Women in Context

An International Series

NORWEGIAN WOMEN'S WRITING 1850-1990

Janet Garton

Norwegian Women's Writing 1850–1990

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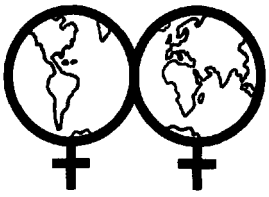

Women's Writing 1850–1990

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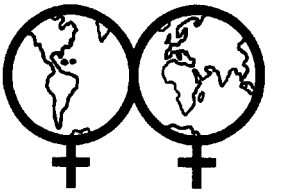
Women in Context



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Janet Garton

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In memory of Astrid
and for Annegret, Carol and Eli
– and all the others who have shared
the frustrations and the joys

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Finally I should like to thank my parents for their unflagging support and my sons for their forbearance during three long years.

Janet Garton
Norwich

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Series Foreword

The aim of the *Women in Context* series is to present a country-by-country survey of women's writing from the beginnings of the struggle for emancipation until the present day. It will include not just feminist writers but women's writing in a more general sense, incorporating a study of those working independently of or even in direct opposition to the feminist aim of greater autonomy for women.

While the principal emphasis is on literature and literary figures, they are placed in the context of the social, political and cultural development without which their position cannot be properly understood, and which helps to explain the differing rates of progress in different areas. The volumes therefore combine survey chapters, dealing with women's place in the public and private life of a given period, with more in-depth studies of key figures, in which attention will be focused on the texts. There is no attempt at encyclopaedic completeness, rather a highlighting of issues perceived as specifically relevant by women, and of writers who have influenced the course of events or made a significant contribution to the literature of their day. Wherever possible, parallels with other countries are drawn so that the works can be placed in an international perspective. Modern critical currents are also taken into account in relating feminist criticism to recent critical theory.

Until quite recently women's writing has been virtually excluded from the literary canon in many countries; as a result there is often a dearth of information available in English, and an absence of good translations. *Women in Context* represents a move to remedy this situation by providing information in a way which does not assume previous knowledge of the language or the politics of the country concerned; all quotations are in English, and summaries of central texts are provided. The general reader or student of literature or women's studies will find the volumes a useful introduction to the field. For those interested in further research, there is a substantial

bibliography of studies of women's writing in the country concerned and of individual authors, and of English translations available in modern editions.

Janet Garton

Introduction

Why a volume on Norwegian women writers? Norwegian literature is an area to which not even the most informed general reader has had much access. Ibsen is an internationally acclaimed dramatist (without, often, being much associated with Norway at all); Knut Hamsun is known to some; but of women writers, none but Sigrid Undset has ever achieved noteworthy success in the English-speaking world. Like Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden, Edith Södergran in Finland, Karen Blixen in Denmark, she seems an isolated figure; yet behind each of these writers lies a rich and diverse tradition which is in many cases only now becoming available to English readers through the medium of translation.

The Scandinavian countries are often held up today as models of liberated thinking and radical legislation as regards women's role in the family, in employment and in politics; and the admiration is justified. Yet behind these achievements lies a long struggle, originating in a form of society which in the early nineteenth century was as male-dominated as any in Europe. In Norway the conflict was exacerbated by the fact that the country itself was struggling into independence in the first part of the century. Unlike Denmark and Sweden, with centuries of independence behind them, Norway had been for hundreds of years a protectorate under the Danish crown, and even during the whole of the nineteenth century it was partially dependent on Sweden.

During the years after independence from Denmark in 1814, Norway was gradually evolving its own system of government and its own distinct literary tradition; and the issue of women's rights was one which emerged slowly. The major woman writer in mid-nineteenth century Norway, Camilla Collett, would ruefully compare her own country's progress in such matters with that of Great Britain and the United States, and hold up John Stuart Mill as a model to her own countrymen. In literature too, women were

for a long time practically invisible, despite the fact that creative writing enjoyed enormous prestige in the new nationalism of the nineteenth century. Norway's men of letters were regarded not just as entertainers but as representative national figures, guardians of the national spirit. Yet until the last couple of decades of the century, one looks in vain for well-known female literary figures; in an epoch which in English literature produced Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and then George Eliot, there is only one woman writer who is pre-eminent in Norwegian literature, and that is Camilla Collett herself.[1]

The last two decades of the nineteenth century, however, saw the founding of groups dedicated to the cause of liberation for women, and particularly to winning the vote; and women began to play an increasingly public role in literary and cultural debate. Camilla Collett, who came to public attention with her novel *Amtmandens Døttre* (*The District Governor's Daughters*) in 1854–55, became the first of several women writers to contribute both in fiction and in polemic utterances to the debate about women's role in society and about sexuality and the double standard, which reached a pitch of vociferousness bordering on hysteria in Scandinavia as a whole in the 1880s and 1890s.

Once the Women's Liberation Movement in Norway got going, it moved comparatively quickly. It had its share of frustrations, but nevertheless succeeded, without resorting to the extreme measures to which the British suffragette movement was driven, in winning universal suffrage in 1913. Norway was only the second European country to give all women the vote, after Finland in 1906; Denmark followed in 1915, Sweden not until after Britain in 1921. For a time Norway was in the vanguard, acclaimed by American liberationists who did not achieve universal suffrage for the whole of the USA until 1920. (All the Protestant countries of Northern Europe were, of course, much earlier than the Southern Catholic countries in according this privilege to women; countries like France, Spain and Italy had to wait until after the Second World War.) [2]

After the winning of the vote, there was something of a lull in liberationist activity in Norway, as in many other countries; important as was its symbolic significance, it did not radically alter the structures of power or the programmes of the political parties,

and women's direct influence in public life did not increase to any marked extent.[3] It was not until 1924 that the first woman was elected to the Norwegian Parliament, and the Church, the legal profession, industry and finance remained solely the preserve of men. Legislation to improve women's social standing, begun in the nineteenth century, proceeded slowly; but the economic depression of the 1930s and the upheaval of the Second World War, with the German occupation, focused attention elsewhere. It was not until the late 1960s that there began the surge in feminist agitation which resulted in a degree of participation in public life at the highest level and a real equality of opportunity in most fields, enshrined in law, which is second to none in the world.

If there was a slackening in the rate of women's political achievements in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the same cannot be said of women's writing; from the 1880s onwards, Norwegian literature has produced a number of literary figures who would be as well known internationally as George Sand or George Eliot had they written in French or English. And the last generation in particular has seen women writers becoming a major force in literary life, responsible for much of the most exciting work being written. The majority are still, as they have always been, writers of fiction; but they have made significant contributions to drama and poetry as well.

Feminist literary criticism has emerged as a discipline in Norway since the early 1970s, and has attracted some of the best talents amongst researchers. The majority of research has adopted the historical-biographical approach, the so-called 'Anglo-American' method, undertaking the task of rewriting literary history in order to rediscover the lost tradition of women writers, along the lines of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own,*[4] or re-evaluating the work of well-known authors from a fresh perspective, as in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic.*[5] But there are also adherents of the 'French' school of linguistic criticism, which starts from the premiss that it is impossible for women writers and critics to liberate themselves from the strictures of the male tradition unless they first reinvent language to embody the multiplicity of the feminine.[6]

Little criticism in English about Norwegian women's writing exists, beyond a few articles on authors like Sigrid Undset or Cora Sandel.[7] This makes it difficult to refer English speakers to secondary reading, much of which is in Norwegian. Part of the reason for this has been the lack, until very recently, of any substantial body of translated works. Sigrid Undset is unique in being the only Norwegian woman writer whose major works were translated not long after they were written – no doubt in part due to the award of the Nobel Prize. Twenty-two of her books had been published in English by the time of her death in 1949. Otherwise only Cora Sandel made any impact before the last few years, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Elizabeth Rokkan, who translated five of her novels in the 1960s.

In the last decade, however, there has been a considerable change, due largely to the enterprise of a few small publishing houses in Britain and America, and to the Norwegian government's policy of supporting the publication of its literature abroad.[8] Nineteenth-century classics like Amalie Skram's *Constance Ring* and *Betrayed*, short stories by Nini Roll Anker, Ragnhild Jølsen, Solveig Christov and others have at last been published in English. Camilla Collett's *The District Governor's Daughters* has just appeared for the first time in English, almost 140 years after its publication in Norway. Halldis Moren Vesaas's *Selected Poems* has also appeared. Contemporary literature is faring better too; the list of recent translations includes Bjørg Vik's *An Aquarium of Women*, *Out of Season* and *Daughters*, Cecilie Løveid's *Seagull Eaters* and *Sea Swell*, Gerd Brantenberg's *What Comes Naturally* and *The Daughters of Egalia*, Herbjørg Wassmo's *The House with the Blind Glass Windows*. The time is ripe for a fuller presentation of these works and their authors in English.

My decisions about which authors to foreground in the following study have been influenced in part by the availability of translations, but also by my own sense of their relative importance in both a historical and a literary context. Of the authors to whom I have devoted a complete chapter, most are principally writers of fiction, but I have included one poet (Halldis Moren Vesaas) and one dramatist (Cecilie Løveid). Because much of the material will be relatively unfamiliar to many readers, I have introduced a fair amount of historical and biographical information, highlighting the

tensions which lie behind as well as within the texts. Yet the main emphasis is always placed on the texts themselves. I have been concerned to examine not only what Norwegian women write but the way they write, the rhythms and images of their poetry and prose – to demonstrate that they do indeed have a literature of their own.

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PART I
1850–1913

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1
Finding a Voice

The Birth of a Nation

It was with the publication of Camilla Collett's novel *Amtmandens Døttre* (*The District Governor's Daughters*) in 1854–5 that the struggle for women's rights in Norway can be said to have properly begun. In order to understand the frustrations out of which the book arose, however, it is necessary to look back to the beginning of the nineteenth century or, more precisely, to 1814, the year in which the modern Norwegian state came into being.

For many hundreds of years before 1814 – ever since the latter part of the fourteenth century – Norway had not existed as an independent sovereign state. The country was ruled by the Danish monarch; and although in theory all (male) citizens of the twin kingdoms were equal, in practice it was Danish administration, language and culture which predominated. The Norwegian civil service was largely staffed by Danes, and Copenhagen was the cultural as well as the administrative centre of both countries. Norway did not have its own university; its scholars studied at the University of Copenhagen and its intellectuals and artists often settled there permanently. The population was small and largely rural. Of the total of 885,000 in 1815, only 9.8 per cent lived in towns; the rest were scattered over a wide expanse of often inhospitable terrain. In comparison with the rest of Europe it was backward; in the eyes of the great powers it was negligible.

The beginning of the nineteenth century brought international conflicts in which Norway became an incidental victim. The British naval blockade of Denmark from 1807 meant that Norway was virtually cut off from its ruler and, more seriously, from its trade links; near starvation followed. In the bargaining of the great powers, Swedish ambitions to take over Norway grew, as it became politically expedient for the Swedes to look westwards to compensate for the loss of Finland to the Russians in 1808–9. The

Swedish crown prince, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte (later Karl Johan), took advantage of Denmark's vulnerability to threaten Frederik VI into ceding Norway to Sweden.

The union with Sweden, which was to last until 1905, was, however, very different from the utter dependency of the relationship to Denmark. National feeling had been growing in Norway since the late eighteenth century, and the years of isolation from Denmark gave it further impetus. In 1809 a society for the promotion of economic and educational advance, *Selskabet for Norges vel*, was founded, and 1813 saw the foundation of a Norwegian university and plans for a national bank. When news of the cession reached leading Norwegians, they were not disposed to accept their new overlords passively. At a meeting of a hastily organized national assembly at Eidsvoll in April 1814, regional representatives drew up and ratified a Norwegian constitution, which laid down provisions for a national Parliament [*Storting*] to oversee the running of national affairs in collaboration with the king and his ministers. The Swedes saw the expediency in ensuring a peaceful takeover by accepting the constitution, which thus provided a significant degree of autonomy for Norway, and the basis for much future wrangling as the Norwegians progressed towards complete independence during the uneasy century of union.

The constitution confirmed Norway's growing sense of nationhood, which began to make itself felt in all areas of public life during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The *Storting* gradually acquired more confidence in its dealings with the Swedish king, local government was introduced and political parties were formed, until in 1884 full parliamentarianism under Johan Sverdrup's new Liberal administration began the process of dismantling the union.

The building up of the cultural life of Norway, and especially of the capital, Christiania (Oslo[1]), was a vital ingredient in the creation of a national identity. There can be few countries in which there has been such intense interaction between writers and politics, and in which writers' pronouncements have been taken so seriously, as they were in Norway throughout the nineteenth century. The milieu was small, and prominent figures often played many roles. In the 1830s and 1840s, nationalism coincided with Romanticism to produce a National Romantic movement of which the hero

was Henrik Wergeland (1808–45), son of one of the founders of the constitution. He has been given the lion's share of the credit for restoring Norwegians' confidence in their cultural inheritance;[2] as well as producing some fine poetry and plays, he was an ardent advocate of education for the people, writing a series of popular textbooks, a furious polemicist and a devotee of the Norwegian line in politics and literature, striving for a native and colloquial tone in his writings. In this he was opposed by a Danophile group which favoured a gradual development of the joint Dano–Norwegian culture which had grown up over the centuries, based on the Danish language as the natural medium of expression. The leader of this group was also a poet, Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1807–73), whose classically restrained verse was as much a contrast to Wergeland's as were his politics.

Reviving the national culture involved looking back to the past – and in Norway's case, to find a heroic past one had to look some way back, to before the Black Death and the collapse of Norwegian autonomy. There was thus a revival of interest in medieval culture during this period (further encouraged by Romantic tendencies, which, in Norway as elsewhere, encouraged a glorification of this half-mythical time). Sagas, ballads and tales of the Norsemen provided material for quasi-historical treatments of Norway's golden age – amongst others, for Ibsen's early historical dramas in the 1850s. Turning to the more recent past, researchers also became aware of the oral tradition which had preserved the folk literature down through the centuries. The pioneers in this field were P.Chr. Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, who travelled around the country collecting *Norske folkeeventyr* (*Norwegian Folk Tales*, 1841–4). These collections are important not only for the tales which they rescued for posterity but also for the language in which they are retold, which attempts to capture the colloquial style of the teller and give them a more native Norwegian form.

The importance of the language question in the development of the modern Norwegian state can hardly be exaggerated; it still raises hackles today in a way which amazes foreigners whose own language development has been a process of gradual growth. During the centuries Danish had become the official written language, differing in orthography and vocabulary from the still spoken Norwegian. A reinstatement of Norwegian became part

of the national programme. There were two different schools of thought, however. One advocated a gradual adaptation of Danish to conform more closely to educated Norwegian usage, the other a radical break with Danish and the substitution of a new language form based on the rural language of the people. In the event – and one might say unfortunately, in view of later ramifications – both directions were followed, with the result that two Norwegian languages developed. Dano–Norwegian, which developed into the modern *bokmål* ('book-language'), approximated to urban usage in Eastern Norway, and has always been the language of the majority. However, a significant (but now dwindling) number, among them some of Norway's finest writers, opted for the other language, originally called *landsmål* (national language) but since 1929 called *nynorsk* (Neo-Norwegian). The latter is a language which owes its formation to one man, the philologist Ivar Aasen, who travelled around rural Norway in the 1840s collecting dialects out of which he constructed a dialect norm, publishing a grammar in 1848. In the 1880s *landsmål* was accepted as an alternative language of instruction in schools.

What part did women play in the birth of this modern Norwegian state? In direct political terms, the answer is, not surprisingly: absolutely none. There were no women delegates at Eidsvoll in 1814; both the electors and the representatives they chose were male. So were the electorate for the *Storting*, and the Members of Parliament. It has been suggested that it was a retrograde step for women's participation in public affairs:

> Those tough, strict, responsible men had little ability to understand and value the female mind. There were several women who were well-known and had wide influence in the centuries before the nineteenth. From the beginning of the nineteenth century – or rather from 1814 onwards – there is not a single woman in Norway who is visible beyond the narrow circle of the family. And in the furious politicking which developed in Norway after 1814 we do not hear a single woman's voice.[3]

The men themselves, of course, represented an élite. The franchise was restricted during most of the nineteenth century to men

with a property qualification; as late as the 1870s, only 7–8 per cent of the population was entitled to vote. But stranger than the absence of female electors is the almost total absence of women from any form of public life during the early part of this century. This is no doubt largely due to the fact that there was so much emphasis on 'politicking' during this period. Women had no legal status in their own right, could not carry on a trade and had no access to higher education. Bourgeois women were respectable only as members of a family; working-class women toiled at menial tasks for even less pay than their menfolk.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century there were some cautious political reforms which benefited a small number of women. In 1839 the *Storting* decreed that women over forty should be authorized to practise a craft if it was necessary for their own support; in 1842 this right was extended to all unmarried women. There is no evidence that women themselves agitated for these reforms, however; they were seen primarily as a relief to heads of families who had previously had to support unmarried female relatives who were unable to earn their own living, and whose presence in the household was becoming burdensome as labour-saving devices made housework easier and there was less need of their unpaid labours. Yet this was the beginning of a process of reform which gradually recognized women's right to participation in economic and public life.

There was no well-known female writer or artist in Norway in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cultural life too was the preserve of an élite, and flourished mainly in circles connected with the University of Christiania – to which women did not have access. That is not to say that women were not writing before 1850; they had been writing since before books were printed, and the tradition of published women's writing in Norway goes back to the poet and psalmist Dorothe Engelbretsdatter in the seventeenth century. But their writing was often of the intimate kind which did not catch the public eye: religious meditations, translations, stories for children, memoirs. Often it was anonymous, and has been overlooked by literary historians.[4] It is also of relevance to

note that the novel, which has shown itself to be a form congenial to the talent of women writers, developed rather late in Norway; in fact the realistic novel of family life did not make its appearance in Norwegian literature until there was a woman of sufficient talent to create it. That woman was Camilla Collett, and the novel was *The District Governor's Daughters*.

Two Pioneers

Camilla Collett's novel was the culmination of a long struggle on the part of its author, a cry of protest against the stultifying conventions which she felt had ruined her life. She came from the privileged élite (she was a Wergeland), but was assailed by her own temerity in publishing at all, and tried to preserve her anonymity. It was only in later life that she began to speak out in her own name about the injustices perpetrated against women of her class – and others; and by then she had been joined by other educated women whose efforts were directed to practical reform. (See Chapter 2.)

The other pioneer of the women's liberation movement in Norway was an equally remarkable woman, Aasta Hansteen (1824–1908). She too came to feminism as a result of personal suffering. She was in many ways the opposite of Camilla Collett; although she also was privileged in terms of background and opportunity, she felt herself to be unattractive where Camilla was beautiful and fêted, yet she came – paradoxically – to seek public attention, whereas Camilla shunned it. She threw herself passionately into many causes.[5] She began her career in the 1850s as a painter and continued to regard herself for most of her life as first and foremost an artist. In the 1860s she took up the language cause, becoming only the third writer after Ivar Aasen and the poet Aasmund Olafsson Vinje to publish in *landsmål*; her book *Skrift og Umskrift i Landsmaalet* (Writing and Rewriting in Landsmaal, 1862) contains both her own original poetry in the language and her recasting of texts by other authors, including Wergeland, Asbjørnsen and Moe. It was not until the 1870s that she began to agitate for the rights of women;

and then she dedicated herself to that cause, giving public lectures and writing articles with a lack of moderation which made her a favourite subject for caricature. (She has also left more serious traces in men's writing, being used as a model by Ibsen for his Lona Hessel in *Samfundets støtter* (*Pillars of Society*, 1877) and by the playwright Gunnar Heiberg for the eponymous heroine of *Tante Ulrikke* (Aunt Ulrikke, 1884)). Embittered by lack of recognition, in 1880 she took refuge in America, where she remained for nine years, making contacts with women's organizations and enjoying the more liberal climate.

In Norway too, however, things were changing; in the 1880s, women became organized and the fight for liberation began in earnest. When Aasta Hansteen returned in 1889, it was to a quite different atmosphere. Both she and Camilla Collett lived long enough to hear their lone voices taken up by a chorus, and to receive recognition in their old age for their achievements.

Neither Aasta Hansteen nor Camilla Collett had a programme of practical reform; different as their methods were, they shared the view that it was a change in consciousness rather than in political and social structures that was needed. Both still saw woman's place as being within the family, but wanted to give her greater autonomy within her proper sphere. There were other influences that were making themselves felt during the 1860s and 1870s, however, which were to have profound repercussions for the status of women. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was known and discussed in Scandinavia during the 1860s (and translated into Danish by the author J.P. Jacobsen in 1871–3); as in other European countries, it had the effect of making people question the superiority of mankind and the supremacy of the Church and the patriarchal institutions it sanctioned. More directly, John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), which appeared in the same year in Danish in a translation by the critic Georg Brandes, provoked heated discussion about the place of women in society. In Norway, the gradual process of reforms continued, with women gaining more control over their own affairs, training for the new office work, and obtaining access to higher education – culminating in the

admission of the first female student to the University of Christiania in 1882.

Political Progress and Social Realism

In the 1880s, development was rapid in many areas. In political life, the development of the dual-party system which culminated in the first Liberal administration in 1884 stimulated a reassessment of conservative institutions; the Liberals were more sympathetic towards underprivileged groups, including women, and instrumental in seeing through social and educational reform. But women too were beginning to take a more public role. 1884 also saw the formation of *Norsk kvinnesaksforening* (The Norwegian Women's Liberation Organization), the first public organization to fight for women's equality. Many of its most influential members were men. It was, however, cautious about going as far as demanding the right to vote, and in the following year a new organization, *Norsk kvinnestemmerettsforening* (The Norwegian Women's Suffrage Organization) was formed by a breakaway group. This was to be entirely a women's organization, and chose as its leader Gina Krog, a campaigner who had given up her teaching post in 1880 in order to devote the rest of her life to the cause. She was the editor of the movement's journal *Nylænde* (lit. 'newly cleared land') from its inception in 1887, and kept it going, often practically single-handed, until her death in 1916 (the journal actually survived until 1927). The group worked for political reform, stimulated by similar organizations abroad, in particular in America and England, and in 1890 a motion to give the vote to property-owning women got as far as the *Storting*. It was defeated, but had attracted considerable support; the women felt that the tide was turning in their favour.[6]

Literary figures played a major part in public debate in the 1880s too. This was the period of 'problem' literature, the so-called Modern Breakthrough, when social issues were a central concern for many writers. It was a literary direction which was fostered and focused by Georg Brandes, who in a series of lectures in Copenhagen during the 1870s on *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century

Literature) had explained new developments in European literature to his fellow Scandinavians and urged them to write in a realistic manner about contemporary society. Preoccupation with modern social problems led many authors to focus on the position of women – and not only bourgeois women. The working class became a serious literary subject for the first time, rather than a rural idyll or a backcloth; and working-class women were perceived to be doubly disadvantaged. Sexual morality too became the subject of a furious pan-Scandinavian literary feud which lasted over decades, but reached its climax in the 1880s.

Drama had become a medium for literary debate in Norway by the 1880s. After a late start – the first Norwegian-language theatre was founded by Ole Bull in Bergen in 1850, followed by one in Christiania in 1852 – Norwegian theatre had acquired two major talents, Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and his equally famous contemporary Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). It was in 1879 that Ibsen wrote what came to be seen as his clarion call for women's liberation, *Et Dukkehjem* (A Doll's House); this was followed by many plays in which it is the female central character who demonstrates a strength of purpose or a breadth of vision unequalled by the men (Mrs Alving in *Gengangere* [Ghosts, 1881], Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm,* 1886), or whose life has been ruined by lack of opportunity (*Hedda Gabler,* 1890) or callous exploitation (Irene in *Når vi døde vågner* [*When We Dead Awaken,* 1899]). Although Ibsen did maintain that he was a supporter not of women's liberation but of people's liberation, his strongest sympathies lie with those whose efforts in the pursuit of self-realization are most severely hampered, and in nineteenth-century Norway that category consisted largely of women.

Bjørnson played a central role in public debate throughout the second half of the century, taking up the cudgels on behalf of a breathtaking number of causes. Many of his plays and novels contain what would now be called positive role-models: strong and self-assured women whose men are not always equal to the challenge they pose. His emancipated women include Valborg in his play *En Fallit* (*A Bankrupt,* 1875), and the heroines of *Leonora* (1879) and *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* (1898). With Georg Brandes, August Strindberg and others he played a leading role in

the sexual morality debate, which revolved around the question of the double standard: whether society should condone promiscuity in men while simultaneously demanding chastity of women; this led to questions of free love, prostitution, contraception, the right to divorce, etc. Bjørnson's main literary contribution to the debate was his play *En Hanske* (*A Gauntlet*, 1883), in which the item in question is thrown down in challenge to her fiancé by the heroine Svava, when she discovers that he has had an affair.

The other two writers who make up the 'four greats' of this period – Jonas Lie (1833–1908) and Alexander Kielland (1849–1906) – also contributed to the debate. Jonas Lie's novels from the 1880s, *Familjen paa Gilje* (The Family at Gilje, 1883) and *Kommandørens Døttre* (The Commodore's Daughters, 1886) explore the lack of opportunities for women and their fates under the tyranny of convention. The title of the latter novel is a reference to Camilla Collett's *The District Governor's Daughters*, and it is written in the same spirit. (It is noteworthy in this context that Jonas Lie's wife, Thomasine, played a major role – as he acknowledged – both in developing his ideas and in giving them artistic form; yet her name does not appear on any publications.)[7] Kielland's satirical novels and short stories expose male pretensions and self-delusion; he is also concerned about the exploitation of working-class girls and the evils of prostitution, a theme which aroused growing outrage throughout the 1880s until the *Storting* passed a law in 1887 abolishing legalized prostitution. Kielland's short story *Else* (1881), which depicts an honest working-class girl who is seduced by a cynical adventurer and forced into prostitution to stay alive, helped to raise the storm of indignation which led to a change in the law. Battle in this area was also joined by authors whose books caused such a scandal that they were banned: Christian Krohg's *Albertine* (1886), which went further than *Else* in portraying moral corruption (amongst the police) and the horrors of prostitution and enforced medical examination; and Hans Jæger's *Fra Kristiania-Bohêmen* (From the Christiania Bohemia, 1885), one of the major works of the 'Bohemian' literature which made the case for unfettered sexual indulgence for both men and women.

Thus the interweaving of literary activity, social debate and legislation was intimate during the 1880s; women's lack of autonomy was highlighted by socially concerned writers, who helped to form the climate of opinion which made changes possible. It is symptomatic of this involvement that in 1884, when the *Storting* had discussed the question of whether a married woman should have the right to own her own property and a referendum of local council members had overwhelmingly defeated the proposal, Bjørnson took the initiative to send a protest, signed by Ibsen, Kielland and Lie, pointing out the unfairness of making a woman automatically subject to her husband, and of asking only men to vote on the matter. (It was, commented Ibsen archly, 'like asking wolves to approve of increased measures of protection for a flock of sheep'.[8])

It was not only male writers on whom the burgeoning women's movement relied for support – although they were invaluable during the early stages, which is why they have been given so much space here. An increasing number of women were responding to the calls for socially committed writing. The most well-known was Amalie Skram, who made her debut in 1885 with *Constance Ring*. This is the first of many novels which investigate the consequences of the double standard, here the fate of a young girl brought up in complete ignorance of sexuality, who is married off to an older, experienced man – with catastrophic results. Both in her life and in her writing Amalie Skram was to demonstrate the classic problems of self-realization for an independent woman in a male-dominated society (see Chapter 3).

Amalie Skram's talent, like Camilla Collett's, has been to some extent recognized in traditional literary histories.[9] The same has not been true of other nineteenth-century women writers, who have been remembered – if at all – for reasons other than their writing. Magdalene Thoresen (1819–1903) is a case in point. Her main claim to fame was first as Ibsen's mother-in-law, and second as a model for various of his and Bjørnson's characters. A sensual woman, who was clearly not satisfied by her marriage to the kindly but considerably older Pastor Thoresen, she was thought to have been the model for Ellida in Ibsen's *Fruen fra havet* (*The*

Lady from the Sea, 1888). Many of Bjørnson's strong-willed female characters, like the heroine of *Fiskerjenten* (*The Fisher Girl*, 1868) and of *Leonora* (1879), probably owe much to the woman whose passionate nature at once fascinated and alarmed him. But she was herself a successful writer who was rated alongside Camilla Collett by critics like Georg Brandes. She published a book of poems, *Digte af en Dame* (Poems by a Lady), as early as 1860, becoming the first woman author in Norway to eschew anonymity.

Her poems still seem remarkably fresh and intimate; they give direct expression to female desire in an unprecedented way. Some are addressed by an older woman to a young man – a scandalous subject, but concealed in the imagery of flowers ('Resedaen taler' – 'The Mignonette Speaks') or as a regret for her own lost childhood ('En Drøm' – 'A Dream'). It is a theme which recurs in one of her best stories, 'Min Bedstemoders Fortælling' ('My Grandmother's Tale', 1867), in which a grandmother on her deathbed recounts the story of her hopeless love for a younger man – which was unexpectedly realized when his wife died, and she demonstrated the courage of her love and claimed him as her husband. (The young poet in the story bore such a strong resemblance to the young Bjørnson that no one could be in much doubt – and certainly not Bjørnson himself, who was so offended by her use of him that they were estranged for some time. Although he was happy to use her as a model, he did not wish to have the compliment returned.)

Magdalene Thoresen wrote throughout her life after being left a widow with small children in 1858, endeavouring to support herself by her pen – a battle which she gradually won, as her work became popular. She wrote mainly novels and short stories, somewhat uneven in quality, inclining towards the melodramatic and fatalistic; but in the best of them, such as the popular *Billeder fra Midnatsolens Land* (Pictures from the Land of the Midnight Sun, 1884–6), she gives finely observed portraits of life in rural Norway, and particularly of women. Her later work was popular with women readers, and with women critics as they began to appear towards the end of the century.[10]

Dramatic writing is a genre in which women writers have traditionally made less impact; and they play little part in the official history of nineteenth-century Scandinavian theatre, dominated as it

is by figures like Ibsen, Bjørnson and Strindberg.[11] From the late eighteenth century onwards, however, women were involved in the dramatic societies which were formed in several Norwegian towns as private clubs with restricted membership. Their involvement was principally as actresses, and women from the leading families did not regard it as improper to take part. They also played a part behind the scenes, for example in translating foreign plays – though such work was often anonymous. As the nineteenth century progressed they began to write too – and had their works performed in progressively larger numbers. During the period 1870 to 1900, for example, the originally Danish-language Christiania Theatre performed fifty plays written by Norwegian dramatists, of which eleven were by women. Amongst the better-known women dramatists are Mathilde Schjøtt (1844–1926) and Marie Colban (1814–84). Amalie Skram wrote one major play, *Agnete* (1893), which did not do well when it was first staged in Bergen but has since become a popular part of theatrical repertoire.

In the history of the Norwegian theatre too, Magdalene Thoresen is an important but largely forgotten name. She wrote many plays, of which no fewer than four were staged (anonymously) at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen during the 1850s – three of them whilst Henrik Ibsen was director. None did very well, but they were useful training for her later more successful dramas: *Et rigt Parti* (A Good Catch, 1870), a play about the immorality of young girls selling themselves to rich husbands, which was performed both in Copenhagen and at the Christiania Theatre; and *Inden Døre* (Behind Closed Doors, 1877), a study of generation conflict which had considerable success in both Christiania and Bergen, and was also performed abroad.

Of some importance in theatrical history is another largely forgotten name, Laura Kieler (1849–1932). Forgotten as an author, that is; for she has an assured place in literary history as the model for Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House*. Laura Kieler's marital history resembled Nora's, although the details reflected even less credit on her husband; Ibsen has drawn more closely from real life here than in any other of his plays. But he had known of her well before 1879; as early as 1869, when she was only twenty, she had published a novel under the pseudonym Lili called *Brands døtre* (Brand's Daughters). This was a sequel to Ibsen's *Brand*,