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POST SCRIPTUM
Some Reflections on the Publication of
Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie

It is a special honour and pleasure for me to be among the guest speakers on the occasion of Amy van Marken's 80th birthday. I may have met Amy van Marken for the first time twenty years ago, at an international conference on Scandinavian studies (IASS) in Reykjavik, Iceland, in July, 1974, but I do not have any recollection of that. What I do remember, however, is that we met in Nijmegen in Holland the following year, in June 1975, at a great international conference in women's studies in the humanities. Amy van Marken was a member of the arrangement committee for the conference, if I remember correctly, and more importantly, an outstanding representative for Scandinavian studies and feminist studies in literature, especially through her studies of Hamsun's portraits of women. For those of us who belonged to a younger generation, it was extremely encouraging to meet such a fine role model. It is fair to say that the Nijmegen conference has been an important point of reference for those of us who were lucky enough to be able to participate, and that the lectures we heard and the people we met had a lasting impact on our later careers in the sense that they were decisive for some of our basic views on feminism and literary research.

I am therefore very happy to be able to join in the praise of Amy van Marken. And I find it proper to deal with a topic and a field of research that I have been engaged in for some years, a topic that may perhaps be seen as one of the many fruits that sprang from the seed that was sown in Nijmegen in 1975.

Background and framework for *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie*

In the 1970s and well into the 80s many Norwegian (and Scandinavian) university women, students and teachers, were deeply engaged in women's studies in various fields. Women in the field of literature were

among the most active ones, besides women in history, sociology and related disciplines. In Norway we had a seminal literary milieu, with professor Åse Hiorth Lervik of the University of Tromsø at the centre. Many research projects in women's literature were born due to her active planning, participation and coaching. Among the ideas discussed fairly early at the annual seminars arranged by the Tromsø group was the writing of a comprehensive, reasoned history of Norwegian women's literature.

It was understood fairly early that such a project would be hazardous without proper funding, for it was clear that no single person would be able to write the book needed at the time.¹ It would take a pooling of creativity and research activities and also a certain amount of cooperation. Resources would be necessary to finance someone to coordinate the project as well as seminars and work-shops for the contributors.

I shall not go into details about the editorial and practical set-up for this project. At this point I will just say briefly that a four-year grant from the Norwegian Research Council was obtained and that this grant financed one full-time researcher and coordinator of the project (Irene Iversen, now professor at the University of Oslo). The project could not have been carried through without this financial basis. Including Irene Iversen, we were five editors², who also each of us contributed by writing separate articles in the order of two or three lengthy chapters for each of the three volumes. Altogether there were thirty-seven writers on the project, among them five men. Far from all held university positions; some were post-graduate students, others worked in high schools, in publishing houses, or in the media. Some of the contributors later moved into university positions. One of the positive effects of the project has been to help qualify women for university jobs.

¹Since the project was first discussed, more than 15 years ago, a number of monographs and articles on different authors, surveys of women's literature, and anthologies of women's texts have been published by people connected with the Tromsø group and others, like Liv Blikrud, Irene Engelstad, Rakel Christina Granaas, Jorunn Hareide, Irene Iversen, Åse Hiorth Lervik, Torill Steinfeld, Janneken Øverland, Elisabeth Aasen, and others.

²The others were Irene Engelstad, Torill Steinfeld, Janneken Øverland, and myself.

We started working in the fall of 1985, and in 1988 the first volume appeared, the other two following in 1989 and 1990. All the time, we had a fairly close cooperation with one of the editors of our publishing house, Pax Forlag A/S.

Purposes and intentions

As one of the editors of *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie*, I have often been challenged as to the need for such a work. I think it is necessary, and I hope to show why by going into some of the discussions and notions that led to this project. I shall try to assess some of the results of our efforts, and, simply, relate some of the things we found.

I would start by suggesting that, generally, there are two driving forces behind this kind of work, forces which are both universal and equally important.

One is the *feminist engagement*, or the political and ideological energy stemming from a conviction that something is wrong with *status quo* in the field of literary research. This energy is probably a *sine qua non* for this kind of work, as both editors and writers will otherwise give in to all the obstacles they are sure to meet with under way.

The other drive is not primarily political, but is rooted in a *concern for literature and the writing of literary history itself*. From this, it follows that a major concern will be to correct the established picture of the literary legacy by making women's contributions to literature visible.

If we look at traditional histories of Norwegian literature treating, for example, the last century, only few women's names are mentioned. Those who are treated at any length can be counted on one hand: Camilla Collett, Amalie Skram, and then, later Sigrid Undset, that is, only the very few that attained notoriety and fame also outside of Norway. Let us compare this number to the approximately one hundred and fifty names of women authors of the last century that feminist efforts have brought forth. Not all of these are prominent authors, but the idea of a history of literature cannot be to mention only the very best, but to present and assess what is there. This is the usual practice where male authors are concerned.

One major objective, then, was to trace a Norwegian female literary tradition that we believed was there, if not necessarily unbroken. We

wanted to bring forth all the forgotten and half-forgotten names, whose value may lie less in aesthetic sophistication and literary innovation than in that they give us the possibility of observing literary trends and developments from a knowledge of the complete body of material. Thus, the overall picture of Norwegian literature would become more correct.

By rereading and reassessing already known literature by women we hoped to bring to light aspects of it that traditional interpretation had overlooked or not found relevant or interesting. Some of these books were undeservedly forgotten, perhaps not fitting into the literary trends of their day, or being written in a manner not considered proper for women and therefore suppressed. An illustrative example of this is the way in which the works of Amalie Skram's had been evaluated up till the 1970s. She had won respect as one of the great naturalists of Norwegian literature mainly for her four-volume work *Hellemyrsfolket* 1887-1898, while her novels describing – and criticizing – bourgeois marriage had been brushed aside as badly written, exaggerating or uninteresting. It was only when feminists of the 1970s in Norway and Denmark started rereading and republishing them that these books gained the status they now have, as pioneer works in a critical feminist tradition.

Structure

Besides correcting traditional understandings of the Norwegian literary landscape by bringing forth new material, we also had more purely academic ambitions: we wanted to write a different history of literature in the sense that we wanted it to deviate from the traditional structure of this genre. We did not want to produce another gallery of portraits in a chronological order, interspersed with survey articles. This was the prevailing structure in the Norwegian tradition, until Willy Dahl broke it in his *Norges litteratur*³ by focusing on the texts and relating them quite firmly to economic and social structures, while abandoning the portraits of authors.

Like Willy Dahl we wanted to foreground the texts themselves, but from a different aspect, as we wanted to build on a genre perspective and

³Willy Dahl, *Norges litteratur. Tid og tekst* 1-3, 1981-1989.

questions of relations to the literary institution more than to questions of economic and social structures. In this way we hoped to lay bare two important conditions for women's literary work: first, women's use of genres, and in a wider sense their relationship to literary trends, and second, how women were conceived and received as professional authors on the one hand by their contemporary, mostly male, publishers and critics, and on the other hand by their readers, who were mostly women. To this structure based on genre, we added portraits of a few authors whom we considered exemplary or outstanding and, also, a few survey chapters presenting, for example, aspects of the literary institution or a certain period.

The genre perspective opened up for a row of sub-genres not usually represented in a history of literature. In addition to the classic genres, drama, poetry and prose fiction, we included children's literature, mass fiction, detective stories, memoirs and autobiography, radio plays and even literary criticism and translation of fiction. This method enabled us to spotlight all the areas in which women had been active and thus to make their efforts visible, and it also helped us see which genres they had been especially attracted to. Furthermore, we could trace their use of the genres, and discuss how women developed and adapted them for their own purposes.

This structure also enabled us to do away with certain myths concerning women authors, such as the myth that they have hardly produced drama before our times, and it enabled us to expose women's role in the development of the novel. We were also able to unravel their affinity to the foreign genre of *romance*, or to light literature on the whole – many women writers translated such books from German or French for newspapers and periodicals that ran them as *feuilletons*, and they learned certain tricks in this way, both useful and detrimental. When the novel as such was first introduced in Norway around 1820, it was not highly esteemed, because most critics and teachers associated it with 'bad' or 'low' literature and warned against it. This may be one reason why most women authors of the last mid-century did not fare very well when their books were reviewed.

Women as authors

Some of the excitement connected with research in women's literature, especially of the last century or earlier, lies in the discovery of the great number of women writers to be found, the quantity and variety of what they produced, and the themes they were and were not interested in.

Our research has provided shocks of recognition and shocks of surprise. A woman of today (and a man, too, for that matter) will easily recognize certain types of existential problems, for example: is there a meaning to life, and if so, what is it? How can my life become meaningful? - while we today, at least in the Nordic, secularized countries, are surprised to meet a deep religious devotion and commitment in most older works by women. We have forgotten that religion was profoundly implanted in the Norwegian people of the last century, and - perhaps more importantly - that women were the moral and religious mentors of the homes. It comes as less of a surprise that sexual issues seem to have been taboo until the 1880s, when women also took part in the great morality debate in Scandinavia. It has, in fact, been possible to trace certain thematic structures in the works of these women - structures which necessarily mirror general cultural trends in their lifetimes.

As for aesthetic sophistication and innovation, we found that too, but it was perhaps not a very prominent feature in most works. All the same, it is one aspect that might perhaps have been better illuminated in *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie*.

Rather than enlarging upon these thematic and formal aspects of women's literature, I would like to pose a question that seems pertinent when faced with what women actually wrote: Why were so many of them actually left out of traditional histories of literature? There are many answers to this question, and I shall suggest only a few, besides the more obvious ones that bear on male dominance in all branches of the literary institution (and which I won't go into).

One reason might be that women authors simply were not good enough. I have already touched upon this problem, and would imply that there is a bias at play when mediocre male authors are included while mediocre female authors are not. As only outstanding women seem to have been visible from a male viewpoint, those who were less than outstanding were not included in the tradition.

However, one must not forget that on the whole women stood fewer chances of becoming good or excellent authors than men did. Women lacked the pre-conditions necessary to excel, pre-conditions that men acquired almost automatically, if they belonged to bourgeois society. In the Norway of last century almost all authors were recruited from the upper middle classes, in which boys were expected either to pursue university studies in order to enter a liberal profession, or to go into business. For this formal schooling (gymnasium) would be necessary. The men's school training would furnish them with a general cultural competence, with a basic knowledge of foreign and classic languages and literatures, and with practical experience with genre conventions through mandatory written exercises.

Girls, on the other hand, were raised to become good mothers and wives, and given only such instruction as was regarded necessary for these roles. Accordingly, reading, writing and simple arithmetic were imparted often by their mother or older sisters as being important for their correspondance and household accounts. Religious training was needed both to instill in the women the right virtues like obedience and modesty, and to prepare them for their future religious upbringing of their children. In addition, a superficial knowledge of geography, history and foreign languages were considered suitable for them to be able to pass as adequate hostesses, and drawing and piano lessons might be added as the finishing touch. But many women never got anything like a formal education even on this modest scale, as is witnessed by autobiographers also from the higher classes.

On the other hand, intelligent girls sometimes were free to browse in their father's libraries and pick up what scraps of knowledge they could find. But often parents would deny them these pleasures on the grounds that they were considered a waste of time or detrimental to the girls' future prospects or to their health. It was regarded common knowledge that women were more delicate than men and that their physique would not tolerate the strain of education. This was one of the arguments used in the debate about admittance for Norwegian women to the gymnasium in the 1880s. It was also contended, on both physical and psychological grounds, that women would be unfit as mothers and wives if allowed too much education, a notion that has deep roots in Western culture.

These conditions meant that women to some extent lacked the elementary knowledge and experience prerequisite for an author. Few lived in environments that encouraged women to write, and fewer still belonged to literary circles that might be conducive to writing. Camilla Collett was, in fact, one of the very few women of the mid-nineteenth century who was fortunate enough to possess both these advantages. If a woman against all odds succeeded in publishing a book, more often than not, the reviews, if there were any, would be condescending and ironic. For reasons I have just mentioned, some of these books were, in fact, quite faulty, but many of the shortcomings were of a formal kind and might have been improved if the women had been advised and criticized while still in the process of writing.

Female Readers and Female Novels

Despite this deplorable situation, women did write and publish books, and they also found readers, mostly among their own sex. Women on the whole seem to have read more fiction than men. They read some poetry, but mostly novels, mainly Scandinavian, German, and French, and, to some degree, English novels as well, most often probably translated into Danish. Novels had a low status in the hierarchy of the genres up to The Modern Breakthrough, mostly because they were associated with romance and what we now call mass literature, characterized by stereotypes, improbabilities of action and plot, and unrefined language. They were also associated with vice and immorality.

Warnings against novels of a certain kind can be found in educational literature of the time and also in some novels, even up to the end of the last century. We find admonition against seductive literature in fiction by Hanna Winsnes, especially pronounced in her novel *Det første Skridt*, 1844 (The First Step). Jonas Lie described the reading of romance as a flight from a trivial reality in *Familien paa Gilje*, 1883 (The Family at Gilje). Dikken Zwiłgmeyer in some of her short stories from the 1890s blames romance for giving women illusions about married life, thus making for unhappy marriages, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the children.

I wish to suggest that, at least partly, prose fiction by women of the last century was thought of as an alternative to this kind of illusive fiction (romance, primarily) which gave women false notions about life or instilled wrong values in them. Broadly speaking, the views of these writers were embodied in two very different portraitures of women, depending on historic period and cultural circumstances: women seen as dignified beings and women looked upon as miserable creatures.

Hanna Winsnes, for one, wanted to give women a sense of value by emphasizing their competence as housekeepers and family economists, not only in her very popular books on cooking and housekeeping, but also in her novels and numerous short stories. Moreover, she viewed women as superior to men in practical and psychological matters, if not in spiritual ones. Having her roots in a firm, Christian belief and the cultural traditions of the Age of Reason, her outlook was more optimistic than that of later women like Camilla Collett, Magdalene Thoresen, Amalie Skram and Dikken Zwiłgmeyer, whose more or less declared intention it was to give a truthful picture of women's conditions and predicaments. These conditions were often presented as quite miserable with little hope of improvement. But, at least the women would then know what they were up against!

The Norwegian female novel of the 1860s and 70s may, I think, be seen as an extension of the English *Bildungsroman* from the 1740s on. In his classic work, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt views this genre as a vehicle for the education of the daughters of the rising English bourgeoisie: through novel reading they would acquire the norms for proper behaviour and good breeding, and learn the virtues and ways of a good wife and mother. An interesting aspect of this tradition is that not only the heroines, but also the heroes, have to undergo changes of behaviour and values in life in order to be worthy of marital bliss; this is a view that was strongly propagated also by the Norwegian heirs of the English novel.

I believe that one of the reasons why women seemed to embrace the novel and the short story rather than poetry and drama, was that they had this educational intention behind their writing, and that the novel was better suited for this purpose than other genres. The novel would give them scope to describe an environment that the readers could recognize, and to develop a plot and a turn of events in some detail. Thus, the readers would be more easily affected by the norms of the book in question. The

novel would also give more space for long discussions on moral and religion, for example. This is in fact a feature that we find in many novels (and which slows down the action considerably).

The women could also draw on their intimate knowledge of everyday life in the home and their insight into human psychology, developed through their experience of family life. And since the novel did not have any fixed form or established genre norms at the mid-century, as opposed to poetry and drama, it was a genre that women could launch upon despite their lack of formal education. In place of that education, they had a wide-ranging reading of fiction to support them, and a kind of writing experience that was highly suitable for their purpose, namely that of writing letters and diaries, of which we have a telling example in Camilla Collett.

She cultivated the art of letter and diary writing from her early youth, developing a writing style of her own and also a keen sense of psychology. This was an important preparation for her later groundbreaking novel *Amtmandens Døttre* (1854-55)⁴, her autobiography and her short stories. She was also widely read in contemporary and older European literature and, so, had a broad basis from which to write. Knowledge of the great European tradition of literature was part of the culture in the professional classes, and from the memoirs of women, we know at least in part what they read.

Becoming a professional woman

Given that it was difficult on many accounts for women to become professional writers, one might well ask what made them try. Obviously, there were many reasons, some of which are of a more general kind and may be discerned.

Some women, of course, like men, had a strong poetic and creative urge which drove them to writing, despite obstacles and difficulties. Alvilde Prydz is a case in point.

⁴This novel was translated into English for the first time in 1992 and published by Norvik Press under the title *The District Governor's Daughters*.

One evident reason was, however, that writing might provide a source of income. Many of the women authors were either widows, like Camilla Collett and Magdalene Thoresen, or unmarried, unsupported family daughters, like Dikken Zwiłgmeyer and Alvilde Prydz. There were not many job options for women of the upper and middle classes. Menial work was not considered *comme il faut*. Writing, on the other hand, was considered to be a fairly suitable occupation for a woman of the middle classes, especially if she wrote religious publications and books for children, or unobjectionable family novels of good morals. Writing had the added advantage of being performed at home, so that the women were not in danger of neglecting their households, and at the same time avoiding exposure to the outside world. The incomes they could get from writing were highly variable and often insecure, but at least it was something

Publishing, of course, did mean exposure to the public, but more often than not women until well into the 1880s hid their real identity behind pseudonyms, often male, or published their books anonymously. This at least gave them an illusion of protection from the public eye, although in little Norway it was often known who the author in question was. But there were exceptions: Hanna Winsnes, who published her novels and short stories under the male pseudonym of Hugo Schwartz, managed to keep his real identity a secret for more than 20 years.

Besides having economic and practical reasons for writing, women might also write because of a strong devotion to a certain issue, for example, the women's issue, as in the case of Camilla Collett. This devotion would sometimes force them to break both literary conventions and codes for female public behaviour, and would inevitably bring them ridicule and a reputation for being eccentric and unwomanly. Not very many women had the courage to do this in the way Camilla Collett, Magdalene Thoresen, Aasta Hansteen, and Amalie Skram had. The personal costs were too high.

On the whole, women writers of the last century for a variety of reasons had to fight to be published and heard. Most often, they did not get a fair treatment by critics, and very few of them obtained a secure economic and social position as writers.

The positive aspect of the picture is that this literature actually offers a wonderful source of insight into the way women lived and thought in older times. Many women were aware of this; they knew that in ordinary

historic sources and history books women were often misrepresented. Even men have welcomed women's contributions to literature for exactly this reason. Arne Garborg turned to his wife Hulda, a writer in her own right, and to Amalie Skram, for advice when describing women. Aksel Sandemose, among others, welcomed the day when women would dare tell the truth about themselves in their writing, for, in his opinion, male authors could not have the insight into women's mentality that women themselves could have.

This day has perhaps dawned on European literature now, but that is another story.

Some Afterthoughts

On assessing *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* some time after its completion, it is only natural to conclude that some things might have been improved. For one thing, our understanding of genre might have been problematized further. Perhaps we ought to have insisted that traditional genre conceptions simply do not apply to women's writings. We do carry this point in several connections, but perhaps not as an all-round idea. The point seems to be obvious for the autobiographical genre, in which women are prolific; the difference between the typical 'male' and the typical 'female' autobiography is one of the issues at stake in our treatment of this genre. Furthermore, our discussions of sub-genres like the *Bildungsroman* and the novel of disillusion point to a new understanding of genres among women authors.

Another problem related to this emphasis on genre was the risk that some works, even major ones, would slip our attention if they did not fit into one of our genre categories. These categories could therefore turn out to be a mental strait-jacket at times, and needed to be used with caution.

The survey chapters were intended to provide a necessary cultural and institutional background, by illuminating current ideological, literary, and societal structures. They should also help to create a certain unity by binding together and filling gaps between chapters on the development of the genres and the portraits of individual authors.

Some critics have, however, raised the objection that the structure of *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* tends to give the impression of a collection

of essays rather than of a wholly conceived history of literature. To a certain extent this may be unavoidable as long as there are many co-writers involved, as in this case, unless there is a very strong-willed editor with a wide-ranging mandate. The editors of *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* hoped that the different points of view and various points of departure resulting from the many writers might be looked upon as an enriching and fruitful dialogue within the text. Here lies a challenge to the reader to combine and discern for herself or himself.

The portraits of the authors are a concession to our interest in biography, to our curiosity regarding the human being behind the texts. Even though the editors do not adhere to old-fashioned historic-biographical interpretational methods, we do see a point in drawing some connection between life and work. These portraits are dissimilar in that the writers have weighted biography and work differently. The overall idea was to offer a picture of the author in her time, that is to say, to consider the author and her work in the light of her background and possibilities, in relation to contemporary literature and literary norms, and also in relation to her readers.

Critics of *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* have suggested that the work would have been more useful had it contained more portraits or at least more concentrated presentations of authors and their work. By using the register at the end of each volume, it is in fact possible to piece together a portrait or an entity of the different authors. But it is admittedly more of a task than having a complete portrait presented. It may be that had we started this project today, we would have allotted more space to portraits, if only to meet a growing interest in biography. But a history of literature is always also a child of its time, like works of art and other cultural utterances.

The reception

The interest with which *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* has been received among most ordinary readers seems to prove that the approach we chose was a happy one. Readers have been astounded by the number of interesting writers that they had not known anything about. This is especially true of the first two volumes, which cover the periods from

approximately 1600 until 1940 (up to the Second World War), that is to say, the periods farthest away from us in time. It seems clear that we have managed to bring forth a lot of material unknown to most readers, and that we have also succeeded in making these books and their authors appear to be interesting and worthwhile.

I think I may say, by way of conclusion, that *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie* has been a success at least in terms of its being read, cited, and discussed. It is now on many students' reading lists. Material and viewpoints from it are being included in current discussions and histories of Norwegian literature, as, for instance, in the brand new *Norsk litteratur i tusen år* (Norwegian Literature of a Thousand Years) written by the staff at the Department of Scandinavian Studies of the University of Bergen. This work is aimed at students in their first year of Norwegian studies at the university and also for students at teachers' training colleges, so it will be widely read and lay the ground for their further studies. As editors of *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie*, we believe that we have attained one of our major goals, namely that of making Norwegian woman writers visible in such a way as to make it impossible to exclude them from the general literary history in the future.

I understand that plans are now made for a Dutch history of women's literature, and I would like to close by wishing luck for this project. In addition to academic qualifications, it takes stamina and conviction. Looking to Amy van Marken, I am convinced that the plans will succeed.