

Ann-Sofie Gremaud (Reykjavík) about:

Katalin Nun: Women of the Danish Golden Age. Literature, Theater and the Emancipation of Women. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press [et al.] 2013, 180 pages.

Through countless sources and with a very well developed understanding of the period, Katalin Nun guides the reader through the landscape of high culture in Copenhagen during the »Golden Age«. She focuses on specific characters that stood out and are still considered key figures in the intellectual heritage of the period such as Søren Kierkegaard, Meir Goldschmidt, Mathilde Fibiger, H.C. Andersen, and the Heibergs. Some chapters have been published elsewhere in earlier versions, but as a collection they make up a book, which can be read either as a whole or in minor sections for its interesting input on individual figures or subjects.

The significance of Danish culture in the so-called »Golden Age« (around 1800–1850) reached beyond national borders, and the period has been studied widely and thoroughly. However, it is a key point in Nun's study that the impact of female writers and artists has been largely overlooked so far. Not only are personalities such as Johanne Louise Heiberg, Thomasine Gyllembourg and Mathilde Fibiger interesting by virtue of their own writings; in her account, Nun manages to prove their impact on other thinkers of their time, for example, on Johann L. Heiberg who was greatly influenced by all three women, and so was Kierkegaard to a degree.

Nun's book is divided into seven main chapters which subsume a number of smaller chapters, followed by an extensive bibliography and an index. A continued discussion of Kierkegaard's writings runs like a common thread through all seven chapters that, thematically seen, can be divided into two.

The first three chapters revolve around the Royal Danish Theater and the relationship between the Heiberg family (Johanne and Johan Heiberg, and his mother Thomasine Gyllembourg) and Søren Kierkegaard. Besides being the prominent theater director and actress of the time, the Heiberg couple was also an intellectual fulcrum of Copenhagen: Johan Heiberg published and debated many of the period's most important writings while Johanne Heiberg wrote and acted in some of the theatrical pieces that functioned as ground-breaking »banal nationalism«. Their achievements seem even more noteworthy considering that they exerted their creative influence in a time when readership was limited and Danish was just being established as a cultural language.

Moreover, Nun points to mutual points of reference and influence between Kierkegaard and Thomasine Gyllembourg. The latter wrote and published stories of women's everyday life in the 1830s and 1840s by which she helped develop the genre of realism in Danish prose as well as Danish as a literary language. Generally, her

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works shed light on contemporary views on the age of the French Revolution and show subtle criticism of patriarchy and of what she perceived as increased superficiality in her day. In the same chapter, the theater is also discussed as a sphere that has shaped the worldviews and writings of Johan Heiberg, Kierkegaard and H. C. Andersen.

Chapters four to six address the dawn of the discussion on women's emancipation. Here, the views of leading female figures such as Johanne Heiberg and Mathilde Fibiger are presented in detail, as is their influence on contemporary male writers and the continued development of the agenda. What is more, Nun sheds light on the controversy that followed Fibiger's radical work *Clara Raphael*, published in 1851 – well before John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). From her immense work in the archives, Nun presents strong indications of a relationship between Johan Heiberg and Mathilde Fibiger, which may have influenced Mr. Heiberg's writings as well as Mrs. Heiberg's attitude towards the ongoing debate.

By principle, Nun is very conscious of the pitfalls which anachronistic readings of her material might imply. Therefore she even more conscientiously guides the reader through the context of writings, which at best appear conservative and at worst misogynistic, in order to reveal their qualities. In spite of its relatively small scope (180 pages) the book gives a nuanced and broad understanding of cultural life in Copenhagen at the time. By ways of a detailed and stringent manner and focus on the influence of key female figures in the cultural landscape, Nun's account provides new perspectives on the connections between cultural debate, private relations, and philosophical as well as artistic works of central figures of the so-called Golden Age.

As regards the precision of the questions and the execution of the investigation, Nun proceeds both conscientiously and systematically. As a whole, the book is an enjoyable and educational read for anyone interested in the Danish Golden Age. The reader, who is unfamiliar with the details of the period's debates and publications, is presented with a methodical and balanced introduction, while the insider obtains more insight into relationships and intellectual exchanges which have not always been granted appropriate attention.

To conclude, Nun's discoveries and the questions she has raised in this book can certainly further develop and broaden the studies of Kierkegaard, the Heibergs and Mathilde Fibiger. Those primarily interested in earlier or later periods are given the opportunity to reconstruct the importance of the outlined discussions that shaped the works of great individual writers and Scandinavian culture in general.