Nora's sisters? Gender, love and independence in dramas by Scandinavian women playwrights in the 1880s and 90s

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In *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) the Norwegian playwright *Henrik Ibsen* (1828–1906) presents a young wife, Ellida Wangel, who decides to stay with her husband instead of giving in to her uncanny memories of a stranger, a rather dissocial sailor, in fact a murderer, she once was in love with. When the sailor returns to claim her as his woman and her husband allows her to make a "free" choice between them, her marriage gets the upper hand. Although Ellida was never in love with her paternal husband – he is considerably older than she is –, she comes to another conclusion than Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1877). In Nora's case there is no other man; she leaves her husband and her two children and rejects a marriage which has compelled her to behave coquettish and childish. Both her father and her husband have treated her as a "doll-child", she claims; thus the title *A Doll's House* (literally translated *A Doll's Home*). Now her aim is to educate herself and get in charge of her own life, hoping to achieve a genuine maturity as a woman and a human being. Nora even refuses her husband to support her economically, thinking that she might be able to earn her own money. Therefore, while Ellida may combine freedom and marriage, for Nora such a possibility is, at best, an uncertain option in an unpredictable future. And while Ellida is willing to adjust to everyday life with a paternal, but sympathetic husband, in spite of her attachment to the ocean and its limitlessness, Nora does not believe in a revival of her marriage. A "real" wedlock would require a profound transformation of both Nora and her husband, Thorvald, and at the end of the play she does not believe in such "wonderful things happening".

Three months after its publication the Norwegian feminist writer *Camilla Collett* (1813–95) wrote to Ibsen about *The Lady from the Sea*. Identifying her own fate with Ellida's, she praises Ibsen for his exploration of the blind infatuation, which has been so destructive for many women. A product of the phantasy this obsessive kind of love has ruined many lives, due to the disappointments which either arise from the need to renounce a love-affair, or, if a

relationship *is* established, is embedded in it. Complaining that women might subject themselves to a man's raw strength and ruthless selfishness, and that men are dazzled by sensual deceptions, she argues that freedom to choose a partner in an informed way requires better opportunities for men and women to get to know each other and achieve a mutual understanding. Another precondition for a sound relationship, based on free will, is more independence for women. But to achieve this aim, it is necessary to fight what Collett calls "the dragoon", i.e. the idea of a passionate, "hypnotic-demonic" kind of love. And this is indeed what Ibsen does in *The Lady from the Sea* (Collett 2014).

The topics Camilla Collett discusses in her letter to Ibsen: different forms of love, the relationship between love and freedom, and women's opportunities to make informed choices when it comes to love and marriage, are also at the forefront in many plays published by Scandinavian women writers in the 1880s and 90s and early 2000s. Ibsen and the Swedish writer *August Strindberg* (1849–1912) are of course the towering figures of the late 19th century Scandinavian drama, but quite many women writers published plays, and a few published several plays. The Swedish writers *Anne Charlotte Leffler* (1849–92) and *Alfhild Agrell* (1849 –1923) were probably the most recognized ones of these female playwrights, but canonized novelists like *Victoria Benedictsson* (1850–88) and *Amalie Skram* (1846–1905) also wrote dramas.

During the past decades there has been a new interest in this part of Scandinavian literary history, especially in Sweden. In the 1980s and 90s several Nordic research projects outlined the literary history of women writers – the largest one resulted in a 5-volume *History of Nordic Women's Literature.*[1] Of course dramas by women writers were discussed in these works, although not at length. In recent years several dramas by late 19th century women writers have also been staged, or, more often, there have been public readings at different venues. Victoria Benedictsson's *The Enchantment*[2] (*Den bergtakna* in Swedish) was for instance staged at the National Theatre in London in 2007, and in May 2008 The Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm offered a staged reading of a new reconstruction of the play, based solely on Benedictsson's own manuscripts. Back in the late 1970s several plays by the Norwegian writer *Dagny Juel Przybyszewska* (1867–1901), who was married to the Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski, were published in Norwegian. The edition was based on Juel's own manuscripts. Recently several plays by other Norwegian women writers of the late 19th century have been republished, and there have also been public readings by actors. Of

[1] Cf. http://nordicwomensliterature.net/
[2] It has also been titled *Spellbound* in English.

course many works are also accessible today via websites, as for instance the Swedish *Dramawebben*.[3]

It is worth noticing that this recent reception of women playwrights of the late 19th century has been largely promoted by actors and directors. But scholars have also contributed to this new interest, as biographers, by publishing scholarly articles and by editing original versions of some of these plays and also exploring how texts have been adapted by translators and editors. This is the case with both Victoria Benedictsson's and Dagny Juel Przybyszewski's plays. Juel's major plays were previously known only through Stanisław Przybyszewski's Polish adaptations and in Czech. And since its publication in 1890 Victoria Benedictsson's *The Enchangement* has been known in a completed adaptation, made by her friend and heir Axel Lundegaard as Benedictsson did not finish the drama herself, before she committed suicide in July 1888. In 2008 the new reconstruction of the text was published, and the play premiered at the Royal Theatre, as part of a series of readings entitled "True Women". The name refers to a play by Anne Charlotte Leffler.

I will also mention that there is a European interest in 19th century women writers. One result of this engagement is a large European Cost-action, called *Women Writers in History*. The action ended in 2013, but continues as an international network, open for other scholars.[4] The focus of the action was on reception and relations between women writers, especially across national borders. I find it interesting that many younger scholars from Eastern Europe contributed to the Cost-action, from Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Romania, and also Turkey. The interest in the Nordic countries was more limited, perhaps because of the large literary history-projects in the 1980s and 90s – so much work has been done already. But there was a strong group from Finland in the action, a Swedish group, based in Gothenburg, and a Norwegian group as well.

In what follows I will discuss some of these plays by Scandinavian women writers, focusing on the conflict between conventional gender norms and women's identity and the love-versus freedom theme.

Gender norms, love, and self-definition

We all know how a 19th century woman was supposed to be: a loving angel in the home, modest, unselfish, caring, able to beautify everyday life, moreover loyal to her family, always

[3] http://www.dramawebben.se/
[4] Contact: Suzan van Dijk. http://www.womenwriters.nl

willing to sacrifice her own interests and to overlook and forgive offences and infidelity. And certainly this romantic idea about femininity had a strong appeal. Even a writer like Victoria Benedictsson could subscribe to it, as the longing of her life:

Nobody can be more a woman than I am. This desire to be allowed to be something to another human being, to be able to forget one's own ego as soon as it concerns this other person, it is so genuine female. This is what I am looking for; this is what I have always been seeking. (11.3. 1887, Benedictsson, 2008, 638)[5]

We also know that in much of 19th century literature by women writers the young protagonists meet the very opposites: dominating and manipulative mother-figures or just narrow-minded and weak ones, who victimize younger women, especially daughters, furthermore vain, selfish, materialistic, irresponsible, sometimes also seductive and exploitive younger women. They are powerful these women, not least because they know how to use hypocrisy and gossip to control and suppress other women, most often daughter- or sister-figures.

With some modifications we also meet these characters in many plays by Scandinavian women writers of the late 19th century. While Ibsen tended to focus on the married woman, the protagonists in plays by women writers are often young women who are equipped with all the positive capabilities which signify a 'romantic' femininity, including good taste, discrete beauty, an idealistic world-view, an open heart, and a willingness to serve others. Her problem is that she is not a part of a loving family, nor does she have a social supportive environment. Exploiting the Cinderella-myth, in several dramas the protagonist is motherless or feels deserted; her virtues are taken for granted, and sometimes she is ridiculed or an object of gossip. Normally she have wishes which transcend traditional gender conventions; some hopes for an education – even studies abroad –, but in vain. The young woman may be an orphan living as a poor relative in a well-off family, as is the case with Agnes in Anna Munch's Black *Swans* (*Sorte Svaner,* 1898), or, being alone in the world, she has to support herself as a companion to an elderly rich lady, as is the case with Elisabeth in Laura Kieler's *Men of Honor* (*Mænd af Ære*, 1890). She may also be a lonely spinster in her 30s, yearning for something and someone to live for. Louise in Victoria Benedictsson's *The Enchantment* is such a woman. Her "free-love"-affair with a famous sculptor, whose career has been fading for some years, results in a grand celebrated work for him and suicide for her.

[5] My translation. "Ingen kan vara mer kvinna än jag. Detta begär att få vara något för en människa, att få glömma sitt jag så snart det rör denne andre, det er så äkta kvinnligt. Det är denne jag söker, denne jag alltid har søkt."

And if the protagonist does have a family, as is the case with Bertha in Anne Charlotte Leffler's *True Women* (*Sanna kvinnor*, 1883), she may be mocked because she is not feminine-submissive enough. Bertha is the daughter of a compulsive gambler and a weak mother, who allows her husband to ruin her – the family fortune was once her inheritance –, thus Bertha has to support her family. She works in a bank during the day and has extra copy-work to do until late night, due to her father's recklessness. She even rejects a marriage proposal from a fair-minded colleague and friend because she thinks her mother needs her, well aware that her sacrifice will not be appreciated, and that her father will continue his gambling as long as he can exploit his family. The title, *True Women*, reflects the norms of the family, i.e. it refers to Bertha's mother who is unable to deny her husband anything, and Berthas sister, Lissi, who forgives her philandering husband. But the father finds Bertha unfeminine, especially when she tries to prevent her mother from giving him a small fortune which the mother has received as a personal gift. Of course his opinion also reflects the social prejudices which middle-class women were met with in the 1870s and 80s when they entered the work-force as clerical workers and were accused of being unfeminine, bluestocking, too modern etc.[6] The social context of the drama is the legal reforms of the 1870s and 80s which, altering the doctrine of coverture, allowed married women to be the legal owners of their earnings and values they had received as a gift or an inheritance and to control their fortune and income themselves. Sweden got its *Married Women Property Act* in 1884, securing married women the right to use their own money as well as being the legal owners of them. Bertha tries to act in accordance with the new norms, but gives in to her own unselfish family values. Thus we may interpret the ending as a defeat. On the other hand the play does not depict marriage as an option for an independent-minded woman. While it sometimes happens that women writers supply their protagonist with an attractive suitor, preferable someone who arrives as a stranger and obtains the young women's confidence – a scientist, a scholar or an artist – Bertha' choice places her into a category which we might call 'the woman who refuses marriage'. This type is quite common in 19th century literature, and she signifies the conflicts between wishes, needs and options, i.e. women's restricted possibilities to make their own choices. But Bertha may also represent another trend: a certain rejection of the everyday man – may be because a marriage with a book-keeper lacked the aura of the "wonderful" life which Nora and many other women yearned for.

[6] It is interesting that Nora also does copy-work at home, because she has to earn money to pay her debts. Cf. "Last winter I was lucky enough to get a lot of copying to do; so I locked myself up and sat writing every evening until quite late at night. Many a time I was desperately tired; but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man." (Ibsen 1923, 2).

Another example of 'the woman who refuses to marry' is Bodil in Alvilde Prydz' *Undine* (1904). Her energetic suitor, named Herluf Ørn (=eagle), wants her to go with him to the United States, where he is a university professor and is planning to establish a new community somewhere in Mississippi – a "colony", "new" society for "new" human beings, based on a "new" morality with love, fairness and social felicity as basic values.[7] He is actually negotiating with the government about his plan, including how to supply his new community with new immigrants. Ørn appeals to Bodil's romantic notion of love: He is the man she is searching for, he argues, the man, who is created for her, and who has sought her "with all his heart". But neither his vitality and openness, nor the prospect of a financially secure and/or an adventurous life in the United States convinces her. Bodil longs for a man that may not exist yet, she tells him, "the man you speak of (…) is probably not born yet – maybe he will not be born until about a hundred years". The title, *Undine*, signifies that Bodil, as is the case with Ibsen's Ellida, is a water spirit, a kind of mermaid. But she is also connected to the forest. In a discussion with Ørn Bodil's – and the drama's – nature mysticism becomes evident, "When you [men] are insufficient for us, we [women] go our way into the depths, into the wilderness". And when Bodil leaves her home at the end of the play, neither she, nor the reader knows for what. She might kill herself; she has often talked about death and even about madness, and she mourns the "death" of the young woman she once was – a result of her being disappointed in love. But the play's subscription to "the new man"/"new woman" ideas at the turn of the century may also signal a new century for women, where gender identities are challenged and gender differences are blurred. Talking about the next turn of the century, Bodil may remind us of the famous Swedish writer Ellen Key's discussion of "The Women of the Future" a few years earlier ("Framtidens kvinna», 1898). Key pointed to the end of the 20th century when she predicted a new woman, "Toward the end of the twentieth century only could the type of the nineteenth century woman have reached its culmination and a new type of woman begin to appear (Key 1911, p. 40) But *Undine*'s symbolism also evokes a romantic image of women. For Bodil's longings are vague, and the text is emphasizing her bonds to the wild landscape. Formerly disappointed in love, she now considers herself to be bound by "an incurable love" for the unattainable. By refusing to get tempted by Ørn's offer of a common societal project, which would require hard work by all its participants, Bodil also reinforces the image of her ethereal identity. Being a poor young

[7] Cf. the contemporary interest in utopian and Georgist communities. Among the famous literary examples of the late 19th century Edward Bellamy' *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) was translated into Danish (1889), and Theodor Hertzka's *Freiland. Ein sociales Zukunftsbild* (*Freeland. A social image of the future*, 1890) was translated into Norwegian (1895).

women who has been adopted by a wealthy uncle who adores her, Bodil does not need to do any kind of work, and she does not seem to miss it.

Love is seldom happy in the dramas I have read for this lecture. The woman may be rejected by the man she loves because her life-style is in conflict with conventional social mores, as is the case with the bohemian divorcée Agnete in Amalie Skram's play *Agnete* (1893); a husband cannot accept his loving wife's past, i.e. a premarital love-affair, as is the case with Siri in *The Stronger* (*Den sterkere*) by Dagny Juel Przybyszewska (1867–1901), or the young women might reject a fiancé due to his conventionalism, as Ragna does in Asta Graah's *People* (*Folk*, 1890). This play has a happy ending however. The mother-less Ragna has a supportive father, but he gives in to the gossip about her among their middle-aged female acquaintances because she differs from other young women, being more independent, more knowledgeable, never coquettish or giggling. Thereafter she breaks off her engagement to a young narrow-minded man, and accepts a proposal from a stranger, a scholar who normally travels and works in Africa for the Belgians, begging him to take her away from her home-town and from Norway.

The unhappiest love-affairs in my material are between a male artist/writer and a single, lonely woman. The protagonists are Elisabeth in Kieler's *Men of Honor*, and Louise in Benedictsson's *The Enchantment*. They both meet men who practice the bohemian ideology of "free love", which was so popular among male writers and artists in the 1880s and 90s. Thus these men need a constant supply of women to inspire their work, either as a writer (Kieler) or as a sculptor (Benedictsson). Both plays have a melodramatic ending. Louise drowns herself after she has seen her lover's new grand sculpture – "Destiny" – depicting her as dead. For her the sculpture signals that her lover will leave her, and he regrets his behavior too late. Shaken by her suicide he insists he would have married her. The naïve and idealistic Elisabeth leaves her lover when he tires of her and the charity work she so eagerly has taken up to help the poor and destitute, and she discovers his cynicism, both as a lover and as a radical author. Compromised as a 'fallen' women, she can't get a job, struggles to earn a living by doing copy-work, falls ill and then dies in a melodramatic scene which reminds us of the final scene in Verdi's *La Traviata*. Her lover, who has been at the premiere of his new play, "New Earth" – where he unknowingly has used her story, which he has been told – finds out where she is, and comes to see her just before she dies. Now he regrets his rejection of her, and insists that she is the love of his life. While she has lost her reputation, Elisabeth tells her shaken ex-lover before she dies, he is still a man of honor according to conventional norms – thus the title.

When *The Enchantment* and *Men of Honor* were published, it was widely believed that the cynical male artist/writer was coined after the Danish critic Georg Brandes or the radical writers that belonged to his circles, and both plays have caused heated debates, either when published and performed in 1890 (*Men of Honor*) or during its 20th century reception (*The Enchantment*). The same theme – women as muse and model for the male artist – was later explored by Ibsen in *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). There is also a similarity between the two grand sculptures, "Destiny" in *The Enchantment*, and "Resurrection" in *When We Dead Awaken*.

There is an alternative to this exploitive women model– male artist relation in my material however. Agnes in Anna Munch's *Black Swans* is also a lonely young woman who falls in love with a talented sculptor. The artist, Jonathan, uses her as his model, without knowing her identity. A homeless orphan, after having had to leave the home of an aunt and an uncle because she refused to marry her aunt's lover, the Cinderella-like Agnes moves in with Jonathan, but refuses a sexual affair. Duped by his own success as an artist and a welcomed guest in high society circles, Jonathan then becomes engaged to her vain, egoistic, and seductive cousin. Agnes on the other hand is scandalized when his sculpture of a naked woman is exhibited, and she is recognized as his model and cohabitant. But in the end Jonathan realizes that he loves Agnes. Thus he is an example of men who are dazzled by sensual deceptions, but unlike Louise the sensible Agnes does not give in to the "hypnothic-demonic" forces of love.

If we look for happy married couples in these plays I have found just one example. Klara, Elisabeth's fair-minded friend in *Men of Honor*, is married to an engineer. She enjoys being a wife and a mother, rejects to live an upper-class life, and insists, successfully, on her own moral standards when it comes to Elisabeth's choices and fate. She also convinces her husband to share her loyalty to her friend, to accept that she has her own opinions in moral matters, and to ignore the gossip which she might be met with herself because she does not reject Elisabeth. Elisabeth dies in their home.

To conclude so far, the plays I have discussed above, do not reject the romantic image of women as loving and lovely creatures, but they try to demonstrate how genuine feminine values too often are down-graded in a society where – to quote Collett – "men are dazzled by sensual deceptions" and their own egoistic needs, and women are allowed to be narrow-minded and vain, or, if not, are idealistic or naïve, and bound to lose their illusions. Love is a major theme; hypocrisy, dilutions and gossip belong to the order of the day; lack of education and missing access to paid work pop up as problems in several plays, and generally the young

protagonists long for an alternative to the narrow or hollow everyday-life they are expected to live. A certain rejection of the mother-generation may also be spotted in the motherless protagonists, and in the hostile images of middle-aged women as gatekeepers of polite society with its fixed gender-roles. No one seems to be interested in politics – a surprise may be, when we think of the political conflicts of the late 19th century, including the women's movement of the 1880s and 90s.

Lovely women and evil monsters

Most Scandinavian women playwrights of the late 19th century and early 2000s published realistic dramas, featuring very likeable protagonists. But there are some exceptions to this tendency. Among Norwegian women writers, *Dagny Juel Przybyszewska* and *Hulda Garborg* (1862 –1934) are the ones who offer the strongest deviations from the "nice young woman struggling to cope with the world and make a life for herself"-plot. They share an interest in women who are more demonic than angel-like, women with a will to power, women who may commit crimes to achieve their aims, women whose fatal attractions may ruin other women's life, sometimes to the extent that their victims commit suicide. Two such women are Gunnhild in Juel Przybyszewska's *Ravens Farm* (*Ravnegård*, 1900?) and Miss Linde in Garborg's *The Spider* (*Edderkoppen*, 1904). They are both single women in charge of old farms; both are obsessed by the need to conquer a certain man (Juel Przybyszewska), or a series of them (Garborg), and the men bend to their wishes although they also despise and hate them and may be married to women whom they love. In Gunnhild's case, she cannot stand that her sweet younger sister unwittingly has married her own former lover. When the happy newly-wed couple comes on a longer visit to the farm, she is able to convince her brother-in-law that she is his destiny, and that their love is beyond social mores. And when her betrayed sister commits suicide by leaping to her death from a waterfall, she refuses to take any blame, but attribute the events to fate. The plot illustrates a general tendency in *Dagny Juel Przybyszewska's* fin-de siècle dramas: love implies a power-struggle between man and women; Eros triumphs over affection, and love tends to be fatal. In one of her short plays, *At sunset* (*Når sol går ned*, probably written in 1897), a betrayed dead wife reappears as a ghost and seems to kill the protagonist who, together with the dead woman's husband, caused her death. And in *The Sin* (*Synden*, probably written in 1897) a young wife murder her elderly husband because she has let herself be seduced by a family friend and now fear her husband's grievances.

Hulda Garborg's Miss Linde is a femme fatale, a man-eater. Presenting herself as a pious and caring woman, she is hypersexual and obsessed by controlling her lovers. She has inherited her fortune from a former lover, whose rightly young heir she seduced and made into an alcoholic and her lover. Another lover later brought her his daughter, whom she has kept as a foster-daughter after he died, well aware that the wife he left behind, and whom he had loved, now is too poor to take care of her children. When the young girl, Bertha, some years falls in love with the farm manager, it turns out that he is also the lover of Miss Linde, who is willing to accept a marriage with Bertha to keep him as her own lover. Miss Linde is a cold, calculating woman, and when Bertha tried to shoot her in the final scene of the play, she fails. The Devil protects her, according to one of Miss Linde's lovers, who arrives at the scene. The exclamation may remind us of how Gunnhild's old aunt cursed her in the final scene of *Ravens Farm*, "I curse you forever. May your damned bewitched flowers blur your soul and your mind with its poisonous breath, so that you will never see the sun and the light again!"[8]

Compared to the plays I discussed in the former section of my lecture, *Ravens Farm* and *The Spider* explore the darker side of the female human being. The women are lonely, unable to form genuine attachments, envious on other lovely and loving women, power-driven, afraid of nothing, and, especially Miss Linde, manipulative. One could argue that by launching such self-driven protagonists, Juel Przybyszewska and Garborg challenge the traditional romantic and Victorian images of women. But on the other hand, these protagonists are more (psychologically) imprisoned than the kind young heroines in for instance Anna Munch's and Laura Kieler's plays. Gunnhild seems to compare herself to a large flower, which longs for movement and freedom but whose roots are trapped in the soil. The spider's web attracts its victims, but spiders are seldom social, and male spiders always risk to be eaten by its partner before, during, or after copulation. Trapped by their lust and their intrigues both Miss Linde and Gunnhild may end up as their own victims – if we are to guess what will happen in the future. And certainly the battle of the sexes in Garborg's and Juel Przybyszewska's plays does not offer women the loving relationships they yearn for, but are unable to achieve.

Noras's sisters?

[8] "Jeg forbander dig i all evighed! Måtte dine forhexede helvedesblomster omtåge din sjæl og dit sind med sin giftige ånde, så du aldrig mer fikk se solen og lyset!"

It goes without saying that neither Dagny Juel's Gunnhild nor Hulda Garborg's Miss Linde belong to the Nora-type in late 19th and early 20th century literature. On the contrary, they belong to the "evil sisters" of the European and American fin-de-siècle culture, to use Bram Dijkstra's classification. As for the other protagonists I have discussed, we may recognize a longing for the right to self-definition and to challenge conventional norms which restrict women's lives. A few leave their home and experience how difficult it is for a middle-class woman to support herself by paid work, but these protagonists have no children. Some experience how love ruins their lives, but thereafter they usually die, while Nora slams the door, hoping for a future. A few refuses to marry. With very few exceptions the men in the dramas are not paternal as is the case with the husbands in *A Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea*. They are more often irresponsible or weak and one is a cynical fortune hunter. But a few may be interpreted as images of a new modern man, who neither subscribes to the doctrine of coverture, nor to the bohemian idea of a free love as a relationship without long-lasting obligations.

Of course Ibsen's plays were an inspiration for many women writers in the late 19th century, and women dramatists of the time were also reviewed by critics who referred to Ibsen as the master of the modern drama – including the drama which focuses on women's positions in a patriarchal society. But we diminish their talent and their work if we just read them as his followers, and we do miss out the cultural significance of the many women's voices which used the drama as a medium to explore middle-class women's identities, hopes, anxieties, and challenges in the late 19th and early 20th century.

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