing inherently tragic in the plot of "Mot betalning", however, and the story could more properly be regarded as a diatribe against the women's liberation movement. When Ibsen expands on the plot of Strindberg's story he adds an element of tragedy in the form of Hedda's suicide. The core of the plot, that of a degenerate woman who seeks to dominate men, remains largely untouched. This plot is central to Ibsen's conception of *Hedda Gabler* and can be identified in his earliest notes to the play. As we shall see by turning to Ibsen's notes and working manuscripts, a preoccupation with the theme of degeneration inform his writing process from beginning to end.

²⁵⁵ "Vilken helvetets förruttnelse låg icke under denna lögnaktiga moral, detta vansinniga emancipationsraseri från den sunda naturen, idealismens och kristendomens askes-teorier inplanterade i nittonde århundradet." (Strindberg 1982, 251)

²⁵⁶ "Så kom hon! Lugn, leende, triumferande; men skönare än han sett henne förr." (Strindberg 1982, 254)

²⁵⁷ "Han kröp som en hund efter henne, lydde hennes minsta vink, gjorde allt vad hon önskade, men förgäves." (Strindberg 1982, 254)

²⁵⁸ "Var överklassen degenererad efter som den icke längre ville föröka sig, eller var den moraliskt rutten." (Strindberg 1982, 256)

Ibsen's preserved notebooks and working manuscripts for *Hedda Gabler* are collected under the catalogue headings NBO Ms.8° 809, 1942, and 2638-39. The precise dating of the materials is difficult to establish and I will simply adopt the chronology suggested in *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, along with the editors' designation of the individual manuscripts contained in each catalogue item (manuscripts 1 through 10; cf. *HIS* 9K:111).²⁵⁹ Apart from materials containing notes of varying length we also have access to a lengthy working manuscript (NBO Ms.8° 808). I will in the following delineate how the theme of degeneration develops by examining Ibsen's notes in chronological order.²⁶⁰

Manuscript 1 contains one of Ibsen's earliest notes, a brief description of a man and a woman: "The pale, seemingly cold beauty. Great demands on life and on the joy of life [*livsglæde*]. He, who has now finally defeated her, uncouth in person, but honorable and gifted free-thinking scientist."²⁶¹ This description establishes the Hedda character as a paradoxical figure, seemingly detached from life while at the same time having a lust for life. The key concept "livsglæde" establishes an intertextual connection to *Gengangere*. This echo of Alving establishes the Hedda character as someone who wishes to enjoy life but is unable to do so. While coldness implies control, "seemingly" suggests some external restraint being imposed on her, as though she were forced to restrain herself from pursuing the joy of life.

Manuscript 2, a notebook that can be dated to April 1890 (*HIS* 9K:113), contains notes fleshing out the main character, who is now called Hedda, and her relationship to the other characters. The Løvborg character, here referred to as Holger, has completed a manuscript in which he criticizes contemporary society: "The manuscript that H. L. leaves behind states that the human task is: Upward, towards the light-bringer [*lysbringeren*]. Life on the current social basis is not worth living. Therefore fantasize away from it. By drink, etc."²⁶² The idea that Løvborg rejects the foundations of the society he lives in and instead rejects contemporary life by dreaming and drinking establishes him as a character in the mold of Brendel. Løvborg's belief that mankind should strive upward, toward "lysbringeren", which is to say Lucifer, strengthens the link between the two characters. The connotation of suicide in the description of the manuscript similarly establishes a parallel between Løvborg's life-rejecting idealism and Brendel's longing for annihilation. Similarly to Brendel, a constituent part of Løvborg's

²⁵⁹ NBO Ms.8° 809 is a collection of minor working manuscripts (manuscripts 1, 5, 6, and 9). NBO Ms.8° 2639 (manuscript 2) is a notebook with notes and lines of dialogue. NBO Ms.8° 1942 contains a list of characters (manuscript 3) and an outline of the first act and parts of the second act (manuscript 7). NBO Ms.8° 2638 (manuscript 4) is a notebook containing short notes, some of which can be related to *Hedda Gabler*.

²⁶⁰ Eivind Tjønneland reads Ibsen's notes as indicative of an interest to engage with the pressing issues of the day (Tjønneland 2001, 154). I would rank degeneration among these issues.

²⁶¹ "Den blege, tilsyneladende kolde skønhed. Store fordringer til livet og til livsglæden. Han, som nu endelig har besejret he[nd]e, tarvelig af person, men hæderlig og begavet frisindet videnskabsmand." NBO Ms.8° 809:1, bl. [1]r. Quoted from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG8809.xhtml.

²⁶² "Manuskriptet, som H. L. efterlader, går ud på at menneskeopgaven er: Opad, imod lysbringeren. Livet på det nuværende samfundsgrundlag er ikke værd at leve. Derfor fantasere sig bort fra det. Ved drik o. s. v." NBO Ms.8° 2639. Quotes in the following from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG82639.xhtml.

personality is his inability to control his urges: “H. L’s despair lies in the fact that he wants to control the world but cannot control himself.”²⁶³ Løvborg is portrayed as a gifted person, as seen in the inability of other characters to understand his manuscript: “What an irony over the human pursuit of development and progress[.]”²⁶⁴ Even his personality seems incomprehensible to others, including the Thea character: “She can only guess but cannot understand his way of thinking.”²⁶⁵ Perhaps part of this can be attributed to his “double nature”, his ability to “realize the lowly bourgeois” in order to “win support for his great central thought.”²⁶⁶ The picture that emerges of Løvborg is that of a gifted man whose inability to constrain his urges contributes to his downfall.

Manuscript 4 provides a substantial amount of information on Hedda’s background, personality and present circumstances. The first three pages of general commentary appear to have been written earlier than the subsequent pages, 4-46. The latter are labeled “Notes” (“Optegnelser”) and may have been written in August–October 1890 (*HIS* 9K:131). There is an intriguing connection between the first three pages and one note in manuscript 3 that can not easily be linked to any single character. This comment concerns the notion of rejecting the laws of nature: “They say: it is a law of nature. Well, but then you oppose it. Demand it abolished. Why retreat. Why surrender for grace and disgrace.”²⁶⁷ This comment can be compared to a note found among the first three pages of manuscript 4: “‘The apostate’s’ defence of the cultured man. The mustang and the racehorse. Drinks – eats paprika. House and clothes Revolution against the laws of nature – but not [...] before the position is secured.”²⁶⁸ The idea of liberating one’s self from the strictures of natural laws serves as a bridge between manuscripts 3 and 4. These comments introduce the motif of transgression, not merely against convention but against the laws of nature. A desire to transgress comes across as Hedda’s defining characteristic in the subsequent “Optegnelser”, which contain a variety of notes phrased by Ibsen as expressing the central themes of the play. One note, helpfully labeled “Main points” (“Hovedpunkter”), reads as follows:

- 1.) They are not all cut out to be mothers.
- 2.) Sensuality is in them, but they are afraid of scandal.
- 3.) They feel that there are life tasks at this time, but they cannot get hold of them.²⁶⁹

²⁶³ “Fortvilelsen hos H. L ligger i at han vil beherske verden men ikke kan beherske sig selv.”

²⁶⁴ “Hvilken ironi over den menneskelige bestræbelse efter udvikling og fremskridt[.]”

²⁶⁵ “Hans tankegang kan hun nemlig blot ane ikke forstå.”

²⁶⁶ “dobbeltnatur”; “realisere det lavt borgerlige”; “vinde position for sin store centrale tanke.”

²⁶⁷ “Der siges: det er en naturlov. Nu vel, men så gør man opposition mod den. Forlanger den afskaffet. Hvorfor vige tilbage. Hvorfor overgive sig på nåde og unåde.”

²⁶⁸ “‘Den forlornes’ apologi for kulturmennesket. Mustangen og væddeløbshesten. Drikker – spiser paprika. Hus og klæder Revolution mod naturlovene – men ikke [...] før positionen er sikkert.” NBO Ms.8° 2638. Quotes in the following from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG82638.xhtml.

²⁶⁹ “1.) De er ikke alle skabte til at være mødre.

2.) Det sandelige drag er i dem, men de har skræk for skandalen.

3.) De for[ne]mmer at der er livsopgaver i tiden, men de kan ikke få tag i dem.”

These comments can be applied to Hedda. Most importantly for my analysis is the third comment, which indicates that Hedda's inability to engage in worthwhile pursuits threatens to render her a useless person. The theme of lack of vocation is emphasized in another note: "The mutual hate among women. The women have no influence on external state affairs. Therefore, they want to have 'influence over the souls' [...] And so many have no purpose in life (the lack of this is a legacy) –."²⁷⁰ This could be read as society constricting the ability of women to engage in productive activity, which would mean that society is to blame for Hedda's situation. A few other notes could possibly be related to Hedda's existential despair: "The play will be about 'the insurmountable', the craving and striving for something that is against convention, against what is accepted in the minds, – also in Hedda's."²⁷¹ This comment suggests a lineage from Helene Alving and Rebekka to Hedda, all of whom are women who feel constrained by societal conventions. To this can be added a comment on the role of women in effecting fundamental change in society:

It is about the "underground forces and powers". The woman as a miner: Nihilism. Father and mother belonging to different ages. The female underground revolution in thinking The slave-fear outwards against the outside.²⁷²

In these notes, society tends to be blamed for the inability of women to find a vocation in life. It would therefore be incumbent on women to change the facts of their lives by going on the offensive toward the restrictive structures holding them back, a process that can be likened to "nihilism", modern women acting as dynamitards bringing about the destruction of an oppressive social order. Hedda would in this context be a woman who for whatever reason is unable to break free of the strictures of convention. She understands that there are great tasks to engage in but is unable to contribute directly to reforming society, and instead seeks to achieve influence over others, a goal which she fails to accomplish.

This image of Hedda can be fleshed out using notes that relate to her personality and the circumstances of her life. Her physical appearance seems linked to her class status: "Nobly shaped distinguished face with fine waxy skin."²⁷³ She has sparse hair and conveys a graceful impression, "Calm manners", but there is a coldness to her eyes: "The eyes are steel-coloured, with a dull sheen."²⁷⁴ She is fascinated by, but unable to contribute to, the cause of the radicals: "Hedda feels demonically attracted to the trends of the time. But the courage is

²⁷⁰ "Det indbyrdes kvindehad. Kvinderne har ingen indflydelse på de ydre statsanliggender. Derfor vil de ha 'indflydelse på sjælene' [...] Og så har så mange intet livs mål (mangelen heraf er en arv) –."

²⁷¹ "Stykket skal dreje sig om 'det uoverkommelige', det, at hige og tilstræbe noget som står imod konventionen, imod det vedtagne i bevidsthederne, – også i Heddas."

²⁷² "Det er om de 'underjordiske kræfter og magter' der handles. Kvinden som grubearbejder: Nihilisme. Far og mor tilhørende forskellige tidsaldrer. Den kvindelige underjordiske revolution i tænkningen Slavefrygten udad imod det ydre."

²⁷³ "Ædelt forment fornemt ansigt med en fin voksfarvet hud." This calls to mind the description of the delicate proto-Rosmer, as discussed in the previous chapter.

²⁷⁴ "Ro over manererne"; "Øjnene stålfarvede, med et mat skær."

lacking. It remains theory, feeble dreams.”²⁷⁵ Her past is accentuated with reference to the disgrace of her father, an event that compromised her social standing: “Then comes the story of the general’s ‘disgrace’, dismissal, etc. The most terrible thing for a ball-lady is not to be feted for her own sake[.]”²⁷⁶ As opposed to Hedda, Løvborg is clearly associated with the future. His manuscript bears the title “The philosophy of the future culture. Moral doctrine”,²⁷⁷ indicating that his manuscript outlines a potential for human advancement and a prescriptive ethics. There is no indication that Hedda would be able to contribute to his cause. Doing so would perhaps provide her with a vocation, which she appears to lack. The notion of purposeful work is highlighted in connection with the attempt by Tesman and Thea Elvsted to reassemble the manuscript: “It is a wonderful thing to work towards a goal.”²⁷⁸ Furthermore, Hedda shows no interest in having children and rejects bourgeois ideals of domesticity, expressing indifference to the health of Tesman’s sickly aunt:

“I don’t understand people who make sacrifices. Now look at old Miss Rising. There she has a paralyzed sister lying in the house – for years. Do you think she thinks it a sacrifice to live for this poor creature, who is a burden even to herself? Oh far from it! On the contrary. I do not understand it.”²⁷⁹

Her reasoning extends to children: “H. talks about how children have always been a horror to her too.”²⁸⁰ She even rejects the notion of familial love: “Hedda takes a strong, albeit unclear, stand against the opinion that one must love ‘family’. The aunts are nothing to her.”²⁸¹ She appears to be pregnant but is afraid of what her pregnancy will bring about: “Hedda is completely preoccupied with the child that is to come, but when it has arrived she dreads what will follow –”²⁸² Three primary characteristics which all deviate from the norms of bourgeois patriarchy can thus be identified at an early stage: an unwillingness to bear children, a disdain for the notion of caring for others, and a disinterest in the institution of family. Hedda’s own values are not outlined, and instead we are only offered a catalogue of values that she rejects.

An important corollary to Hedda’s lack of vocation is her disinterest in the real world. Several notes emphasize the role of fantasy, for instance a comment on the difference between the imaginations of men and women: “The female imagination is not active and independently

²⁷⁵ “Hedda føler sig dæmonisk tiltrukket af tidens tendenser. Men modet mangler. Det blir ved teorien, ved de ørkesløse drømmer.”

²⁷⁶ “Så kommer historien om generalens ‘unåde’, afsked o. s. v. Det forfærdeligste for en baldame ikke at være feteret for sin egen skyld[.]”

²⁷⁷ “Fremtidskulturens filosofi sædslære”.

²⁷⁸ “Det er noget skønt at arbejde for et mål.”

²⁷⁹ “Jeg forstår mig ikke på de opofrende mennesker. Se nu gamle frøken Rising. Der har hun en lam sengeliggende søster liggende i huset – i årvis. Tror De hun synes det er et offer at leve for denne stakkers skabning, som er til byrde for sig selv endogså? Å langt ifra! Tvert imod. Jeg forstår det ikke.”

²⁸⁰ “H. taler om at også hende har børn altid været en gru.”

²⁸¹ “Hedda sætter sig stærkt om end uklart op imod den mening at man skal eller elske ‘familjens’. Tanterne er for hende ingenting.”

²⁸² “Hedda er helt optaget af det barn som skal komme, men når det er kommet gruer hun for hvad der vil følge –”

creative like the male. It needs a little bit of reality to help[.]”²⁸³ In Hedda’s case this could mean that she requires some material to work with in order to engage in fantasy, and Løvborg provides this material. She appears preoccupied with Løvborg as an object of fantasy:

Hedda is the expression of the lady in her position and with her character. You marry Tesman, but you occupy your imagination with Ejlert Løvborg. You lean back in your chair, close your eyes and imagine his adventures. – Here’s the enormous difference: Mrs Elfstad “works on his moral improvement”. For Hedda, he is an object of cowardly, alluring reveries. In reality, she does not have the courage to participate in such things. Then comes the realization of her condition. Tied down! Doesn’t understand. Ridiculous! Ridiculous!²⁸⁴

The impression given of Hedda here is one of passivity. She lacks the courage to pursue Løvborg and instead satisfies herself with fantasizing about his erotic escapades. Her closing herself off to the world, described as hysteria, is seen as the driving force behind her actions: “Brack understands well that it is H.’s closed-in nature, her hysteria, which is actually the motivating factor in her entire course of action.”²⁸⁵ Hedda’s retreat from life reinforces the connection between her and Rosmer, who similarly sought to retreat into a realm of fantasy. The similarity with Rosmer can be emphasized further by noting that Hedda possesses a demonic quality: “The demonic in Hedda is: She wants to exert influence on another – If this is done, she despises him.”²⁸⁶ Her need for dominating others indicates that there is something unnatural about Hedda. This undercurrent of abnormality can be seen in a note on Hedda’s relationship to the maid: “Hedda’s discovery in the third act that her relationship with the servant girl cannot possibly be proper.”²⁸⁷ This comment can be interpreted as Hedda experiencing same sex desire. To this can be added a confusion concerning gender roles. Hedda is a woman who wishes to live her life as a man, but is prevented from doing so by gendered expectations: “It is really the man’s whole life that she wants to live. But then come the misgivings. The inherited and the implanted.”²⁸⁸ If Hedda is understood as a woman who wishes to live her life as a man, all the while being attracted to other women, she can be read as a woman who identifies herself as more of a man than as a woman.

The possibility that Hedda desires other women establishes a clear intertextual link between her and Rebekka. Another echo of *Rosmersholm* is Løvborg’s views on friendship

²⁸³ “Den kvindelige fantasi er ikke aktiv og selvstændig skabende som den mandlige. Den behøver en liden smule virkelighed til hjælp[.]”

²⁸⁴ “Hedda er udtrykket for damen i hendes stilling og med hendes karakter. Man gifter sig med Tesman, men man beskæftiger sin fantasi med Ejlert Løvborg. Man læner sig tilbage i stolen, lukker øjnene og imaginerer sig hans eventyr. – Her den uhyre forskel: Fru Elfstad “arbejder på hans moralske forbedring”. For Hedda er han et objekt for fejje, lokkende drømmerier. I virkeligheden har hun ikke mod til at være med på sligt. Så kommer erkendelsen af hendes tilstand. Bunden! Begriber det ikke. Latterligt! Latterligt!”

²⁸⁵ “Brack forstår godt at det er det indelukkede hos H., hendes hysteri, som egentlig er det motiverende i hele hendes handlemåde.”

²⁸⁶ “Det dæmoniske i Hedda er: Hun vil øve indflydelse på en anden – Er det sket, så foragter hun ham.”

²⁸⁷ “Heddas opdagelse i tredje akt at hendes forhold til pigen umuligt kan være rigtig.”

²⁸⁸ “Det er egentlig hele mandens liv hun vil leve. Men så kommer betænkelighederne. De nedarvede og de indplantede.”

between men and women, which are reminiscent of Rosmer's. True friendship between the sexes will bring about the advent of a spiritually elevated mankind: "Ejlert Løvborg's idea is that a relationship of comradeship between man and woman has to come about, from which the true spiritual person can emerge."²⁸⁹ Tesman sees this as the most daring idea in Løvborg's manuscript: "The new thing in E. L's book is the doctrine of development on the basis of comradeship between man and woman."²⁹⁰ The notion of friendship between the sexes is described as "The saving idea", but it has a potential downside: "If, for the sake of society, we are not allowed to live morally with them (the women), then we will live immorally[.]"²⁹¹ Løvborg's camaraderie with women has the unintended effect of sublimating his erotic desire, which erupts in debauchery: "It is precisely the sensuality accumulated while spending time with female "friends" or "comrades" that is expressed in him through his deviations[.]"²⁹² He chooses to blame society for his ills: "Why should I follow a social morality that I know will not last another half a lifetime. When I deviate, as they call it, it's an escape from the contemporaneous."²⁹³ This dynamic of longing for friendship while also acting on his urges points to the central conflict of the Løvborg character. The tension between idealism and depravity, calling to mind Ulrik Brendel, allows for a reading of Løvborg as a grotesque character, at once a critic of bourgeois morality and a drunken degenerate.²⁹⁴

Hedda's lack of vocation is a recurring theme in later manuscripts. Manuscript 5 contains lines of dialogue that emphasize Hedda's boredom. Hedda complains that she is predisposed to boredom, "I have no aptitude for anything but being bored", and complains "That life should not have anything at all to offer."²⁹⁵

The idea of Hedda lacking a purpose in life is addressed in manuscript 6: "Hedda's despair is the notion that there are certainly so many opportunities for happiness in the world, but that she cannot see them. It is the lack of a purpose in life that torments her."²⁹⁶ The same manuscript contains relevant information on Hedda's father. A key line is Hedda's description of her father: "Remember that I'm an old man's child – as well as a worn-out man – or a decrepit one then – It may have left its mark."²⁹⁷ The description of the general as a worn out

²⁸⁹ "Ejlert Løvborgs tanke er at der må skaffes tilveje et kammeratskabsforhold mellem man og kvinde, hvoraf det sande åndige menneske kan framgå."

²⁹⁰ "Det nye i E. Ls bog er læren om udvikling på grundlag af kammeratskab mellem mand og kvinde."

²⁹¹ "Redningstanken"; "Kan vi for samfundets skyld ikke få lov til at leve sædeligt med dem (kvinderne) så lever vi usædeligt[.]"

²⁹² "Det er netop den i omgang med kvindelige 'venner' eller 'kammerater' opsamlede sandselighed, som hos ham får udtryk gennem hans udskejelser[.]"

²⁹³ "Hvorfor skal jeg følge en samfunnsmoral, som jeg véd, ikke vil holde ud en halv menneskealder til. Når jeg skejer ud, som de kalder det, så er det en flugt fra det samtidige."

²⁹⁴ The parallels between *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm* extend to the level of dialogue. As Anne Marie Rekdal has noted (Rekdal 2000, 252), Brack's comment on Løvborg, "Because he's recently assumed the garb of a new man" (Ibsen 2019, 353) ["For nu har han jo iført sig et nyt menneske" (*HIS* 9:148)], is an echo of Brendel's "I intend to put on the new man now." (Ibsen 2019, 126 ["Jo, du, nu vil jeg iføre mig et nyt menneske." (*HIS* 8:357)])

²⁹⁵ "Jeg har ikke anlæg til andet end til at kede mig"; "At da ikke livet skal have nogen verdens ting at byde på." NBO Ms.8° 809:2. Quoted from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG8809.xhtml.

²⁹⁶ "Heddass fortvilelse er den forestilling at der visst findes så mange muligheder til lykke i verden, men at hun ikke kan få øje på dem. Det er mangelen på et livsmål som piner hende." NBO Ms.8° 809:3. Quoted from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG8809.xhtml.

²⁹⁷ "Husk på jeg er et gammelmandsbarn – og dertil en udlevet mands – eller en affældig da – Det har måske sat sine mærker."

reprobate suggests a reading of Hedda as having been born with limited vitality. Another comment describes Hedda's realization that others treated her based on her father's status: "Hedda talks about how she felt pushed aside, step by step, when her father was no longer in grace, took leave and died leaving nothing. – It was bitter for her, as if it was because of him that she had been feted. – And then she was already between 25 and 26 years old. Close to going downwards, unmarried."²⁹⁸

Manuscript 7 identifies Hedda's lack of purpose as the origin of her existential despair: "She struggles with the awareness that she has no purpose in life and at the same time finds herself upset that T. finds it alright. After all, she can share his interests."²⁹⁹ This explains her resentment at being married to a man who cannot understand her frustration.

Manuscript 8 contains several lines relating to Løvborg that were crossed over by Ibsen and do not appear in the finished play, but which I would argue flesh out his character. He claims that he does not wish to call on his relatives to aid him obtain a position as professor: "Because I want to conquer through myself. Achieve victory by my own abilities."³⁰⁰ The comment indicates that Løvborg prioritizes accomplishments achieved through one's own efforts. He realizes that he will never be able to achieve his own goals because he is unable to constrain himself when facing temptation. He phrases this inability as a loss of willpower:

Hedda. But can you never learn to tame yourself!

Løvborg. No, – that's exactly what I can't do. And that is the despair. I don't have it like that, like so many others. They have it in their power to tell themselves to stop when they see that things are going badly. I will never learn that. I have condescended to become an unfree man. Lost power over my own will.³⁰¹

This exchange suggest that Løvborg suffers from the same difficulty in mastering one's will as did Alving and Rosmer. An intriguing parallel to *Rosmersholm* is the fact that Hedda's name is given as "Hedda Rømer". This could simply be an oversight on Ibsen's part, but it is nonetheless one that invites speculation. There are clear thematic overlaps between *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler*, not least in the character of Hedda. The theme of the fall of the old order, as expressed in her father's fall from grace and her marriage to the bourgeois

²⁹⁸ "Hedda taler om hvorledes hun følte sig tilsidesat, skridt for skridt da hendes far ikke længere var i nåde, tog afsked og døde uden at efterlade sig noget. – Det stod da i bitterhed for hende, som om det var for hans skyld at man havde feteret hende. – Og så var hun imellem da 25 og 26 år allerede. Nær ved som ugift at gå nedad." The phrasing of "gå nedad" is significant, given the association of falling with degeneration.

²⁹⁹ "Hun vander sig under bevidstheden om at hun ikke ejer noget livsmål og finder sig på samme tid oprørt over at T. finder det i sin orden. Hun kan jo dele hans interesser." NBO Ms.8° 1942:2. The manuscript can be dated to September 1890 (HIS 9K:128). Quoted from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG81942.xhtml.

³⁰⁰ "Fordi jeg vil sejre gennem mig selv. Sejre ved mine egne evner." NBO Ms.8° 808. The manuscript is dated by Ibsen to August–October 1890 (HIS 9K:131). Quoted from https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG8808.xhtml.

³⁰¹ "Hedda. Men kan De da aldrig lære at tæmme Dem selv!
Løvborg. Nej, – det er just det, jeg ikke kan. Og det er fortvilelsen. Jeg har det ikke på den vis, som så mange andre. De har det i sin magt at kunne sige stop til sig selv når de ser at det bærer for galt i vej. Det vil jeg aldrig komme til at lære. Jeg har levet mig ned til at bli' en ufri mand. Mistet magten over min egen vilje."

Tesman, establishes a clear connection between Hedda and Rosmer. Much like Rosmer, Hedda belongs to a moribund aristocracy, and does not realize that her class has been superseded by its bourgeois inheritors. And like Rosmer, Hedda is the last member of a family line, the demise of which makes possible a renewal of society. Ibsen's apparent misnaming can thus possibly be considered significant rather than trivial.

Tesman as failed patriarch

The economic framework that underpins aunt Julle's behavior toward Hedda centres on the tension between investing in one's self or giving of one's self to another. This issue is connected to the idea of having a purpose in life, in that living for someone else can be construed as having a vocation. A logic of investment is at work that involves children and adults, with Tesman being regarded by his aunt as both a child and an investment. The reasoning behind aunt Julle's decision to sacrifice her own resources for the sake of Tesman can be understood in terms of who sacrifices what, for whom, and why. Children are regarded as investments and their parents are expected to give of themselves in order for the child to prosper. Aunt Julle's prioritization of Tesman is the most obvious example of self-sacrifice in the play, and in this regard Hedda stands as her polar opposite. Aunt Julle's self-effacing impulse is also directed toward her invalid sister, but an important distinction should be made between investing in a child and nursing an adult. One invests in a child with the expectation that the child will come to achieve a higher station in life, which would in turn benefit one's own status. The idea of a return on investment is not readily apparent in relationships between adults; aunt Julle's caring for her sister will not improve anyone's standing. Aunt Julle's care-giving has more to do with a sense of fulfilment that Nantawan Soonthorndhai reads as essentially parasitic: "Aunt Julle takes care of the invalid, not to restore her to health, but to keep her in the state of invalidism, in other words, to preserve the quality of death-in-life. [...] An obvious element of morbidity characterizes this guardian role she deems so necessary to her own survival." (Soonthorndhai 1985, 150) Following this line of reasoning, aunt Julle's caring for her sister is motivated by her own needs and provides her with a deep sense of satisfaction. A similar intent can be seen in the reasoning behind her investment in Tesman, which she also describes as giving her a purpose in life. Self-sacrifice is not always entirely altruistic, and may contain an element of self-interest.

Aunt Julle has invested in Tesman and Hedda by forsaking her own needs and contributing to the purchase of the Falk villa. During the first few scenes we are provided with clues indicating that Tesman, who has been coddled by his aunts and depends on their support, will turn out to be a bad investment. Aunt Julle is convinced that Tesman can not manage on his own and that the maid, Berte, must remain in his household. Aunt Julle appears to still regard Tesman as a child: "Jørgen *must* have you with him here in the house, you understand. He *must*. After all, you've been so used to looking after him ever since he was a

little boy.” (Ibsen 2019, 292) Her insistence suggests that she has never stopped thinking of Tesman as a child, which alerts us to the possibility that Tesman is incapable of fulfilling the role assigned to him, that of a bourgeois patriarch. Berte’s response is to think of aunt Rina and worry that a new maid will be unable to care for her: “Yes but, miss, I do think an awful lot about *her* that’s lying there at home. Poor thing, so completely helpless.” (Ibsen 2019, 292) Aunt Julle and Berte exemplify the ideal of self-sacrifice, consistently focusing their efforts on the needs of others. Their dialogue accentuates Tesman’s status as a grown child in that both he and the invalid aunt Rina require the aid of others. Tesman’s dependence indicates that his upbringing has deviated from the norm. Whereas Hedda embodies female masculinity, Tesman represents a male femininity. Lou Andreas-Salomé appropriately uses female imagery to describe Tesman: he is “receptively and reproductively inclined”, we soon understand that he relishes the thought of “working unselfishly to promote and restore another’s work”, and when he does embark on his mission to restore Løvborg’s manuscript, he shows that he is “better suited to working with other people’s thoughts than creating independently [...]”.³⁰² Commenting on Tesman’s unmanliness has since become a mainstay in the scholarship, and Andreas-Salomé’s assessment can be compared to Birgitta Johansson’s description of Tesman as “a man who is unproductive in the sense that he collects, catalogs and reconstructs other people’s material instead of bringing about creative renewal himself.”³⁰³ In a similar vein, Jenny Björklund comments that “Tesman’s masculinity is paradoxically characterized by a lack of conventional masculine traits; he is dependent on others rather than self-sufficient, and he is sexually ignorant and uncompetitive.” (Björklund 2016, 10) Tesman thus conforms to the ideal of bourgeois domesticity, according to which women are regarded as the passive recipients of male initiative and energy.

Tesman has never known his father and has never had a male role model who could encourage him to go out into the world and assert himself. Jørgen Haugan argues that Tesman has grown up to become both feminine and sexless (Haugan 2014, 439). Tesman displays neither initiative, self-reliance, nor strength of will. Nantawan Soonthorndhai argues that Tesman’s unmanliness is due to aunt Julle having destroyed his will: “If Tesman ever was a man of will and ever had a sense of his own personhood, Aunt Julle has long since destroyed that will. He has become a man without will and without creativity except for his specialized, rather mechanical ability to sort and collect data.” (Soonthorndhai 1985, 151) I would rather argue that his lack of a father is to blame, in that it is the role of the father to impart willpower. The absence of paternal influence is highlighted in Tesman’s greeting to aunt Julle: “You, who have been both father and mother to me.” (Ibsen 2019, 295) Tesman’s arrested development is accentuated by the repeated use of the verb “*stelle*”, with its associations of caring for others but also of death. Berte has been “looking after” (*stelle for*) Tesman, and aunt Julle has done the same, as expressed in a comment on aunt Rina: “But, pray God I get to keep her a while longer! Otherwise I’ll be lost for what to do with my life, Jørgen. Especially now, you see, when I no longer have you to look after [*stelle for*].” (Ibsen

³⁰² “receptiv og reproductiv anlagt”; “gjennem uegennyttigt Arbeide at fremme og gjenoprette en Andens Verk”; “[b]edre skikket til at arbeide med andres Tanker, end til at skabe selvstændig [...]” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 163, 172)

³⁰³ “en man som är improduktiv i den meningen, att han samlar, katalogiserar och rekonstruerar andras material istället för att själv åstadkomma kreativ förnyelse.” (Johansson 2008, 254)

2019, 295) If aunt Julle lives to take care of others, her life would be circumscribed unless she can find someone else to care for. Following aunt Rina's death, aunt Julle again makes use of "stelle": "She must be tended to [*stelles*] and dressed nicely now, as best I can. She'll be so pretty when she is laid in her grave." (Ibsen 2019, 363) Through repetition and modification of meaning, "stelle" acquires connotations of wasting away. These connotations signal that there is something unwholesome attached to the act of care-giving, and that an individual who requires that others care for him can not be described as an autonomous person.

Tesman's dependence on others extends to the realm of finance. In conversation with aunt Julle, Tesman takes pride in the fact that he managed to pay for both himself and Hedda with the limited funds at his disposal. When aunt Julle says that she doesn't understand how he could afford the trip, Tesman replies with an evasive "Well, no, I don't suppose it's so easy to imagine?" (Ibsen 2019, 296) Aunt Julle belabors the point: "And especially when travelling with a lady. Because then, from what I have heard, it can get inordinately more costly." (Ibsen 2019, 297) It appears that Hedda has expensive tastes and that she has forced Tesman to pay for a honeymoon: "But Hedda *had* to have that trip, Auntie! She really *had* to. Nothing else would do." (Ibsen 2019, 297) Tesman's satisfaction at having been able to afford a trip for two can be read as a belated attempt at asserting his capacity to provide for his wife. His pride is undercut by aunt Julle's revelation that she has assisted with his finances. More importantly, his attempt at affirming his masculinity is undermined by the fact that Hedda demanded that he spend money in order to fulfill her needs. Ross Shideler notes the importance to Hedda of having access to luxury goods, referencing "her need for the expensive honeymoon, the house, the butler, horse, and so on" (Shideler 1993, 81), but her habits must be read in conjunction with Tesman's desire to satisfy them. When read in the context of Tesman being a grown-up child, this would be his first significant attempt at standing on his own two feet, thereby proving that he has emancipated himself from his aunts. The irony of the situation is that he has only been able to provide for Hedda by acting as a penny-pincher, which indicates that he is dangerously close to living beyond his means. If he were actually self-reliant in financial matters he would be able to entertain Hedda with a measure of largesse. Furthermore, his inability to deny Hedda's requests points to his weakness of will. Instead of saving his meagre funds, he is forced to act against his own interests by potentially overspending. As indicated by his reply to Brack's suggestion that Tesman should have settled for less expensive furniture, Hedda's needs compel him to overspend: "I could hardly present her with petit bourgeois surroundings!" (Ibsen 2019, 315) Tesman's spending mirrors that of aunt Julle in that he chooses to spend his resources on someone else. What Tesman fails to understand, however, is that the economic logic underlying aunt Julle's investment in him is predicated on an expectation that he will continue the Tesman line. By redirecting her resources from herself to Tesman, aunt Julle hopes to ensure the long-term growth of their family's social standing. This would be a constructive use of her resources, as opposed to Hedda's wasteful spending on her own pleasure. While Hedda does not want a child, Tesman fails to comprehend his duties as head of the family. Tesman remains an adult child, as indicated by his response to aunt Julle's hint that he should fill the empty rooms of the house with children: "Yes, you're absolutely right, Auntie Ju! As I expand [*forøger*] my book collection, then –." (Ibsen 2019, 297) The use of "forøge", which

means to increase but can also be used in the sense of having children, demonstrates that Tesman is incapable of living up to his obligation to carry on the family line, instead occupying himself with scholarly pursuits.

Tesman's tendencies toward overspending and bookishness further strengthen the impression that he is a poor investment. Tesman's choice to prioritize Hedda risks eliminating the benefit to aunt Julle of having diverted her own resources. Her hoped-for increase in stature of the Tesman name is based, as Nantawan Soonthorndhai observes, on "slippery ground because house and furnishings are heavily mortgaged and their ability to meet future payments is far from certain." (Soonthorndhai 1985, 148) Aunt Julle's admission that she has used the interest accruing from her savings to finance the purchase of the house elicits alarm from Tesman: "That interest money – it's all you and Rina have to live on." (Ibsen 2019, 298) Her attempt at calming him reveals the nature of the financial agreement they have entered into. She is willing to contribute to his finances because she believes that he will be able to obtain a position which will offer him financial stability. Tesman's description of her actions as a sacrifice – "Oh, Auntie – will you never tire of making sacrifices for me!" (Ibsen 2019, 298) – shows that he does not understand the rationale behind her decision. A sacrifice is not a sacrifice if one expects to be compensated for it, and aunt Julle identifies herself with Tesman's imagined success. Aunt Julle's actions are sensible within the context of bourgeois patriarchy, and it is in the same context that her expectations of Hedda should be understood. Ellen Mortensen considers aunt Julle's enthusiasm for Hedda's pregnancy to be a paradox in that aunt Julle is childless (Mortensen 2006, 390). But there is nothing paradoxical about aunt Julle having invested in the Tesman-Gabler marriage in the hopes that it will produce a child that would raise the status of the family to which she has dedicated her life. She has sought to realize a driving impulse of bourgeois patriarchy, which is that one must invest in one's children. Nantawan Soonthorndhai describes this impulse as an economization of the procreative urge: "Even sex has to be profitable, has to be placed at the service of procreation – the fruit of which Tesman and his aunts eagerly await." (Soonthorndhai 1985, 162)³⁰⁴ A clear expression of this line of reasoning is aunt Julle's triumphant exclamation that Tesman's success is also her own: "And we are close to our goal now! Things may have looked dark at times. But, praise be, you've come out on top, Jørgen!" (Ibsen 2019, 298) The conflation of "we" and "you" illustrates that she views his achievements as the return on her investment.

What aunt Julle has failed to take into account, besides Tesman's careless indulgence of Hedda's appetites, is his incapacity for engaging in productive labor and his distaste for competition. Tesman intends to work from home, writing his book: "And I'm so looking forward to getting down to it. Especially now that I have my own lovely house and home to work in." (Ibsen 2019, 299) The topic of his book, "Brabantine domestic crafts [*husflid*] in the Middle Ages" (Ibsen 2019, 299), is revealing. "Husflid" simply means to produce items at home for use or sale, but "husflid" in general and Brabantine "husflid" in particular are gendered activities primarily associated with women working from home (*HIS* 9K:167-8). Married men would be expected to work in the office or another exterior locale. Tesman's

³⁰⁴ I differ with Soonthorndhai on the issue of what Tesman expects. My argument is that Tesman is disinterested in becoming a father.

choice of topic and his decision to work from home are more indications of his impaired masculinity. As Bjørn Hemmer notes, the Tesman home is a typical bourgeois interior, inhabited by people who find contentment in everyday life and household matters such as career advancement and childbirth (Hemmer 2003, 414). Instead of going out into the world and competing with other men, Tesman will content himself with occupying a position similar to that of a Brabantine housewife. Jenny Björklund describes Tesman as a man in close proximity to the domain of women: “Thus, personally as well as professionally, Tesman is connected to the feminine and the domestic – which, of course, was coded as a feminine domain.” (Björklund 2016, 11) Hedda, on the other hand, rejects precisely those symbols of femininity which offer Tesman comfort: “She refuses to go near his slippers, and she does not want to be associated with his aunts. Instead, she is associated with a masculine domain throughout the play – her father’s.” (Björklund 2016, 13) The connotations of femininity adhering to Tesman’s preferred milieu are carried along throughout the play and culminate in his suggestion to Thea, in the final scene, that she should move in with aunt Julle in order to help him reassemble Løvborg’s manuscript: “You know what, Mrs Elvsted – you should move in with Auntie Ju. Then I’ll come up in the evenings. And we can sit and work *there*.” (Ibsen 2019, 377) The future he envisions for himself is one in which he lives surrounded by women, having moved in with his *ersatz* mother and occupying himself with another form of “husflid” in reassembling Løvborg’s manuscript.

Tesman’s homebound labor suggests an inability to provide for his family. Embroidery is not a substitute for entering into a competitive workplace and earning a salary. This is what aunt Julle hopes for upon his obtaining a position as professor. When Tesman learns that he will have to compete with Løvborg for the professorship, however, he admits to Hedda that he has wagered their present on what he regarded as the promise of a position: “We were married on the basis of these prospects, Hedda and I. We’ve taken on a massive debt. And borrowed money from Auntie Ju as well. Good God – I was as good as promised that position.” (Ibsen 2019, 317) Tesman’s understanding of his financial situation does not appear grounded in reality. He makes use of an imagery of fantasy in conversation with Hedda when describing his financial prospects and their marriage: “Oh, Hedda – one should never venture into the land of fairy tales.” (Ibsen 2019, 318) The phrasing of this comment is ironic in that it is precisely his lack of courage, manifesting in his avoidance of competition with other men, which has resulted in Tesman risking debt. In the context of bourgeois masculinity, higher value is ascribed to a man’s achievements if they are attained with effort, in a competitive setting whereby he is given the opportunity to test his mettle against other men. Tesman has instead opted for a life of passivity and non-competition and only belatedly comes to understand that the consequence of refusing to compete is that he will be unable to achieve much of anything. Success requires effort, and it is this realization that causes him to worry about his future. There is one aspect of his life, on the other hand, that can be described as a victory over his rivals, and that is his marriage to Hedda. Even if he is loathe to compete for recognition and a well-paid position, he has been able to court and wed Hedda Gabler. Their marriage proves, to Tesman at least, that he can assert himself in competition with other men.

Tesman’s treatment of Hedda as a valuable commodity with which to inspire envy in his male peers is a sign of weakness, and moreover self-defeating. Tesman has a habit of drawing

the attention of other men to Hedda's beauty, hoping that his success in marrying Hedda will impress his peers. In order for this to happen he must ensure that other men notice and acknowledge Hedda's beauty. What he fails to understand is that in doing so he is increasing the risk of other men choosing to compete with him for Hedda's favor. His instrumental use of Hedda is tied to a motif of seeing and being seen which is introduced by aunt Julle's recollection of how Hedda and her father were seen riding: "Can you remember when she rode along the road with her father? In that long black habit? And with a feather in her hat?" (Ibsen 2019, 293) Hedda's choice of attire was meant to attract attention, and her display served to display her status. In order to be admired, one must invite attention. This dynamic informs Tesman's habit of commenting on his wife's body. While he prefers to remain in the background, he must ensure that other men are appropriately jealous of him. When aunt Julle comments on his marriage to Hedda, "The one who was surrounded by so many admirers" (Ibsen 2019, 295), Tesman replies with satisfaction: "Yes, I do believe I've a few good friends around here in town who are rather envious of me." (Ibsen 2019, 296) Having strangers observe Hedda would give him no satisfaction, which explains his emphasis on "gode venner". He must be able to observe how his male acquaintances lust for Hedda. By involving men in proximity to his household in his efforts, he is trapping himself in his paradoxical need to both invite and avoid competition.

His attitude differs from that of aunt Julle, who conceives of individual achievement as the result of dominating one's opponents. In order for Tesman to rise in social standing, his competitors must fail, and she accordingly expresses satisfaction that Tesman's rivals have fallen to the wayside: "Yes – and those who opposed you – who wanted to bar your way – they are beneath you now. They are fallen, Jørgen! And the man who posed the greatest danger – he has taken the hardest fall. – And now he lies – poor misguided [*forvildede*] creature – in a bed of his own making." (Ibsen 2019, 298)³⁰⁵ There are no indications that anyone has sought to bar Tesman's ascent, but she nonetheless regards any potential challenger to his position as actively ill-willed. Her comment indicates that she understands competition as a zero-sum game in which any one person's rise can only be achieved by way of someone else's defeat. Her joy at Løvborg's fall shows that she affords no sympathy to her nephew's rivals. While she blames Løvborg for his own failure, she readily admits that she has helped Tesman in his ascent: "Do I have any other pleasure in this world but to smooth your path, my dearest boy?" (Ibsen 2019, 298) Her willingness to aid Tesman and the pleasure she takes in Løvborg's misfortune stands in stark contrast to Tesman's reluctance to engage in competition, further underscoring his lack of male characteristics. He is happy enough to reap the rewards of aunt Julle's aid and of being married to Hedda, but he has not achieved these benefits through his own efforts.

Turning to Hedda, we can read her actions as a rejection both of Tesman's unmanliness, as well as his and by extension aunt Julle's proprietary claims to Hedda. As Frode Helland notes, the new hat aunt Julle has bought is intended to demonstrate her ownership over Hedda: "Julle has bought it so that she can walk with Hedda in the street. The hat is therefore

³⁰⁵ The use of "forvildede" calls to mind Manders' description of Helene's attempt to flee Alving as "the wildest [*det mest forvildede*] moment of your life." (Ibsen 2016, 214) Løvborg's conduct has similarly placed him outside the bounds of civilization.

not just something that Julle wants to decorate herself with, it is a means that the aunt will use to be able to decorate herself with the ‘lovely’ Hedda Gabler.”³⁰⁶ Hedda finds her status as a showpiece to be used by the bourgeois Tesmans intolerable. She understands that she represents an investment in the future of the Tesman family, as indicated by Tesman’s phrasing of how Hedda is “part of the family [*hører til familien*]” (Ibsen 2019, 301), which in the original has connotations of ownership: “He says that she belongs to the family the way a house or a grand piano belongs to, and not that she belongs *in* the family, as an independent part of it or the like.”³⁰⁷ Hedda’s entrance, however, immediately suggests that she will prove a poor investment for the Tesmans: “*Face and appearance noble and dignified. Her complexion has a matte pallor. Eyes are steely grey and express a cold, clear calm. Her hair is a beautiful mid-brown, but not particularly abundant.*” (Ibsen 2019, 299) Her dislike of sunlight and preference for “shade and fresh air” (Ibsen 2019, 300) makes her seem like a convalescent who must remain in a shaded and well-ventilated area. Tesman notices none of this and instead parades Hedda before aunt Julle: “But, Auntie, do take a good look at Hedda before you go! Look, how elegant and charming [*nydelig*] *she* is!” (Ibsen 2019, 301)³⁰⁸ The use of “nydelig”, which can mean charming but also pleasurable, as in enjoying a fine wine, shows how Tesman appropriates Hedda into his own desire. This comment would be Tesman complimenting himself on having obtained such a prize. Yet more disconcerting is his observation that Hedda has gained weight: “Yes, but have you noticed how plump and buxom she’s got? How she’s filled out during the trip.” (Ibsen 2019, 301) Aunt Julle arriving at the possibly mistaken conclusion that Hedda is pregnant and kissing her on the forehead accords with aunt Julle’s instrumental view of Hedda as a conduit for producing a new generation of Tesmans.³⁰⁹ Frode Helland reads Tesman’s comment as an attempt at asserting his primacy over her (Helland 1993, 71). While this is certainly the case, I wish to dwell on the question of why Tesman, who is not at this time aware that Hedda might be pregnant, takes such pride in her weight. He references Hedda’s weight again when Brack enters: “But what do you say about Hedda! Doesn’t she look buxom? What?” (Ibsen 2019, 314) I believe that Tesman’s behavior is motivated by his need to have other men lust for his wife, while at the same time dreading the possibility that she may choose another mate. If Hedda were to become overweight, Tesman’s fear of being out-competed would presumably lessen.

Unable to respond, Hedda expresses her frustration at being treated as an object to be admired or a vehicle for the continuation of the Tesman line through her gestures: “*Meanwhile, HEDDA walks across the floor, raises her arms, clenching her fists as in a rage.*

³⁰⁶ “Julle har kjøpt den for at hun skal kunne spasere sammen med Hedda på gaten. Hatten er derfor ikke bare noe Julle ønsker å pynte seg med, den er et middel som tanten skal bruke for å kunne pynte seg med den ‘dejlige’ Hedda Gabler.” (Helland 1993, 70)

³⁰⁷ “Han sier at hun hører til familien slikt et hus eller et flygel hører til, og ikke at hun hører til *i* familien, som en selvstendig del av den eller lignende.” (Helland 1993, 70; emphasis in original)

³⁰⁸ It should be noted find the translation misleading, in that “nydelig” “But, Auntie, do take a good look at Hedda before you go! Look, how elegant and charming *she* is!” (Ibsen 2019, 301)

³⁰⁹ Ane Hoel argues against a reading of Hedda as being pregnant, basing her interpretation on the supposed inability of Tesman to engage in intercourse with his wife (Hoel 1998, 277). I think that this reading is overstating the extent of Tesman’s lack of masculine traits. I also find unconvincing Hoel’s argument that Hedda knows that she is not pregnant, but decides not to tell the truth in the hopes that a pregnancy will secure her a protective husband (Hoel 1998, 282). I do not think that a pregnancy would increase Hedda’s hold over Tesman, which is already absolute.

Pulls the curtains away from the glass door, remains standing there looking out.” (Ibsen 2019, 203) To some extent her frustration is also due to her realization that Tesman, through every fault of his own, will not be able to provide her with the level of comfort she expected when agreeing to marry him. She has hoped to play the part of hostess and preside over social gatherings in their house. This sets the stage for her potential infidelity. As Patricia M. Troxel notes, Tesman’s failure to deliver on his promises leads Hedda to feel that she is “entitled to break that contract in other ways.” (Troxel 1986, 73) But too sharp a focus on financial matters obscures the essence of Hedda’s criticism of Tesman. Part of the contract between them was that Hedda would be afforded the opportunity to have others admire her. This need on her part must be distinguished from expectations of material comfort. As for Tesman, social gatherings would have allowed him to show off Hedda to his peers: “Just think – seeing you as hostess to a select circle!” (Ibsen 2019, 318) Instead she will be confined to the company of the Tesmans, which would not satisfy her craving for attention. Tesman’s failure to live up to his part of the deal clarifies significant aspects of Hedda’s character. Hedda’s longing for admiration is inextricably linked to her desire to dominate others. Her fantasies of a good life focus on having others serve her, for instance by employing a servant and owning a horse. Anne Marie Rekdal argues that these attributes are rooted in Hedda’s past (Rekdal 2000, 241) and can be read as Hedda’s attempt to recreate the past in the present. But a servant, in particular, would be someone who attended to Hedda’s needs. This is precisely what Tesman does and finds great satisfaction in doing, as we see when he serves her drinks and cookies: “Well, because I think it’s such fun to serve you, Hedda.” (Ibsen 2019, 336) Tesman enjoys acting as Hedda’s servant. She wants for others to serve her needs, all the while refusing to take their expectations and wishes into account. Her being waited on by Tesman does not provide her with any real satisfaction, however, for the simple reason that his assuming a subordinate position shows that he is not a worthy adversary whom she can take pleasure in dominating. She is happy enough to be served by Tesman, but his obeisance elicits her disgust. Her dismissive attitude toward him is the inevitable result of his unmanliness. Hedda’s need for power extends specifically to men who can offer her a challenge. To this may be added her sexuality, which as noted can be read as characterized by same sex desire. When taken together with her rejection of the ideal of female self-sacrifice and her rivalry with males we can more clearly delineate the extent of Hedda’s female masculinity. Tesman is lacking precisely those male qualities that Hedda exhibits.

Hedda’s need for domination

Hedda’s same sex desire not only marks her as a woman apart, it situates her in the position of a male. The erotic desire she subtly expresses toward Thea is interwoven with her desire to dominate others. I will argue that the latter element is the clearest manifestation of Hedda’s female masculinity, in that the act of dominating rivals is gender-coded as a male prerogative.

Put simply, women are not supposed to dominate anyone. When examining her relationship to Thea, imagining Hedda as a male will help explain not only her attraction to Thea, but also her fascination with Løvborg's stories of erotic conquest, as well as Hedda's attempts at dominating him. Her behavior toward Thea is motivated by a dual jealousy of Thea as Løvborg's lover and of Thea's power over him. When Løvborg insists that Thea is the only woman who exerts power over him, Hedda takes this as a personal affront. Hedda's behavior is not that of an adulterous woman, and what at first appears as tentative promiscuity should rather be seen as an intricate effort at dominating Løvborg by lessening Thea's grip on him. Hedda does so by establishing dominion over Thea's body. Her transgressive behavior toward Thea, such as threatening to burn her hair, can certainly be interpreted as a sign of frustration at being unable to express her same sex desire. Ellen Mortensen's argument along these lines frames Hedda as a degenerate within the context of Ibsen's time:

Her destructive conduct, which culminates in her own suicide, is outrageously scandalous. However, her character could appear less incomprehensible if we understand her actions in the context of this impossibility, that is, her homosexuality, which is both a cause and an effect of her internal battle. In this interpretation, the repression of this libidinal drive causes her to act erratically and sometimes aggressively. That does not make her less obnoxious, cruel and unpalatable, or to use the adjectives of the 1890s – incomprehensible, repulsive and degenerate – but it could help us explain the reasons for her odd behaviour. (Mortensen 2007, 180)

I concur with Mortensen's reading and will add that Hedda's same sex desire also entails a radical break with the logic of productivity which undergirds bourgeois patriarchy. Sexual desire that is not geared toward the propagation of the family necessarily constitutes a threat to the continuation of the family line. Mortensen is right to note that this type of desire will inevitably be consigned to the realm of the abnormal (Mortensen 2006, 395). That being said, the sexual component of Hedda's same sex desire risks being overstated. Her behavior toward Thea has very little to do with eroticism and more to do with a lust for power.

Thea is presented as Hedda's contrast. As opposed to Hedda, she radiates vitality: "*MRS ELVSTED is of slight build, with beautiful, soft facial features. Her eyes are light blue, large, round and somewhat protruding, with an anxious, questioning expression. Her hair is strikingly blonde, almost yellowish-white, and exceptionally rich and wavy. She is a couple of years younger than HEDDA.*" (Ibsen 2019, 304) She has taken it upon herself to safeguard Løvborg from temptation and has followed him to the city, where she fears that Løvborg will find poor company. As an added risk, Løvborg has obtained a sum of money, although the source is unclear. While Thea appears to have successfully raised Løvborg from his state of degeneracy, her reentry into Hedda's life rekindles a rivalry which has remained unrecognized on Thea's part. Hedda's habit of pulling and threatening to burn Thea's hair during their school days can be understood as the young Hedda recognizing that Thea, who presumably already had a luxurious head of hair at the time, might one day come to compete with Hedda for the affection of men. Hedda's strategy in the present is to pretend to be Thea's confidante, calling her "du" instead of the formal "De" (*HIS* 9:47) and kissing her on the cheek. Unlike

Hedda, Thea has fully embraced an ideal of female self-sacrifice and lives to aid others. She has taken on the role of a servant to her husband, which may explain why she complains that she has never had a home of her own: “Oh, if only I had a home! But I don’t. Never did.” (Ibsen 2019, 309) Her living situation can be compared to that of Hedda, who also finds herself in a home that is not truly her own. Thea entered her husband’s household as governess, took on the role of house-keeper and cared for his ailing wife, and went on to marry him after his wife’s passing. Her caregiving establishes a link between her and aunt Julle. Joan Templeton argues that both women embody an ideal of service to others that inhibits the development of one’s self: “The selfless Miss Tesman and Thea Elvsted have no self; sentimentalists who have absorbed their culture’s ideal of woman as servant, they are domestic angels to Hedda’s devil.” (Templeton 1997, 230) Hedda, on the other hand, chooses differently, and wishes to live for herself. Hedda’s choice carries with it its own risks. Caring for others may provide the caregiver with a vocation in life, and in Thea’s case, her ministrations of Løvborg leads to a growth of her self under his tutelage. Elizabeth Hardwick comments on the nature of Thea’s relationship to Løvborg: “But it is more than romance; it is a mission, a sacred trust, one of those dedications that challenge the very essence of a superior woman. Løvborg is more than a romantic man; he is the instrument through which Thea can find some purpose for her own intellectual possibilities.” (Hardwick 1974, 59) Thea’s willingness to care for others, combined with her lack of self, led her to marry Elvsted, but have also compelled her to abandon her husband and pursue Løvborg. One might even argue that Hedda admires Thea’s dedication. Thea denigrates herself, commenting that her husband only cares for her as a servant and that she does not cost much in upkeep: “And it doesn’t cost much to keep me. I’m cheap.” (Ibsen 2019, 310) Hedda’s response is significant: “That’s stupid of you.” (Ibsen 2019, 311) Even though Hedda does not care much for Thea, she recognizes the transactional nature of Thea’s marriage – and takes the unexpected step of criticizing Thea for selling herself cheaply. While Hedda’s reply highlights her mercenary attitude toward marriage, it is nonetheless an exhortation to Thea to think more highly of herself. In a roundabout manner, Hedda is counseling Thea to be more like her.

Thea’s dedication to being someone who can, to quote Andreas-Salomé, “give something and be something for others”³¹⁰ has left her with a curious lack of identity that is expressed as her not being a whole person unless she can live for someone else. She understands that she has a measure of power over Løvborg: “I almost got a sort of power over him.” (Ibsen 2019, 312) There is a reciprocal influence at work, and spending time with Løvborg causes a fundamental alteration of her self: “And he – for his part – has made a sort of real human being of me. Taught me to think – and to understand so many things.” (Ibsen 2019, 312) Her phrasing suggests that she did not consider herself a complete person until she met Løvborg. By investing herself in Løvborg’s rehabilitation, she not only finds a vocation in life but also becomes a fully-fledged person. If her previous state of incompleteness has been ameliorated by Løvborg’s influence, then it might be argued that she has not in fact assumed an identity of her own, but rather that she has adopted an identity fashioned for her by Løvborg. Her reliance on Løvborg belies her assertion of individuality, and she has merely exchanged one master for another. She in effect serves Løvborg, placing his needs above her

³¹⁰ “give noget og være noget for andre” (Andreas-Salomé 1893, 160)

own: “And then came that lovely, joyous moment when I came to share in his work! Was allowed to help him!” (Ibsen 2019, 312) Thea’s ideal of self-sacrifice has not diminished through association with Løvborg. Her dependence on Løvborg offers a contrast to Hedda, and highlights an important aspect of the idea of a vocation in life. Aunt Julle and Thea have a vocation in life, but only at the expense of their own selves. Judging by their examples, a woman can have a purpose in life or an identity of her own, but not both. Even if Hedda were to find a vocation, one might suspect that this would be accompanied by her self becoming diminished. By rejecting the ideal of female self-sacrifice Hedda avoids the risk of losing her identity. This would be a benefit, albeit a double-edged one, of her female masculinity.

The character of Thea can thus be read as an extended commentary on the consequences of the ideal of female self-sacrifice. Hedda’s desire for domination, on the other hand, is consistently associated with masculinity, most significantly in regard to the only male who is impervious to her manipulation. Judge Brack appears to recognize Hedda’s lust for power and deflects it with humorous banter and some manipulation of his own. Brack seems to possess an insight into Hedda’s personality that can perhaps be explained by their shared class background and common interests. Brack exhibits a tendency toward voyeurism that aligns thematically with Hedda’s need to be admired. Helena Forsås-Scott has highlighted the importance of the gaze to Brack, as exemplified by his use of a lorgnette and his repeated references to the importance of being seen (Forsås-Scott 2004, 36). One example is Brack’s off-hand comment that he would like to watch Hedda dress: “And there isn’t any sort of little crack in the door one could negotiate through?” (Ibsen 2019, 321) Hedda’s reply, “No, you’ve forgotten to arrange one of those” (Ibsen 2019, 321), suggests that she might not altogether object. Hedda allows Brack to peer into her household and learn how she feels about her marriage. His comment on acting as a friend to married women is a less than subtle indication that he wishes to gain access to Hedda’s sex: “My only desire is this, to have a good, trusting circle of acquaintances, where I can be of service in word and deed, and be allowed to come and go as – as a tried and tested friend –” (Ibsen 2019, 324) Equally unsubtle is his suggestion that such “three-way relationships – can in fact be hugely agreeable to all parties.” (Ibsen 2019, 324) His offer to act as a trusted friend to Hedda may appeal to her desire to be served. As long as his demands are limited to looking, Hedda appears amenable to such an arrangement. There is a transactional aspect to their discussion in that they both find some measure of satisfaction without too large a risk. Hedda reveals to Brack that her marriage was entered into on a similarly transactional basis. She had begun to worry that her time was running out, and had come to realize the benefits of Tesman’s proposal: “I was wearied of dancing, my dear judge. My time was over –” (Ibsen 2019, 323) I understand her comment as a realization that her beauty, perhaps the most important commodity she had to offer, would soon depreciate. Her class background does not save her from being subjected to the same obligation of marrying while young that Engstrand expounded to Regine in *Gengangere*. Hedda’s fear of ageing comes to the fore in her comments on the smell of flowers:

HEDDA: Ugh – I think all the rooms smell of lavender and rose water. But perhaps Auntie Ju brought the smell in with her.

BRACK [*laughs*]: No, I think that's likely to be a legacy from the late Right Honourable Mrs Falk.

HEDDA: Yes, there is something deathlike about it. It reminds one of a posy – the day after the ball. (Ibsen 2019, 327-328)

Making the proposal more attractive was Tesman's insistence that he would provide more for her than his rivals were prepared to offer: "And when he came along in full battle mode [*med vold og magt*] determined to be allowed to provide for me –. I can't think why I shouldn't accept? [...] It was certainly more than my other gallant friends were willing to offer, my dear judge." (Ibsen 2019, 324) Hedda's phrasing of "*med vold og magt*" demonstrates the intensity of Tesman's desire to serve her. Accustomed to being waited on, Hedda agreed to Tesman's offer to become her servant. Her description of how she "used Tesman last summer to accompany me home from evening events" (Ibsen 2019, 327) suggests that she was comfortable with using him at this early stage of the courtship. She chose Tesman because he, unlike his competitors such as Brack, was willing to serve her. This exchange illuminates an important aspect of her relationship to Brack. As long as he spies on her, fueling her sense of self-worth but without imposing any demands on her, he is useful to her. While Brack may be willing to please Hedda, however, he recoils at Hedda's need to dominate men.

Brack's answer to Hedda's complaints of boredom, for instance her comment on "how atrociously bored I'm going to be out here" (Ibsen 2019, 328), is his attempt at offering constructive guidance delivered from the perspective of patriarchy. Brack suggests that she needs to engage in a worthwhile task: "Mightn't life have some sort of task to offer you too, Mrs Hedda?" (Ibsen 2019, 328) He is counseling her to exert herself so that she may find a purpose in life, instead of resigning herself to inaction. Hedda's notion of manipulating Tesman into entering politics demonstrates how she envisions a worthwhile task as using others to advance her own aims. Brack fails to understand how Tesman's success would address her sense of futility: "Well – what satisfaction would there be in that for you?" (Ibsen 2019, 328) Hedda once again insists on her boredom, indicating that she does not grasp the point Brack is trying to make, which is that Hedda is responsible for her own happiness. She continues to deflect that responsibility onto others when Brack explains that Tesman lacks the necessary funds to enter politics, to which Hedda replies with complaints of "these frugal circumstances in which I find myself –!" (Ibsen 2019, 328) Instead of asking how she could find her own purpose in life she saddles Tesman with the obligation of providing one for her. Tesman's hypothetical success would only give her a vicarious satisfaction. Brack's argument hinges on the notion that she has never experienced something "to truly awaken you." (Ibsen 2019, 328) Showing little appetite for introspection, she does not ask if she might do anything to wake herself. Brack's final suggestion is for her to embrace the ideal of bourgeois domesticity. Having a child, which he frames as a womanly "calling" (Ibsen 2019, 329), might give her a sense of purpose. Hedda's response is to reject motherhood: "I've no talent for such things, judge. Nothing that makes any demand upon me!" (Ibsen 2019, 329)³¹¹ Not

³¹¹ In the original: "Jeg har ikke anlæg til sligt noget, herr assessor. Ikke noget med krav til mig!" (*HIS* 9:91) The translation of "anlæg" as "talent" misses the mark. "Anlæg" is used here in the sense of innate qualities that can

only does her sense of self prohibit her from giving of her self to another, she also believes that she has been born without the capacity to be a mother.

The exchange between Hedda and Brack allows us to determine how Hedda conceives of interpersonal relationships. She makes others responsible for her happiness and expects Tesman to apply himself in a manner that would benefit her. Her lack of interest in his professorship and her dismay at possibly bearing his child demonstrates her indifference to what want from her. Her treatment of Tesman is in part due to her class background, in that she effectively considers him a servant, but also derives from her desire for dominion over men. Hedda experiences a type of ennui that, when compared to the frustrated Alving and the lethargic Rosmer, appears as a specifically male condition. In the context of bourgeois patriarchy, men would be expected to take initiative, engage in competition, and expend their creative energies on worthy undertakings. Men such as Tesman who fail to live up to these ideals compromise their masculinity. Hedda's female masculinity, and her adopting the position of a man, should be understood in this context. She has sought to carve out a position for herself analogous to that of her father, but has failed to do so, having been relegated to a subservient role vis-à-vis the Tesmans. She is invariably treated as a woman while associating herself with male traits, a disjunction in terms of gender that is not acknowledged by others. We are dealing with a destabilizing of gender roles that is structurally similar to the effeminateness of Tesman, and which is also at play in the character of Løvborg. While Brack retains his position as a ruthless and successful male, Løvborg provides another instance of how tragedy may arise from a confusion of gendered norms of behavior. In this regard he offers an opportunity to further illuminate the nature of Hedda's female masculinity.

Løvborg's loss of manhood

Løvborg presents us with an example of a man whose masculinity, at first seemingly stable, gradually unravels until it collapses. While Hedda actively undermines Løvborg's masculinity, the process is aided by Brack, who considers Løvborg a rival. Brack's suggestion that Løvborg should remain with Hedda and Thea, drinking tea while Brack hosts a dinner party unsuitable for "gentlemen of anything but the strongest principle" (Ibsen 2019, 330) is characteristic of his attempts at emasculating Løvborg. Løvborg, like Alving and Brendel before him, is another case of wasted potential, or to borrow Tesman's phrasing: "A man with his unusual talents –. I was sadly convinced that he'd run aground for good." (Ibsen 2019, 316) Løvborg's class background is similar to that of Hedda and Brack. He has previously possessed an inheritance of money and still has influential relatives who may come to his aid. These pieces of information suggest that he is far from a self-sufficient person; despite his

be developed further. A better translation would be "disposition". Ellis-Fermor's "gift" (Ibsen 1964, 306) and Arup's "aptitude" (Ibsen 1998, 209) are similarly imprecise.

fall, he retains a safety net that someone with Thea's background would not have access to. Hedda wishes to deprive him of this safety net. Such protection runs counter to the ideal of competition which she comes to express and which can be summarized as the belief that a man should prevail through his own strength. If Løvborg were to regain his social standing with the help of others, this would make him into a man who cannot succeed on his own. This accounts for Hedda's excitement when she learns that Tesman and Løvborg may come to compete for a position: "Just think, Tesman – it'll almost be like a kind of sport." (Ibsen 2019, 317) If the two men were to compete on their own merits, without external aid, their struggle would allow for the most talented man to prevail. Having never seen Tesman engage in competition, she relishes the thought: "I'm truly excited about the outcome." (Ibsen 2019, 318) Her fascination with a struggle between males is an expression of her female masculinity; she values the male virtue of competition and wishes to see it enacted.

Løvborg arrived at his present circumstances due to his own failures. David R. Jones points to Løvborg's fascination with the lower echelons of society and weakness of will: "His family is one of influence, yet he has long been fascinated with the *demimonde*. He is brilliant but weak, as we see from his first entrance and his precarious hold on sobriety and self-control." (Jones 1977, 456)³¹² Significantly, he is unable to drink with moderation and resorts to "bourgeois teetotalism [...]." (Durbach 1982, 38) His background among the "haute bourgeoisie" (Lyons 1991, 63) accentuates his status as a fallen man. His disheveled appearance marks him as a degenerate: "*He is of slim build; the same age as TESMAN but looks older, with a wasted [udlevet] look about him. Very dark brown hair and beard, longish face, pale, only with a couple of red patches on his cheeks.*" (Ibsen 2019, 330) A key word here is "udlevet", which refers to something that is past its prime and lacking in vitality. He is unwilling to engage in competition with Tesman despite the latter being Løvborg's intellectual inferior. When Tesman asks if he does not want to compete with him, Løvborg gives a curiously phrased reply: "No. I just want to gain a victory over you. In the public's opinion." (Ibsen 2019, 333) Løvborg's belief in victory without conflict is seen as odd, as indicated by Brack's puzzlement: "Well, I'd say glory and victory – hm – they can be things of exceeding beauty –" (Ibsen 2019, 334) Løvborg's ideal of non-combative victory is a renunciation of masculine ideals of competitiveness. His distaste for competition may be a source of regret, as suggested by his comment to Hedda that she chose poorly when settling for Tesman: "Oh Hedda, Hedda, my dearest – how could you throw yourself away like that!" (Ibsen 2019, 335) If he believed that Hedda was throwing her life away, one wonders why he did not pursue her more vigorously. While Løvborg believes that Tesman was a poor match for Hedda, it soon becomes apparent that Hedda was faced with a choice between two effeminate men. Hedda regarded Løvborg as a friend and uses an imagery of beauty and bravery when describing their friendship: "When I think back on it now, there was certainly something beautiful, something alluring – something daring about it, I suppose – about our secret sharing of confidences [*løndomsfulde fortrolighed*] – the comradeship that no living person had the least suspicion of." (Ibsen 2019, 337) This is an intertextual echo of Rosmer's

³¹² Frode Helland commits to a reading of Løvborg as a fully autonomous man who embodies a modern ideal of self-control without repressing his natural urges (Helland 1993, 78). I am arguing the opposite, that Løvborg's lack of self-control means that he is governed by his urges.

description of his sexless friendship with Rebekka.³¹³ The situation is similar, with one party not daring to reveal their infatuation to the other. The pleasure Hedda derived from this friendship and from listening to Løvborg's stories is tied to her lust for power. Løvborg admits that he found himself in a humiliating position but could not break free of her spell. He uses religious imagery to depict himself as a sinner confessing his sins to her:

Yes, Hedda – and when I confessed [*skrifted*] to you –! Told you things about myself that nobody else knew back then. Sat there and admitted that I'd been out on the rampage all day and night. For days on end. Oh, Hedda – what sort of power was it in you that drove me to confess such things? (Ibsen 2019, 337)

The verb “skrifte”, often used in the sense of confessing one's sins to a priest, transforms the situation into one of confession and penitence, Hedda taking on the role of confessor. Løvborg invests Hedda with an almost supernatural quality, describing how she asked him questions about his exploits that enticed him to reveal more than he intended: “And all those – those oblique [*omsvøbsfulde*] questions you asked me. [...] To think you could sit there and ask me such questions! So brazen, so bold!” (Ibsen 2019, 337)³¹⁴ Although he shifts the blame onto her by implying moral deficiency on her part, he is unable to explain why he continued talking. His asking her if she felt some affection toward him is an attempt to account for his actions: “But tell me, Hedda – was there really no love at the core of this relationship? Wasn't it, from your side, as though you somehow wanted to wash me clean – when I turned to you for confession?” (Ibsen 2019, 337) The religious imagery does not work in his favor, and he comes across as incapable of stopping himself. His questioning of Hedda's motives shows that he does not understand Hedda, or even himself. Løvborg displays neither self-understanding or self-control in conversation with Hedda.

Løvborg also fails to recognize Hedda's female masculinity or her same sex desire, which are further illuminated during their dialogue. A key point is why Hedda rejected Løvborg's advances. Joan Templeton argues that fear of scandal prevented Hedda from responding to Løvborg: “Why Hedda did not pass from forbidden thoughts to forbidden acts is understandable. While the violence with which she ended their relation suggests the force of her desire, Hedda has too much self-respect to become Løvborg's woman.” (Templeton 1997, 222) I will argue that there are other and less immediately obvious factors at work. When asked to explain herself, she offers an explanation only to then contradict herself:

HEDDA: That she might want to take a little peep into a world that –

LØVBORG: That –?

³¹³ “If we really think about it, Rebekka – we began our union like two children falling secretly and sweetly in love [*som en sød, løndomsfuld barneforelskelse*]. Without demands, without dreams.” (Ibsen 2019, 164)

³¹⁴ “Omsvøbsfulde” relates to “omsvøb”, signifying actions or speech that does not get to the point, or engages in digression. Hedda's digressive questions were perhaps intended to keep Løvborg talking.

HEDDA: That she is not permitted to know anything about?

LØVBORG: So that's what it was?

HEDDA: [That too. That too, – I almost think.] (Ibsen 2019, 338)³¹⁵

Her phrasing suggests that there is something else at play which she cannot mention. Løvborg fails to notice her omission and accepts her explanation that she simply sought “Comradeship in the lust for life.” (Ibsen 2019, 338) To his question of why she discontinued their arrangement Hedda replies that he sought to change the nature of their relationship: “Shame on you, Eilert Løvborg, how could you want to take advantage of [*forgribe Dem på*] your – your brazen comrade [*kammerat*]!” (Ibsen 2019, 338) It should be noted that “kammerat” has connotations of male friendship.³¹⁶ It is worth remembering Helene’s use of the word when describing Alving’s lack of male companions.³¹⁷ This was not a simple case of Hedda declining Løvborg’s advances; she positioned herself as his *male* comrade. Her phrasing of “forgribe”, a word with strong overtones of sexual assault, is thus imbued with a subtext of same sex desire. Because she considers herself more a man than a woman, her rejection of Løvborg takes on a deeper meaning. Not only did she decline his entreaties, she upheld the stance of female masculinity she had carved out for herself. In her mind, she saw herself as a male companion to Løvborg, and her rejection of Løvborg thus conforms to a heteronormative sexual code. Hedda, through her identification with maleness, exhibits the erotic desire of a heterosexual man toward women. The episode with Løvborg can thereby be reconfigured as an instance of homosexual panic on Hedda’s part, and an assertion of her sense of self as being more male than female.

Reading Hedda as a woman who to some degree thinks of herself as a man helps explain her fascination with Løvborg’s stories. To reiterate, there is some other reason for her interest which she cannot articulate. Let us suppose that she harbors a same sex desire which she is similarly incapable of expressing. Løvborg’s confessions would then have provided her with the vicarious thrill of listening while he narrated his sexual exploits. Charles R. Lyons highlights how Løvborg “functions as a substitute for Hedda herself in her imagination, a surrogate figure through whom she can experience the world.” (Lyons 1991, 50) Her imagination is geared toward Løvborg’s conquests rather than Løvborg himself. Her listening to him is another instance of the voyeurism motif which, as noted earlier, has a sexual component. As with Brack, a voyeur is someone who gains access to an object of erotic

³¹⁵ In the original: “Det også. Det også, – tror jeg næsten.” (*HIS* 9:111) The translation by Dawkin and Skuggevik of the last line as “In part. In part – I rather think” (Ibsen 2019, 338) changes the content of what Hedda says. I have instead rendered a literal translation of the line.

³¹⁶ These connotations are common to the Scandinavian languages. *Ordbog over det danske Sprog* provides the definition “person, som er nært knyttet til en ell. flere andre ved fælles virksomhed”, and provides a list of historical examples of how the word has been used which all tend toward male friendship. Similar examples focusing on brotherhood are provided by *Svenska Akademiens ordbok* (“kamrat”). In modern Norwegian these connotations are more pronounced, as in the definition given by *Det Norske Akademis ordbok*: “(mer eller mindre nær, især mannlig) omgangsfelle, venn”.

³¹⁷ “Without one single friend [*kammerat*] capable of feeling what the joy of life might be; only layabouts and drinking companions –” (Ibsen 2016, 253)

desire. Hedda's same sex desire explains her reference to an unvoiced explanation and provides context to her calling herself "An appalling coward" (Ibsen 2019, 338) when Løvborg complains that it would have been better had she shot him. Hedda elaborates on the issue of cowardice, coming close to revealing some hidden truth about her motives:

HEDDA: My not daring to shoot you –

LØVBORG: Yes?!

HEDDA: – *that* wasn't my worst act of cowardice – that night.

LØVBORG [*looks at her for a moment, understands [begriber] and whispers passionately*]: Oh, Hedda! Hedda Gabler, my dearest! Now I glimpse a hidden depth to this comradeship! You and I –! There *was* that demand for life [*livskravet*] in you –

HEDDA [*quietly, with a sharp glance*]: Careful now! Don't you believe it! (Ibsen 2019, 338-339)

These lines are often read as Hedda indirectly admitting that she did in fact desire Løvborg. Toril Moi provides an example: "In her confession to Løvborg, Hedda acknowledges that she grabbed the gun to hide the fact that she simply could not bring herself to respond to him, to express her feelings, to reveal herself. [...] Løvborg's sexual advances demanded a passionate and spontaneous response, which she couldn't give." (Moi 2013, 446) I will suggest another reading, arguing on the basis of Hedda's same sex desire. The use of "*begriber*" is a sleight of hand. Løvborg believes that he understands why Hedda acted as she did, but this is a misreading on his part. He assumes that Hedda wanted but could not express her desire for him. This interpretation is immediately dismissed by Hedda, who insists that he should believe no such thing. On a prosaic level, her rebuttal could simply be read as another rejection of his advances. When read against the backdrop of Hedda's same sex desire, however, these lines can be interpreted more literally, as a statement that Løvborg has arrived at a faulty conclusion. Furthermore, the argument that Hedda's response validates Løvborg's assumption is difficult to support, given the lack of evidence that Hedda was ever attracted to Løvborg. I can find no indications in the text that Hedda wished to enter into a liaison with Løvborg but was unable to do so. This may well be Løvborg's preferred explanation, but it is an explanation predicated on the notion that Løvborg is correct in thinking that "*livskravet*" involved him. I find such a reading too generous of Løvborg's interpretative abilities, and I instead see this exchange as another instance of his habit of misunderstanding Hedda.

A queer reading of Hedda can be further supported by examining her behavior toward Thea while in Løvborg's company. Hedda's same sex desire and her lust for domination converge in a series of actions that Løvborg invariably fails to register as challenges to his hold over Thea. The scene in which Hedda and Løvborg discuss Thea in her presence and during which Hedda strokes Thea's hair is particularly telling. If Hedda is read as a man, the scene comes across as a competition between two males fighting over the same woman. The scene begins with Løvborg inviting Hedda to admire Thea's beauty:

LØVBORG [*after a short pause, to HEDDA*]: Isn't she lovely to look at?

HEDDA [*strokes her hair lightly*]: Just to look at?

LØVBORG: Yes. Because *we* two – she and I – *we* are two solid comrades [*kammerater*]. We believe in each other unconditionally. And so we can sit and talk together quite candidly, almost brazenly – (Ibsen 2019, 339)

Løvborg's invitation to Hedda to regard Thea mirrors how Tesman drew Brack's attention to Hedda. Tesman sought to both entice and dissuade his competitors. While Løvborg's motivations are to inspire jealousy, Hedda instead accepts his challenge as though he were her rival. When Hedda strokes Thea's hair, she not only seeks to establish dominance over Thea, but also signals to Løvborg that she is violating the bodily integrity of his sexual partner. Hedda goes beyond merely looking by fondling Thea's hair, the symbol of her youth and beauty, thereby reducing Løvborg to the status of an onlooker. Hedda at once undermines Løvborg's masculinity and threatens to make him a cuckold. His use of "kammerater" – which inadvertently reduces Thea's status as a woman – underscores his lack of virility. When read in a context of sexual competition, his response signals to Hedda that he is incapable of keeping Thea to himself. Løvborg's praise of Thea's "courage [of action]" (Ibsen 2019, 340)³¹⁸ in coming to find him can be read as further self-emasculatation. He means to indict Hedda, but he has yet to demonstrate the same level of courage as Thea. His attempts at making Hedda jealous instead situate him in the role of a lesser man than Hedda.

The dynamic of albeit one-sided competition between Hedda and Løvborg adds another dimension to her insistence that he shouldn't fear drinking. If he drinks and does not contain himself, he will have proven inferior to her; if he drinks and manages his drinking, he will have proven himself a worthy competitor. Hedda instigates this process by a seemingly innocuous joke about her power over him: "Do I really have no power over you? Poor me!" (Ibsen 2019, 340) When Løvborg refuses to drink, Hedda suggests that he might be unable to control his urges: "Otherwise people might get the idea that – that deep down – you didn't feel so bold and brazen – so absolutely sure of yourself." (Ibsen 2019, 340)³¹⁹ Leonardo F. Lisi argues that Hedda is using Løvborg's insecurities against him, undermining the image he presents of himself as a social reformer and public intellectual:

³¹⁸ In the original: "det handlingens mod" (*HIS* 9:115) The translation omits "handlingens". Løvborg is commending Thea for demonstrating courage through her actions. Ellis-Fermor's "she has the courage that leads to action" (Ibsen 1964, 319) and Arup's "courage to act" (Ibsen 1998, 221) are better, and I have amended the translation accordingly.

³¹⁹ Her line of criticism is ironic given her difficulty in mastering her own impulses. In her conversation with Brack regarding how she insulted aunt Julle by belittling her hat, Hedda explains how she at times is unable to withstand her own destructive urges: "Well, you know – these things come over me every so often. And then I *can't* stop myself. [...] Oh, I don't know myself how to explain it." (Ibsen 2019, 326)

The claim is that Løvborg's absolute abstinence shows that he does not actually have adequate confidence in his own commitment to the project of being a social prophet. If he were fully convinced that this project is the most important thing for him, then he would not be afraid to take the occasional drink. That fear only arises because he suspects there might be something in him that will be inclined to find the drinking more appealing than the future he has envisioned along with Thea. (Lisi 2018, 35)

Hedda turns the values of bourgeois patriarchy against Løvborg by focusing on the issue of self-control. Løvborg's rehabilitation was predicated on his ability to restrain his urges, but Hedda recognizes that this ability was imparted to him by Thea. When Thea mentions that Løvborg credits her for having inspired him, Hedda understands that his capacity for moderation is not due to his own strength of will. Hedda questions his self-discipline in front of Thea, using "turde", to dare, twice in conversation (Ibsen 2019, 340-1), thereby suggesting that Løvborg is afraid of temptation. Hedda goes on to sarcastically express her admiration for his refusal to attend Brack's dinner party: "Indeed, steady as a rock. Staunch in his principles. Yes, that's how a man should be!" (Ibsen 2019, 341) She involves Thea in her attack by assuring her that she shouldn't be concerned about Løvborg's sobriety: "There's no need at all for you to go about in such deadly fear –" (Ibsen 2019, 341) The implication of Løvborg being afraid further undermines his masculinity. His false sense of self-control begins to unravel after a few drinks, at which point he accuses Thea of acting on her husband's behalf to persuade Løvborg to return to him, which suggests that Løvborg's capacity for rational thought has been compromised.

Hedda's undermining of Løvborg's self-control is interwoven with her desire to exercise power over a forceful man. She is driven by a paradoxical urge to both belittle Løvborg and mold him according to her ideal of manhood. The Løvborg who depends on Thea and cannot contain his drink is not a worthy rival to Hedda. She wants Løvborg to become strong so that she can take pleasure in dominating him. This need on her part underlies her hope of seeing him return from the dinner party with "Vine leaves in his hair." (Ibsen 2019, 344) Hedda's vision of Løvborg is often read in conjunction with the vine leaves as the expression of the nietzschean dichotomy between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, or between hedonism and self-control.³²⁰ Leonardo F. Lisi argues that what Hedda wishes to see from Løvborg is a melding of these ideals: "What Hedda wants, in short, is the unity of transgression and normativity, precisely the sort of balance between conflicting elements that the aesthetic ideal of a beautiful life aims for." (Lisi 2018, 38) Hedda envisions a reformed Løvborg who is able to enjoy life without losing control. If Løvborg is able to exert self-control he will have regained power over his own self. Hedda clarifies this point to Thea: "And then, you see – he'll have reclaimed the power over himself. He will be a free man for the rest of his days." (Ibsen 2019, 344) While she wants for Løvborg to be free, she also wants

³²⁰ For an in-depth discussion of this theme, which is not directly relevant to my argument, see (Lysell 2021). I would also note that Else Høst's argument that Hedda's fantasies of a rejuvenated Løvborg transport her to an earlier stage of her life (Høst 1958, 188) are at odds with my reading, as I do not believe that the young Hedda ever thought of Løvborg as an idealized male figure.

to dominate him. She abhors Løvborg's weakness of will because it makes him an inferior male. There is no satisfaction for her in gaining control over a weak man:

HEDDA: I want, just once in my life, to have power over a person's destiny.

FRU ELVSTED: But don't you already have that?

HEDDA: Haven't – and never have.

FRU ELVSTED: Over your husband's at least?

HEDDA: Oh yes, that was worth the trouble. Oh, if only you knew how poor I am. Whilst *you* are allowed to be so rich! [*Throws her arms passionately around her*] I think I'll burn your hair off after all. (Ibsen 2019, 344)

This exchange reveals that Hedda's dominion over her husband is worthless for the simple reason that he is an unworthy rival; Tesman's willingness to cater to Hedda's every whim means that there is no prestige in subjugating him. If Hedda were to dominate the reformed Løvborg, on the other hand, this would provide her with a sense of satisfaction. She communicates this desire in financial terms: her marriage to Tesman makes her poor, whereas a victory over Løvborg would make her rich. Jens Arup argues that Hedda has no clear aim in mind when manipulating Løvborg: "Hedda's bid to control Løvborg is essentially predatory. She desires power over him for its own sake, and her purpose is largely uncomplicated by any very clear idea of an ultimate end to which she will apply her power once it is gained." (Arup 1957, 28) I am instead arguing that she does have a clear goal in mind, which is to transform Løvborg into a man whom she can take pride in defeating. Building on the imagery of rich versus poor, her domination of Løvborg would also mean that she could recuperate, on the level of metaphor, the wealth she lost following her descent into the bourgeoisie. For Hedda, wealth is synonymous with power, and her domination of Løvborg would rectify her own downfall. It is significant that Hedda at this point yet again threatens to burn Thea's hair. Thea's vitality and beauty are, if not the source, then at least part of her power over Løvborg. By burning Thea's hair, Hedda would deprive her of her influence over Løvborg. This would be another victory for Hedda over Thea, whose role is that of Hedda's rival – not for Løvborg's affection, but for the privilege of exerting power over him.

Sexual competition and gender confusion

Hedda's emasculation of Løvborg fits into a pattern of her engaging men in rivalry, a habit that falls short when faced with Brack's assertive and ruthless masculinity. Brack responds to Hedda's attempts at manipulation and emasculation by engaging her in a battle for domination

in which he ultimately prevails. His behavior toward Hedda fits into a pattern of rivalry and competition which is at first directed at Løvborg but which comes to include Hedda. Brack's willingness to engage in competition in order to achieve his goals, primarily that of obtaining exclusive access to Hedda's sex, sets him apart from the non-competitive males Løvborg and Tesman. By examining Brack's actions through a lens of sexual competition, his role as a patriarchal corrective to Hedda's female masculinity can be clarified. He comes across as a strong-willed male with no apparent signs of gender confusion. The obverse of his self-assured masculinity is an egotistical and destructive desire for self-satisfaction. His single-minded pursuit of Hedda leads him to identify Løvborg as a rival to be eliminated. He is above all motivated by a demand for exclusivity in that he can not stand the thought of having to share Hedda with a man whom he considers to some extent a worthy rival. The same consideration does not apply to his dealings with Tesman, who does not pose a threat to Brack's plans. An examination of how Brack deals with the challenge of Løvborg following the scandalous dinner party will not only illustrate the workings of the theme of sexual rivalry among males, but also highlight the limits of Hedda's talent for manipulation when faced with determined resistance.

At the dinner party Løvborg was unable to contain himself and drink in moderation. Curious to know more, Hedda inquires with Brack as to how Løvborg ended up in miss Diana's salon. Brack's description of the red-haired Diana indicates that she inhabits the *demimonde*. While her salon does afford bourgeois men the opportunity to express their desires, it should not be equated with a brothel (Østerud 2001, 131). Diana is said to have had a long list of conquests, including Løvborg when he was still a respectable bourgeois: "And also a formidable huntress – of gentlemen – Mrs Hedda. You've probably heard talk of her. Eilert Løvborg was one of her warmest patrons – when he was at the top of his game [*i sine velmagtsdage*]." (Ibsen 2019, 353) Brack's gendered phrasing suggests a reading of Diana as a counterpart to Hedda, which is to say a woman who comes to dominate men and who may similarly be suspected of exhibiting a female masculinity. This reading of Diana finds further support in Brack's account of the brawl that erupted when Løvborg accused Diana and her friends of stealing his manuscript: "Which led to a common cockfight [*hanekamp*] between the ladies and gentlemen both." (Ibsen 2019, 354) There is an obvious contrast between the Løvborg of his "velmagtsdage", a word with connotations of strength and vitality, and the Løvborg who engages in fisticuffs with men, but also and more importantly, with women. The manuscript represented his hopes of reclaiming his social standing and his position as a man whom others could respect. Having lost the means of his redemption, Løvborg becomes a wholly pathetic figure. As noted by Gail Finney, the process of writing the manuscript under Thea's benign influence is gender-coded as a male activity: "For what is actually being invoked here is the common metaphor of literary *paternity*, not *maternity*, coupled with the conventional topos of female inspiration." (Finney 1989, 153; emphasis in original) Løvborg's loss of his manuscript is thus also the loss of what little remained of his manhood.

The dismantling of Løvborg's masculinity is reflected in the recurring imagery of his manuscript as his and Thea's child. An emasculated man such as Løvborg will not be able to produce viable offspring; he is creatively sterile. His talent was always circumscribed by his

dependence on others, and the parasitic aspect of his and Thea's relationship comes to the fore in an exchange following his return:

LØVBORG: Since I have no more use for you, Thea.

FRU ELVSTED: And you can stand there and say that! No more use for me! But surely I'll help you now as before? Surely we'll continue working together?

LØVBORG: I don't intend to work from now on. (Ibsen 2019, 357)

Thea has invested in Løvborg to such an extent that she can no longer conceive of living apart from him; she replies "But I can't do that!" (Ibsen 2019, 357) to his suggestion that she should live her own life. Løvborg, on the other hand, blames his dependency on Thea for his loss of masculinity: "It's life's courage and fighting spirit that she's crushed in me." (Ibsen 2019, 359) This is Løvborg's admission that he could not have produced a supposed work of genius without external assistance, and at this stage the manuscript comes to represent an existential failure on his part. Writing the manuscript provided his life with a meaningful purpose, and his loss causes him to fall into despondency. Calling to mind Brack's suggestion that a child might provide Hedda with a vocation in life, the metaphor of the manuscript as a child suggests that the manuscript could have provided the same benefit for Løvborg. Thea's extension of the metaphor to include child-murder indicates that Løvborg's loss of his creative ability is irreversible: "You must know, Løvborg, that what you've done to this book –. For the rest of my days, it'll be for me as though you'd killed a small child." (Ibsen 2019, 358) The metaphor of the manuscript as child, with its implications of Løvborg's sterility, contains within it an element of sexual competition between males which is perhaps not immediately noticeable. When telling Hedda how he imagines the manuscript being handled by others, Løvborg describes the manuscript as having become soiled:

LØVBORG: Imagine, Hedda, that a man – you know, in the early hours – after a confused, liquor-soaked night came home to the mother of his child and said: listen now – I've been here and there. To this place and that. And I had our child with me. At this place and that. The child has gone missing. Completely gone. Damned if I know whose hands [*hvad hænder*] it's fallen into. Who's laid their fingers on it.

HEDDA: Ah – but when it comes to it – it's still just a book –

LØVBORG: Thea's pure [*rene*] soul was in that book.

HEDDA: Yes, I understand that.

LØVBORG: Then you'll also understand that there's no future for her and me. (Ibsen 2019, 360)³²¹

³²¹ I would note that Ellis-Fermor omits "rene", meaning "pure" or "clean", in her "Thea's whole soul was in that book" (Ibsen 1964, 344), as does Arup in his "Thea's soul was in that book." (Ibsen 1998, 245)

Continuing the metaphor of the manuscript as child, Løvborg's complaint can be read as doubt having been cast on the manuscript's paternity. The image of fingers entering into his and Thea's child can be extended associatively to adulterous penetration. If the manuscript is a receptacle for Thea's *pure* or *clean* soul (which is to say untouched), and if others have had their figurative fingers in it, then Løvborg can no longer be sure that he is the father. The vagueness of "hvad hænder" should not be taken as indication that Løvborg imagines these nameless others as being anything other than men. In his mind, Thea has been spoilt through having had her soul, which was deposited in the manuscript, laid bare to others. If Løvborg were to continue their relationship, he would be entering into sexual proximity to the men who have despoiled Thea. Løvborg's fear of entering into liaisons with other men is the obverse of his distaste for competition with other men. In an ironic reversal Løvborg, the cause of Elvsted's cuckoldry, now thinks of himself as a cuckold.

Hedda's burning of the manuscript can similarly be understood in terms of sexual rivalry and exclusivity. When Hedda burns the manuscript she repeats the metaphor of the child-manuscript and her earlier threats of burning Thea's hair: "Now I am burning your child, Thea! – You and your curly hair! [...] Your and Eilert Løvborg's child." (Ibsen 2019, 361) By touching and tearing the manuscript she is in a sense actualizing Løvborg's fear of Thea being fondled by other men. This scene is Hedda's triumph over Løvborg and puts an end to the latter's creativity and hopes for the future. Hedda's subjugation of Løvborg, as Jenny Björklund notes, places him in the same category as Tesman: "Tesman and Løvborg are dismissed; through their emasculation and femininity, they occupy subordinate masculine positions." (Björklund 2016, 14) Brack's efforts at eliminating Løvborg highlight an important difference between the two men when it comes to sexual competition. Whereas Løvborg appears devastated at the thought of other men figuratively fingering Thea, Brack does not seem to mind the prospect of sharing Hedda with Tesman. His efforts at diminishing Løvborg in Hedda's eyes demonstrates that he, much like Hedda, differentiates between worthy and unworthy male rivals. This dynamic of selective exclusivity is expressed in conversation between Brack and Hedda, in particular through the use of the word "hane", meaning cock or rooster.³²² Having first been used as part of "hanekamp", it reappears following Brack's statement that every decent home should remain closed to Løvborg:

HEDDA: And you're suggesting mine should be too?

BRACK: Well, yes. I confess it would be more than a little awkward if this gentleman were allowed access here. If he, as an outsider – an irrelevance [*en overflødig*] – should force his way into –

³²² The double entendre attaching to "cock" is not present in the Scandinavian languages. It is interesting to note, however, that the Scandinavian word for cuckold, "hanrej" (Danish and Swedish) or "hanrei" (Norwegian), is derived from "hane".

HEDDA: – into the triangle [*trekanten*]? (Ibsen 2019, 355)³²³

Hedda's response is a realization that Brack wants to gain exclusive access to her: "I see – the only rooster [*hane*] in the coop – that's your goal." (Ibsen 2019, 355) As opposed to the earlier use of "trekant" in connection with "three-way relationships" between a married couple and their male friend, this exchange centers on the elimination of a sexual rival. Now that Løvborg no longer stands in Brack's way, he is free to pursue his goal.

Hedda's reaction is in line with her appreciation for competition. She smiles, says that he is "a dangerous person" (Ibsen 2019, 355), and expresses admiration for his forcefulness: "And I'm thrilled – so long as I'm never at your mercy in any way [*ikke i nogen måde har hals og hånd over mig*]." (Ibsen 2019, 355)³²⁴ Toril Moi notes that this line indicates that Hedda sees Brack as a potential threat: "The phrase at once transforms Hedda from aristocrat to serf and stresses her status as a woman confronted with a sexual predator against whom the ordinary law of the land offers no protection." (Moi 2013, 445) But the exchange can also be read as an effort by Hedda to deprive Brack of his manhood. She does so by likening him to a rooster, which is to say a domesticated animal. While she may appreciate Brack's willingness to engage in competition, her dismissive attitude indicates that she does not take the threat posed by him altogether seriously. Brack responds with a thinly veiled threat: "Well, well, Mrs Hedda – perhaps you're right. Who can tell if I may not be a man capable of any number of things?" (Ibsen 2019, 355) His insistence on being *man enough* to dominate her is a rejection of her attempt at emasculation. When he jokingly refers to himself as one of Hedda's "tame cockerels [*kurvhaner*]", Hedda replies: "Oh no. When one only has the one, then –" (Ibsen 2019, 356) What may at first seem a lighthearted reference to Hedda shooting aimlessly into the garden on his approach takes on a different meaning when read in a context of sexual competition. By reducing Hedda's threats of shooting him to the level of banter, Brack reclaims his masculinity and asserts his claim to her sex. His jokes and threats are intended to counteract Hedda's desire for domination. Rather than becoming another tame cockerel in her collection Brack uses his knowledge of Hedda having lent Løvborg the pistol as a means to achieve his goal. When Hedda realizes that Brack has come to dominate her, she calls out to him as "You, the only rooster in the coop –" (Ibsen 2019, 377) and turns her pistol on herself. While Brack may have asserted his primacy as a male by doing away with a rival and then subjugating Hedda, his is a pyrrhic victory. For Hedda, suicide is preferable to subjugation. Much like Løvborg, Brack fails to understand the woman he seeks to own.

³²³ The translation of "en overflødig" as "an irrelevance" is misleading. "Superfluous" (Ibsen 1964, 337; Ibsen 1998, 239) is more appropriate, in that Brack is arguing that there is no use for Løvborg.

³²⁴ Hedda's odd phrasing is difficult to translate. Arup opts for "so long as you don't have any sort of hold over me" (Ibsen 1998, 239), which also amounts to a rewriting.

Hedda's wasteful death

Hedda's suicide is possibly one of the most commented-upon scenes in Ibsen's oeuvre. A variety of factors have been highlighted as contributing to her decision.³²⁵ One readily apparent factor is Hedda's realization of Brack's dominion over her, as Toril Moi notes: "Hedda dies in order to avoid scandal, to avoid lowering herself, to escape Judge Brack's sexual blackmail, and to preserve her freedom." (Moi 2013, 443) Equally important but not as obvious is Hedda's refusal to be subjected to public ridicule, which causes her to lie about the provenance of Løvborg's pistol in order not "to be turned into a public spectacle." (Moi 2013, 445) This reading accords with what we know of Hedda's idealism, which inhibits her freedom and is ultimately self-destructive. We can add to this the passage of time, which is often combined with a stress being placed on Hedda's (unconfirmed) pregnancy. Sandra Saari characterizes the plot of the play as "a series of attempts by Hedda to reinstate the past in her present life, a series that culminates in her suicide, her final recognition of the delusory nature of that project." (Saari 1977, 299) Unable to recreate the past, Hedda is finally confronted with the reality of a present in which the driving force of her personality, her lust for power, is stymied by Brack. If Brack is made out to represent bourgeois patriarchy, then her rejection of him, as well as of her potential motherhood, are a decisive rejection of a social order that has sought to impose its moral code on Hedda. Ross Shideler exemplifies this argument: "Hedda's action represents the complete rejection of the nuclear family and the patriarchy that first created a false set of expectations in her, then deprived her of an independent identity, and finally confined her in a household she hated." (Shideler 1999, 95) Hedda's fear of being "locked into conventional femininity" (Björklund 2016, 7), to borrow Jenny Björklund's phrasing, is in equal parts a fear of having demands such as an expectation of motherhood forced upon her, and an anger at having her desire for domination frustrated by Brack.

Which of the above factors is emphasized will vary from scholar to scholar. There is one line of interpretation which I will single out for criticism, however, and that is the tendency to depict Hedda's suicide as an act of heroism. John Northam reads the suicide as Hedda's victory over a society in which there is no room for idealism: "She dies for a vision of human potentiality superior to the reality to which life condemns her. Surround that statement with all the qualifications that Ibsen insists on, and we have one of the most impressive recreations in drama of the experience of what it means to have heroic aspirations in an age that almost, but not quite, denies all possibility of heroism." (Northam 1973, 185) In a similar vein but attaching greater importance to the gendered constraints imposed on Hedda by bourgeois patriarchy, Ellen Mortensen reads the suicide as a heroic act in the tradition of classical drama: "This suicide represents a heroic act, and must, according to contemporary conventions, be considered a very 'unfeminine' act. But at the moment she exceeds the limits

³²⁵ Mary Kay Norseng argues that Hedda's decision is the culmination of the deterioration of her mental health: "I suggest that Hedda has suicide on her mind when the drama commences, and that she acts it out, as deeply depressed people do, bit by bit, as if she were rehearsing a play, or, filling in a sketch already begun, obsessed with images over which she has, paradoxically, all and no control [...]." (Norseng 1999, 31) Norseng's argument is an example of reading the play backwards, using the final scene to explain the events leading up to it.

on her actions imposed by contemporary society, Hedda's suicide appears as an echo of the tragic world of classical drama. The suicide then stands as testimony to her magnificent, heroic pride [...]."³²⁶ Such readings fail to engage with the presence of female characters who are able to find contentment within the bounds of bourgeois patriarchy. Aunt Julle and Thea are perhaps less tragic figures than Hedda, but they are also better suited to their surroundings. To depict Hedda as a rebel against bourgeois patriarchy is to suggest that suicide is an adequate response to a system which can obviously accommodate some women. Vigid Ystad provides an example of this line of reasoning: "The pride of the general's daughter demands that defeat be countered by suicide. Hedda does not escape; she demonstrates her ideals of courage, beauty and order in the suicide. Concomitantly, the suicide is a speechless manifestation of her wild passion and drive, her at its pinnacle." (Ystad 2001, 271) Readings of Hedda as a heroic character also tend to disregard those aspects of her character which align her with death and the demonic. In order to arrive at a characterization of Hedda as a woman who, to quote Roland Lysell, "stands spiritually higher than the men around her",³²⁷ one must ignore her thirst for power, her refusal to give of herself to others, her contempt for Tesman and expectations of obeisance, her habit of threatening and violating Thea, and her fatal manipulation of Løvborg.

To read the suicide as an act of heroism is also to invest the act with a meaning which it in my view quite simply lacks. My main objection to the argument of heroism is that such readings fail to recognize the essential futility of the suicide. My interpretation of the suicide as an instance of utter wastefulness is in line with Leonardo F. Lisi's (2018) reading of the suicide as a triumph of nihilism, and takes as its point of departure Hedda's recognition that she has become useless. Her desire for power prevented her from realizing her uselessness; having been subjugated by Brack, she now comes to experience the full weight of her lack of vocation in life. I thus concur with Nantawan Soonthorndhai's reading of the suicide as a waste: "But the calm, deliberate manner with which Hedda kills herself, by default, seems senseless, unproductive, and profoundly lacking in utility. She has not left any material wealth, and she has destroyed another kind of inheritance: her unborn child." (Soonthorndhai 1985, 168) Hedda's rejection of a logic of productivity which defines the worth of an individual according to his or her capacity to produce can be read as a critique of the capitalist underpinnings of bourgeois patriarchy. When faced with the realities of married life and the possibility of motherhood, Hedda responds by engaging in a manipulation of Løvborg which gratifies her own need for power. Her focus on her self is unproductive, and her final decision is predicated on her realization that she will neither be able to satisfy her lust for power or be of any use to others. In Hedda's case, narcissism and uselessness are intertwined.

Hedda's understanding of herself as useless grows stronger in the aftermath of Løvborg's death. Hedda can only experience happiness when exerting power over worthy men, and she is now left with Tesman and Brack. If at first she was merely bored, she comes

³²⁶ "Dette selvmordet representerer en heroisk handling, og må, ifølge samtidens konvensjoner, kunne anses som en svært 'ukvinnelig' handling. Men i det øyeblikket hun overskrider grensene for sin samtids handlingsramme, framstår Heddas selvmord som et ekko av de antikke dramaers tragiske verden. Selvmordet står da som et vitnesbyrd over hennes storslätte, heroiske stolthet [...]." (Mortensen 1996, 33)

³²⁷ "står andligt högre än männen i omgivningen" (Lysell 2021, 169)

to experience an altogether new feeling of existential despair, being deprived of an outlet for her need for domination. When Tesman turns his attention to Løvborg's manuscript and Thea, this signals the end of Hedda's power over him. As for Brack, she recognizes his strength and admits that "You have me at your mercy from now on." (Ibsen 2019, 375) She defines his power over her as being subjected to his demands and to his will: "In your power all the same. Dependent on your demands and your will. Unfree. Yes, unfree!" (Ibsen 2019, 376) This is a mirror image of her insistence on having others conform to her will. Whereas she was content to use Tesman, she cannot stand being used by Brack. Having refused to live for others, she finds that no one is prepared to live for her. Her awareness of having become ballast sets in motion the events leading to her suicide. The change in her situation is prefaced by death, aunt Rina having passed away. When aunt Rina was still alive, Hedda could not bear to accompany Tesman to his aunt's death bed. After aunt Rina's passing, Hedda plays the part of dutiful wife and offers to assist Tesman with the funeral: "Can't I help with anything?" (Ibsen 2019, 363) Tesman's negative reply has a deeper significance. Perhaps for the first time in her life, Hedda offers aid to another, only to be rebuffed. There is a hint of irony in her offer, in that she still seems incapable of understanding why anyone would choose the path of an aunt Julle and devote themselves to serving others. When aunt Julle says that "there's always some poor sick creature who needs care and succour, sadly" (Ibsen 2019, 364), Hedda's incredulous "Would you take such a cross upon you again?" (Ibsen 2019, 364) indicates that she still cannot fathom why anyone would want to subordinate their needs to those of another.

Løvborg's suicide provides another impetus to Hedda's decision by tearing down the last vestiges of her idealism. At first she idealizes his suicide, taking it as evidence that a life lacking purpose can be given meaning through an act of defiance. She sees his action as an exertion of willpower and a display of initiative which allowed him to regain a measure of control over his life: "He has had the courage to do what – what had to be done." (Ibsen 2019, 370) Hedda understands Løvborg as having succumbed to existential despair and then choosing to defy the circumstances in which he found himself. Hedda describes his defiance as a thing of beauty: "Something imbued with a glow of impulsive [*uvilkårlig*] beauty." (Ibsen 2019, 371)³²⁸ Not only did Løvborg have "the courage to live life in accordance with his own self" (Ibsen 2019, 372), he also showed that "he had the strength and the will to break away from life's party – so early." (Ibsen 2019, 372) Hedda's view of Løvborg's suicide is based on her conception of an ideal masculinity. Her depiction of him as courageous and defiant is a vision of Løvborg as the revitalized man she sought to transform him into. Her sense of satisfaction at hearing the news of his death is derived from her belief that she has succeeded in her aim of rehabilitating and then dominating him. Brack's account of what happened reveals the extent of her failure. Brack offers two hypothetical explanations for why the pistol was fired, both of which serve to further belittle Løvborg's manhood. The first explanation is that Løvborg accidentally shot himself when drawing his pistol with the aim of threatening miss Diana into returning his manuscript. The second explanation is that miss Diana was responsible: "Or does she grab the pistol from his hand, shoot him, and stick the gun back in

³²⁸ "Uvilkårlig" can indicate a lack of control, which would translate to "impulsive", but I believe the word is used here in the sense of something absolute or limitless, as in Arup's "unconditional beauty." (Ibsen 1998, 258) Ellis-Fermor's "spontaneous beauty" (Ibsen 1964, 357) is misleading.

his pocket again? That would certainly seem in character. After all, she's a handy [*håndfast*] sort of girl, that Miss Diana." (Ibsen 2019, 375)³²⁹ The use of "håndfast", best translated as "forceful", accentuates Diana's female masculinity. In both scenarios Løvborg comes across as a failure. Either he was incapable of handling his pistol – which, if the pistol is read as a phallic symbol, means that he cannot handle his own member – or he was subdued by Miss Diana, the huntress of men. The suicide thus becomes Løvborg's final humiliation and the end of Hedda's project of restorative masculinity.

Hedda's failure to transform Løvborg means that she no longer has any goal in life. Her lack of purpose can be contrasted with Tesman, who gladly embarks on a mission to reconstruct Løvborg's manuscript: "I'll put my life into it!" (Ibsen 2019, 371) Given the gendered connotations of the metaphor of the manuscript as Løvborg's and Thea's child, this would situate Tesman as the midwife to Løvborg's belated recognition. Tesman's task is tied to a theme of memory in that the manuscript ensures that Løvborg will be remembered after his death, as Tesman admits: "I owe this to Eilert's memory." (Ibsen 2019, 371) Hedda, on the other hand, understands that no one will remember her. Remembrance depends on the presence of tangible objects. Examples abound, such as Tesman's "Memories" (Ibsen 2019, 301) attached to the slippers Aunt Rina has embroidered for him, Hedda's description of the pistol as a "memento" (Ibsen 2019, 360) when handing it to Løvborg, or her reference to the manuscript as "Løvborg's memorial" (Ibsen 2019, 374). If she is to be remembered she would have to leave something behind. Her only options are her piano, which she affectionately calls "my old piano" (Ibsen 2019, 303), and her sheets of music. Through these Hedda can express something of herself. When she clears a table of her sheet music so that Tesman and Thea can use it to reconstruct the manuscript, Hedda is discarding the last reminder of herself. She is clearing away herself, and her sudden playing of "*a wild dance tune*" (Ibsen 2019, 376) on the piano is a last attempt at reminding others of her existence. At this point Hedda barely seems to have a personality of her own, adopting Tesman's verbal tic of "No, just think [*tænk det*]!" (Ibsen 2019, 376) Her running her fingers through Thea's hair, acknowledging without complaint that Thea will soon come to inspire Tesman, is an admission of defeat. Her offer of assistance is her asking if there is any purpose to her life: "Is there nothing the two of you can use me for here?" (Ibsen 2019, 376) Tesman's reply, "No, nothing at all" (Ibsen 2019, 376), demonstrates that there is not. Faced with the realization that her death will mean nothing, Hedda gives in to her existential despair and commits a pointless act that underscores the uselessness of her life. Brack's pathetic exclamation of "But God have mercy – people don't actually *do* such things!" (Ibsen 2019, 377) simply undercuts the futility of her action; her life matters so little to others that she is not even afforded an appropriately horrified response. Having devoted her life to herself, she will be remembered for nothing and by no one.

³²⁹ "Håndfast" can be used in the sense of someone who is strong and forceful or in the sense of action that is pursued purposefully.