



2017

Katalin Nun. Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater, and the Emancipation of Women.

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Recommended Citation

Kramer, Nate (2017) "Katalin Nun. Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater, and the Emancipation of Women.," *The Bridge*: Vol. 40 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol40/iss2/15>

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Katalin Nun. *Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater, and the Emancipation of Women*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013. 196 pp.

Reviewed by Nate Kramer

Katalin Nun begins her book *Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater and the Emancipation of Women* with the obligatory remarks about the significance of the Danish Golden Age, but moves quickly to her main thesis: that the women who were also a part of that golden age have been overlooked, forgotten, or rendered important only because of the towering figures (men, of course!) of the period. Thus, Nun begins to carve out a space in which to address the authorships of Thomasine Gyllembourg and Mathilde Fibiger and the acting of Johanne Luise Heiberg, all three influential and important figures in their own right. Although the contributions of these women has been addressed before—Nun mentions, for example, two recent multi-volume works dealing with women in Danish literature and in the footnotes provides an extensive catalog of relevant literature—they have not been taken up in any significant way in English. This book is primarily directed toward remedying this relative absence of scholarship about these important women of the Danish Golden Age.

Published as volume eight in the series *Danish Golden Age Studies*, the intent of which is to introduce major figures and issues of the period to an English and non-Danish speaking audience, Nun's book situates each of these women very nicely in the context in which they were writing and acting. The first is Thomasine Gyllembourg, a very influential and important figure in not only the Golden Age but the period that preceded it, Enlightenment Denmark. She was married quite young to a man fifteen years her senior, Peter Andreas Heiberg, one of the literati of Copenhagen. Peter Andreas Heiberg was exiled to Paris for publishing libelous literature and for his political liberalism. Left at home with their son, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, who would himself later become the most influential taste-maker of the Golden Age, Thomasine soon married a Swedish baron named Karl Frederik Gyllembourg-Ehrensvärd, whose surname Gyllembourg she adopted. After the death of her husband, Madame Gyllembourg, as she was known, moved in with her son and his wife, the actress Johanne Luise Pätges. Madame Gyllembourg was thus well-positioned both socially

and intellectually to become an author and to influence the culture of the Danish Golden Age.

Although Madame Gyllembourg wrote many novels and stories, her *A Story of Everyday Life* being the most popular, Nun turns to the last of her novels, *Two Ages*, as the work of the mature author and one that encapsulates many of the themes that dominated her fiction: namely a picture of the bourgeois culture that surrounded her. The novel was, importantly for Nun's argument, reviewed by the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. It is here that Nun begins to outline a critique that will be repeated with the other two women figures: Kierkegaard's review is more invested in exploring his own philosophical categories than with treating Gyllembourg's novel on its own terms and evaluating it on its own merit. Kierkegaard's review of Madame Gyllembourg's *Two Ages* is an especially important one for Kierkegaard's oeuvre because it is here that he levels a critique of the modern age that has become an important touchpoint for many philosophers and cultural critics. By contrast, the novel that sets Kierkegaard's critique in motion has been almost entirely ignored, despite the fact that the novel has been lauded for its careful delineation of the bourgeois culture of the day and for its influence on Danish prose.

Nun then turns her attention to Johanne Luise Pätges, an extremely popular actress on the Danish stage during the period in question, and later the wife of Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Johanne Luise's fame, based on her impressive performances at the Royal Theater, predates her entry into the family. Together with Madame Gyllembourg, Johanne Luise and her husband formed a cultural and literary circle that proved to be enormously influential, especially on Danish theater. Although Johanne Luise was an actress of impressive repute, she was also one who wrote and reflected on the cultural and philosophical significance of acting. Her most important literary work was her autobiography *A Life Relived in Memory*, first published in 1891. It is this work that Nun spends the most time on, discussing Johanne Luise Heiberg's conception of the successful actor as one who performs a double role: immersing oneself completely in the role that one is to play and at the same time resisting such complete absorption so as to maintain one's sense of identity. Kierkegaard also wrote what amounted to reviews of Johanne Luise Heiberg's acting, which were quite laudatory. Nun focuses on an article Kierkegaard published in the newspaper *The Fatherland*, titled "The Crisis and a Crisis in the

Life of an Actress." Although Kierkegaard does not mention Johanne Luise Heiberg by name in the article, journal entries as well as a letter to Johanne Luise Heiberg confirm that Kierkegaard had her in mind. Kierkegaard's discussion of acting, furthermore, resonated directly with Johanne Luise Heiberg's own conception of acting as what Nun calls "an existential question" since it "demands from the actress that she be able to deal with contradictory tasks" (83).

The third and last woman that Nun discusses is Mathilde Fibiger, a very influential figure but one who was not part of the Heibergs' inner circle. In fact, Fibiger grew up some distance away from Copenhagen and was not part of the cultural scene of the time. However, she did ask Johan Ludvig Heiberg to publish her novel, *Clara Raphael*, which he did with C.A. Reitzel, one of the more important Danish publishers of the day. The novel itself became quite controversial as it raised in a much more direct way than had previous literature the issue of the role of women in society and the question of emancipation. While the general reception itself was complex, the reception of the novel by both Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Søren Kierkegaard was, as Nun explains, even more so. Heiberg was strangely silent about the novel, despite the fact that he wrote an introduction for the novel and supported Fibiger well beyond finding a publisher for the novel. Nun suggests that Johanne Luise Heiberg may not have been too pleased about the attention her husband gave Fibiger, a view taken by several others well-acquainted with the history. The question of Kierkegaard's interest in Fibiger is also curious insofar as his review of the novel was never published, for reasons that are unclear. Nun notes a particularly sarcastic tone in Kierkegaard's review, but even more disconcerting for Nun is Kierkegaard's evasion of the question of emancipation in the novel at all. Kierkegaard seems once again to be more interested in issues tangential to the central ones, even using the lasting part of his review to once again revive his conflicts with Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Hans Lassen Martensen.

Each of these examples raises important questions about general views of women in the Danish Golden Age and their role in society. As Nun notes in various places throughout the book, it is intellectually irresponsible to hold the Golden Age to our contemporary standards and views, and yet a figure like Mathilde Fibiger, ahead of her time in so many ways, reveals the startling ways in which the Golden Age itself was divided. The Heibergs (Madame Gyllembourg, Johanna

Luise, and Johan Ludvig) held perhaps the most conservative views regarding women and their roles. Nun makes the important observation that even someone like Johanna Luise Heiberg, who devoted her entire self to acting and performance, held to the conservative ideal of domesticity. Johan Ludvig Heiberg's arguments about women often emphasized ideal "abstractions" over and against the practical considerations that were becoming all the more apparent during the Golden Age and which Mathilde Fibiger, among others, reacted to with such force. Søren Kierkegaard's position is ambiguous on these questions, though he too voiced fairly conservative claims about women and emancipation, if he said anything at all.

This is the strength of Nun's book: presenting the dialogue and discussions taking place in and surrounding the literature of the day without making the reader take a stand on any one position. Rather she invites the reader to consider the conversation itself in its complexity and as a feature of Golden Age literature which has often been ignored. With an enormous wealth of material condensed into a scant one hundred and fifty pages, there is much to be gleaned from such a work. Should one wish for more, Nun has provided copious notes and an extensive bibliography to pursue these important questions further.