

In the name of God and the Father: Scandinavian women's literary history from a meta-literary historical point of view

The historiography of women's writing had an earlier inception in Scandinavia than, for example, in the Netherlands. At different times initiatives were taken that anticipated what was to happen in due course elsewhere. In this connection the extensive five-volume *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* (Scandinavian women's literary history) can be regarded as having an exemplary function. It seems expedient, therefore, to make a critical assessment of these various initiatives, in particular of the compilation of the *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria*, which appeared in print between 1993 and 1999.

Historical overview

At the end of the 19th century, there was already an awareness in Scandinavia of the necessity to draw women authors into the spotlight. This awareness was shown in Sigrid Leijonhufvud's historical overview of Swedish women's literature, published in 1893. Leijonhufvud considers the earliest traces of Swedish women's writing to be those written on the rune stones from the Viking period. The inscriptions often end with a few lines of poetry which describe the heroic deeds of the fallen loved ones:

Perhaps the rune verses, carved by a woman for her dead husband, 'the best of the farmers', or by a mother for her son, are an indication that in ancient times the language of poetry was not foreign to Swedish women.¹

Leijonhufvud subsequently discusses women's literature from St Birgitta's texts (1302/3-1373) down to the writers of her own era. She deals with all kinds of genres: not only with fiction written by women, but also with periodical writings and scientific literature. The bibliography,² composed by Leijonhufvud and Sigrid Brithelli, mentions 561 names of women writers from 1300 to the end of the 19th century.

This first bibliography, being essentially a long list of names, is reminiscent of the so-called 'gynaeceae' from the Renaissance. These inventories of celebrated women

¹ Leijonhufvud/Brithelli 1893, p.1.

² The bibliography was originally begun by Karin Adlersparre and Elvira Huss in 1873 for the World Fair in Vienna in 1873.

existed also in Scandinavia, and were mostly written by men. An exception to this rule is *Hæltinners pryð* (The heroines' jewel) by the Danish princess Leonora Christina Ulfeldt (1621-1698). This was written somewhere between 1671 and 1684, and only a fragment of the manuscript has been preserved. This fragment was published for the first time as late as 1977, so it would not have had any influence on 19th-century scholars like Leijonhufvud and Brithelli.³

Their own bibliography itself had no influence on literary historiography until 1982. In this year a sequel was published: *Kvinnliga författare 1893-1899. Biobibliografi över svensk och finlandssvensk skönlitteratur* (Women writers 1893-1899. A bio-bibliography on Swedish literature from Sweden and Finland), which was one of the results of the 'Kvinnolitteraturprojektet' (Women's literature project) at the University of Uppsala.⁴

Many women writers mentioned in both bibliographies have never been included in any traditional Swedish literary history. They were dealt with for the first time in the national histories of female literature published during the 1980s (see below) and in one of the first two volumes of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria*.⁵ This work, richly illustrated and written by a team of feminist literary scholars, is not an anthology like *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* but a more 'traditional' literary history, with biographical data and analyses of literary texts. Text-fragments only serve as illustrations.

The editors and contributors of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* could largely build on feminist literary criticism undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s. They found their material not only in results from the project started in 1983, but also in publications on forgotten and 'rediscovered' female authors. Besides, they could make use of the national women's literary histories, already mentioned – on Danish writers: *Danske kvindelige författare* (Danish women authors, 1982), on Swedish women: *Kvinnornas litteraturhistoria* (Women's literary history, 1981-1983), on Finnish women: *Finlandssvenska kvinnor skriver* (Finnish women authors, 1984), and for Norway the *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* (Norwegian women's literary history, 1988-1989-1990).⁶

These national histories are to some extent experimental in nature, and show a particular interest for the networks existing between women. In the Swedish history, for example, women authors write about their 'colleagues' of the earlier generations. In the Finnish history, women authors wrote about themselves and their authorship. The Danish and Norwegian literary histories, however, are written by literary historians, and so is *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria*, which covers the whole of Scandinavia, and may be regarded not only as the culmination of two decades of feminist literary research, but also as a development from a national literary history towards a comparative one.

As for the subjects and periods discussed, feminist literary research during the 1970s and 1980s usually focused on the period of what is called the 'Modern break-

³ See the chapter on gynaecea in Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.1: *I Guds namn*, p.217-232, written by Marianne Alenius.

⁴ Westman Berg 1982. The 'Women's literature project' resulted in various studies in the field of feminist literary history and criticism.

⁵ Møller Jensen 1993-99, which consists of the following volumes: *I Guds namn. 1000-1800; Fadershuset. 1800-1900; Vida världen. 1900-1960; På jorden. 1960-1990; Liv och verk.*

⁶ Dalager/Mai 1982; Ramnefalk/Westberg 1981; Holmqvist/Witt-Brattström 1983; Sundgren 1984; Engelstad 1988-90.

through' (around 1870-1890) and the women writers active during this period.⁷ But as a result of the compilation of literary histories, later on, the literature of the Middle Ages and the early modern times soon received full attention. Initially, research had the character of an inventory, and the editors and contributors thought that the work would soon be completed. As it turned out, many more women than foreseen had been writing during these periods⁸ – a similar experience to the one described for women writing in Dutch in the introduction to *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*.

The editors of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* applied several selection criteria for the inclusion of particular authors. One important criterion for them was that of innovation: 'How and when does something substantially different happen in Scandinavian women's literature?'⁹ The editors and contributors even constructed a meta-literary-historical longing for the 'different' and the 'new'.

Furthermore emphasis was laid on the evenemential, a tendency that has much common ground with the method used by Denis Hollier for *A new history of French literature* (1989).¹⁰ The editors of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* wanted to show 'how and in what ways, where, and from which relationships and institutions women's writing was able to develop'.¹¹ This pragmatic approach has its problems: for example, the editors do not really specify what they consider 'new' enough to be included in their book. But the work also offers new lines of approach because of the emphasis on international comparison, albeit on a relatively small scale.

Whereas some of the authors discussed appeared to be isolated in the national literary histories, in *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* they often turned out not to be working in isolation at all, and it was possible to see thematic links between the works of different authors in different Scandinavian countries. On a somewhat larger geographical scale, looking beyond Scandinavia, the educated women, 'feminae illustres', were not lonely stars, but parts of a European constellation. Thus Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) was a model for educated women in Denmark and the Danish Birgitte Thott (1610-1662) was praised in turn by Van Schurman.¹² They and many others played a role in the 17th-century debate on female education in Europe.

God and the Father

So where and when did something 'new' happen in women's literature in the period 1000-1900, as it has been described by Møller Jensen and her colleagues in the Scandinavian women's literary history? I shall give here some examples.

⁷ In 1983, one hundred years after Georg Brandes' book on the men of the 'Modern Breakthrough' (Brandes 1883), Pil Dahlerup showed, in her thesis about the women of the 'Modern Breakthrough', that there were plenty of them, all 'forgotten' by Brandes (Dahlerup 1983).

⁸ Staffan Bergsten, for example, stated as late as 1990 that, despite the women's literary histories, the representation of women authors before 1700 would be very small (Bergsten 1990, p.31).

⁹ As is formulated in Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.1, p.13.

¹⁰ Hollier 1989 served as a model for Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen 1993.

¹¹ Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.1, p.15.

¹² Id., p.233.

The first volume, *I Guds namn*, begins, very traditionally in fact, with an extensive chapter about sagas by the Icelandic researcher Helga Kress. The chronological line is not broken and, to put it in Hollier's words, for that matter 'the traditional orderliness of most histories of literature' is not changed.¹³ But Kress looks at the old sagas from a new perspective. She states that they originated in an oral tradition of female narrative. Mothers talking to their sons, who wrote down the words, occasioned these texts to be written in Icelandic instead of Latin.¹⁴ The female voice was written out, but, as Kress shows, the man's 'mál' (speech) has overruled the women's 'spá' (vision):¹⁵ the women narrating the sagas were presented as fictional, whereas the men who actually produced the texts were real. The only thing remaining of the women who have been left out of literary history are their names – as titles of the various manuscripts: Edda, Njála, Hulda.

Immediately after this period Scandinavian women were (real, and acknowledged as such) authors of religious texts. The Swedish St Birgitta is a well-known example. The introductory chapter on religious literature by Eva Haettner Aurelius¹⁶ poses the question of whether the church permitted women to write under their own names, that is, to use an authentic 'I' in their texts. Women like St Birgitta, after all, often used everyday language. The first person used in these texts, however, is shaped to a great extent by the dictates of the church. Women were allowed to write under this condition: in the name of God. But *I Guds namn* demonstrates that ecclesiastical control went further. The fascinating analyses, by Lisbet Holst, of the transcripts of witches' trials¹⁷ reveal that the church controlled also the devilish language of women considered to be witches. These witches' confessions are labelled 'confession literature'. This earliest Danish confession literature by women can be seen as a product of the interaction between the one who confesses and the one who is listening/writing. Holts reads in these texts a strong voice of the person who at last is allowed to speak. The term 'confession literature' is though – an anachronistic term, illustrating the preoccupation of the modern scholar with the female 'I' in the Middle Ages, as well as the omnipresence of 20th-century critical ideas.

Currently, it is assumed by many literary critics that women authors seldom formulated their own poetics. This assumption is not supported by the Scandinavian women's literary history. Scandinavian women authors did discuss poetical questions with other authors, be it in private letters, or in forewords and afterwords. A good example is the Danish Anna Margrethe Lasson (1659-1738) who is even assigned her own explicit poetics in *I Guds namn*. It was she who, in 1723, wrote the very first prose novel published in Scandinavia. It was inspired by female French models: Madeleine de Scudéry's novels, in particular *Artamène ou Le grand Cyrus* (1648-53).¹⁸ The introduction and the afterword to her novel, *Den beklædte sandhed* (The

¹³ Cf. Hollier 1989, p.xix.

¹⁴ Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.I, p.25.

¹⁵ Id., p.43.

¹⁶ Id., p.84-99.

¹⁷ Id., p.135-151.

¹⁸ Probably Lasson was acquainted with the German translations of the French literature, as Anne-Marie Mai states in the chapter on her in Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.I, p.341-347.

concealed truth), show her as a zealous advocate of the Danish language. Pretending to publish the novel out of love for her mother tongue, she states that many Danes are eager to learn foreign languages, thereby neglecting their own language. Another objective of her novel-writing was her intention to show that women also knew how to write novels.¹⁹ In her afterword Lasson remarks that many of the authors of highly praised 'old' literature were women; she mentions among others Sappho. In literary history her novel, the only one she wrote, is characterized as a 'curiosity', being one of the few Scandinavian pastorals written in prose and because of the fact that it was actually published. Moreover, according to the 19th-century literary historian Rasmus Nyerup, it was an unreadable curiosity even to women.²⁰ Anne-Marie Mai, author of the chapter, defends Lasson arguing that her novel is worthwhile reading, and that after its publication this mistress of the Danish language soon acquired followers, and inspired other defenders of Scandinavian mother tongues.²¹

For the period of the 'Modern breakthrough', discussed in *Fadershuset*, second of the five volumes, writers like Anne Charlotte Leffler (1849-1892) and Victoria Benedictsson (1850-1888) are shown to have often emphasized the difficulties in dealing with the choice between writing (or the arts in general) and marriage. These authors discuss the consequences of the choice their protagonists make, and the sacrifices they have to endure when choosing for authorship and the arts.²² In the third volume, *Vida världen*, the awareness of the literary war between the sexes is dealt with in the discussion of the work of, amongst others, Stina Aronson (1892-1956) and Moa Martinson (1890-1964). Stina Aronson is represented as a writer who struggled alone against the dominant male modernist voice. The chapter on Martinson lays a strong emphasis on her own perception of her works and her position in the field of Swedish literature.²³

Broadly speaking, the emphasis on innovation in the discussion of texts written by women resulted in the editors and contributors of *I Guds namn* registering a number of genres in which mainly women participated, without eschewing the question how to define what is 'literary'. In addition to the witches' confessions already mentioned, there are genealogies, the oral narrative tradition (with a separate chapter on erotic stories by women in the 19th century, the folktales which two male contemporaries, Peter Christen Asbjørnson (1812-1885) and Jørgen Moe (1813-1882), preferred not to publish, as well as the epistolary and autobiographical genres. Salon culture also receives a great deal of attention.

I Guds namn places women authors in a wider context, and shows how, during the 18th century, women started to write and participate in cultural life 'in their own names', instead of God's. This female writing took place, however, in a male context – the father's house, that was given various meanings: the physical space, the house of the father, husband, brother or son, where women wrote, and the more abstract

¹⁹ During this period, there was a great interest in language and grammar, and Scandinavian poetics was often related to language politics; see Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.1, p.345.

²⁰ Id., p.341-342.

²¹ Id., p.347.

²² See Broomans 1986 and Broomans 1987a.

²³ See Broomans 1999, especially p.65-68 and p.107-110.

space in patriarchal society. This patriarchal context is given an extra dimension in *Fadershuset*.

What about the fatherland?

During the period covered by this second volume, the building up of a national identity complicates the position of the woman author; naturally, this affects women's literary historiography.

The 'house of the father' referred to in *Fadershuset* might well have served as a symbol of the fatherland, the nation, but it appears to be necessary to differentiate here between the political nation and ordinary society. Whereas the state watches over communal interests, creative forces are developed in ordinary society. Seen from this perspective, identities, according to Stefan Jonsson, are not formed 'by collective stories that describe the fate of the classes and the nation, but by the little stories about the family, the house, the environment and the place of work'.²⁴ These ideas originate in Hegel's sense of the family as the primeval cell of society. This is where women come in: although every family is represented by its male head, families are linked together both socially and economically. Such interests needed to be watched over, in literature too: 'the little stories' and perhaps the domestic novel in the 19th century were received on that level. In the days of the Swedish author Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865), 'it made sense to see the identity of a person rooted in the house, in genealogy, in the fatherland and in mother earth'.²⁵ Authors such as Bremer and the Norwegian/Danish Magdalene Thoresen (1819-1903)²⁶ are good examples of how the ideology of the (Swedish and Norwegian/Danish) national identity determined evaluation of their work. Bremer and Thoresen were not permitted to 'burn down the house of the father and the patriarchate'²⁷ or to criticize society. This is demonstrated not only by contemporary criticism, but also by the literary historical evaluation of these authors' works.

In my research into the determining ideology in the literary historical texts about Bremer and Thoresen I have used Hayden White's approach to historiography as formulated in his *Metahistory* (1973).²⁸ White differentiates between various 'modes', explanation strategies, that are necessary for the construction of the story in historiography. The three main modes are: 'emplotment', 'formal argument' and 'ideological implication'. Each of these modes is divided into four 'sub-modes'. For the mode

²⁴ Jonsson 1995, p.44.

²⁵ Id., p.62

²⁶ Both translated into Dutch and other languages in the 19th century.

²⁷ Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.II, p.254.

²⁸ See White 1973. One of the conclusions in my thesis on Stina Aronson is that the literary historical image of an author is constructed by the mode of emplotment chosen by literary historians. As White shows, not all historians use the same mode. In *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* the romantic mode dominates or a combination of the romantic and tragic mode is used. Thus Stina Aronson is represented as a lonely genius and her contacts with other women writers are left out. See also the analyses referred to in note 23.

of emplotment there is a romantic, a tragic, a comic and a satirical sub-mode. The mode of argument, in which a historian may try to explain events and to find causalities, can be: formalist, mechanistic, organicist or contextualist. The mode of ideological implication, in which, according to White, the ideology of the historians themselves is reflected, is to be divided into: anarchist, radical, conservative and liberal.²⁹

Both authors, Bremer as well as Thoresen, wrote a number of morally acceptable domestic novels and travelogues that praised the (national) landscape; they were and are still highly valued. Bremer, however, wanted to change society from within, from the home: she published her feminist novel *Hertha* (1856), and her oeuvre became more committed to women's issues. Subsequently, the official literary criticism lost interest in this part of her oeuvre especially.³⁰ Thoresen described the eroticism of the female subject: this was considered to be unacceptable. Her interest in female eroticism was regarded as damaging not only for the family as an institution, but also for the nation, and it was smothered in literary history. Literary historians in the 19th century had generally used a romantic mode of emplotment – depicting the author as a successful hero – when writing on Bremer, but this romantic plot had to be transformed into a tragical one as soon as she 'left the house of the father' in starting to produce radical (feminist) writings. Bremer and Thoresen broke with the so-called 'conciliatory aesthetics', the belief that for the spiritual well-being of the nation it was important that literature reassure the citizens and reconcile them with reality and the legal powers.³¹

These women wanted to create a female national identity that could not be realized. In traditional literary histories there is no room for the female nation as a subject; it only exists as an object of the male imagination, as 'the mother's lap' and the 'rescued daughter'. On a literary historiographical level, too, we have to notice the failure of the attempts made by female literary theorists like Sigrid Leijonhufvud, around the turn of the century, to legitimate the significance of women authors such as Fredrika Bremer for the development of a national identity. Their research into the female national identity was 'forgotten' by later literary historians.³²

This has also had an effect on the modern practice of women's literary historiography. In *Fadershuset* an anarchistic mode of emplotment (the belief in structural changes) is used in the chapter on Fredrika Bremer, by Birgitta Holm. To 'burn down the house of the father and the patriarchate'³³ creates an opportunity for a structural change in literary history, too. By burning down the old image of Fredrika Bremer it should become possible to create, to reconstruct, a new, different image. In the chapter on Magdalene Thoresen, however, there appears to be a certain ambivalence. On the one hand the passive image of Thoresen could be broken down: Thoresen is

²⁹ White 1973, p.29.

³⁰ In the women's movement, however, Bremer and her novel *Hertha* became symbolically important. In 1884, the 'Fredrika Bremer förbund' (a union for women's emancipation) was founded, publishing a female magazine which, in 1913, changed title: this journal, *Hertha*, still in existence, is now the oldest women's journal (Broomans 1987b, p.238).

³¹ Beyer 1992, vol.II, p.220.

³² See Haettner-Olafsson 1981.

³³ See note 27.



Fredrika Bremer

shown – by Lise Busk-Jensen³⁴ – formulating her own poetics and choosing to depict the national landscape of the wild North in preference to the more popular landscape of Italy in her travelogues. Here Thoresen is the real romantic heroine. On the other hand the romantic mode of emplotment is replaced by a tragical mode: Thoresen had to submit to the patriarchate, she ‘accepted’, she ‘resigned’ as a failed playwright.³⁵ While writing on Thoresen, Busk-Jensen does not use an anarchistic mode, but a radical one: to create a different image of Thoresen in literary history, the old one had to be changed, but not eradicated.

In *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* there appears to be a tension between the new literary historical exposition with a gender identity and the traditional literary historical exposition with a national identity. Where did the editors and contributors of *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* place their own representation: inside or outside the writing of literary history as dominated by male tradition? This question has to be asked, and it is an important one in the field of (meta)literary history. The longing for

³⁴ Møller Jensen 1993-99, vol.ii, p.283-297.

³⁵ While her son-in-law Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) conquered the stage...

'something new' in women's literature indicates that, in Scandinavian women's literary history, the developmental mind-set has not yet been abandoned. We can even see a 'romantic genius' mind-set in Scandinavian women's literary history. The woman author as an 'innovator' has romantic overtones; these feminist literary historians often use 'romance' as 'mode of emplotment'.

We have to conclude that Scandinavian women's literary history is a combination of a 19th-century romantic literary historiography and an aesthetics *à la* Harold Bloom.³⁶ In other words, a 'romantic genius' mind-set combined with an originality mind-set. But in whose name is this done? In the name of God, the father, the fatherland, or in the name of the female 'I'? And within what framework and for whom does a feminist literary historian write a women's literary history? Though the editors and contributors of this huge project have to be praised, *Nordisk Kvinnolitteraturhistoria* is not embedded in a thorough metareflection on the act of writing literary history. A metareflection is necessary to confront statements about women's literary histories like the one David Perkins made in *Is literary history possible?*

The antiquarian historian looks back 'with loyalty and love' to the position of the past from which he derives. But in doing so he distorts the past, for he is interested only in what lies within his own tradition and greets even its mediocre achievements with enthusiasm.³⁷

In Scandinavian women's literary history I certainly detect an ambivalence, a to-ing and fro-ing between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand there is the struggle to break free from traditional literary history, and on the other the struggle to make women authors heroines, worthy of the fatherland.

Translated by Julia Harvey.

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³⁶ Cf. Bloom 1994.

³⁷ Perkins 1992, p.181-182.

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