

4.1.2 B.J. Hovde, The Position of Women in Scandinavia

The Scandinavian Countries 1720-1865: The Rise of the Middle Classes
(vol. II), Kennikat Press, 1972

The exploitation of Danish and Swedish wives, daughters, and servants by the men aroused the wholesouled anger of Mary Godwin, and the submissiveness of the women excited her contempt. But her description of the hardships of female servants was hardly as graphic as that of the Swedish economists Agardh and Ljungberg, written in 1854:

The servant woman's duty is . . . to wait on every member of the household; to run every one's errands, and the language of her contract stipulates that, "she shall do all that is to be done." She must keep the rooms in order and tend the fires, carry wood up all the stairs, cook, bake, and brew; she must make, patch, and wash everyone's dirty clothes, often standing knee-deep in cold water; she must scrub the floors on hands and knees. She is expected to brush the men's clothing and clean their shoes. In the country districts she is sent out upon the fields in the heat, - and in several provinces only in her underwear - to work as strenuously as the men. Furthermore, she must make the beds for the master's family, and even for the male servants, conduct the masters to their bedrooms and there apply all her strength . . . to drag off their boots. Finally it became the lot of woman in Sweden to serve as odalisks at every inn and restaurant in order to attract customers. In short, woman in the North is the household beast of burden and the slave of man. We are so used to it that it does not arouse our shame.

Women of the middle classes although spared from drudgery, were even more cut off from really functional activity. They were either more intimate

servants or decorative hothouse plants. If their fathers and husbands were rich enough to keep them in indolence, they might be given excellent formalistic educations, but they were separated from the world and from life by a Chinese wall of proprieties which usually served to frustrate any desires for active self expression. The wall was built of modesty, helplessness, delicacy, gratitude, and a chastity valued the more as it approached ignorance. The supreme virtue was obedience. As far as their means permitted, the men of the lower middle classes demanded of their women the same behavior. Never so much as then was home the woman's place; never did poets so ecstatically eulogize the "beautiful, weaker sex." [..]

If the lot of the daughter and the wife was drab, that of the unmarried woman was incredibly dreary. She was not even ornamental. Where she could perform some useful work in the house of her relatives she was able to maintain her self-respect and was often welcome. Otherwise she must become a burden, or seek refuge in some sort of foundation, or take employment as a servant. For women of the middle classes it was an almost insuperable degradation to become a servant. Refugees after the pattern of the Catholic convents — in Denmark they even continued to be called convents — were maintained by endowments, but were generally open only to members of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. The unmarried women of the common people had to shift for themselves. Agardh and Ljungberg estimated that Sweden had 270,000 of them in 1854, of whom about one fourth had given birth to illegitimate children.

Very few of our readers have any conception of the extent of the misery and the consequent temptations, to which Swedish womanhood is at present exposed.

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In Norway, Camilla Collett's book *Ammandens d tre* (1855) marked the real beginning of the Norwegian feminist problem. Camilla Collett (1813-1895), the gifted daughter of Nicolai Wergeland and sister of Henrik Wergeland, measured her girl's wits with the best in Norway and held her own. No wonder she fretted under the conventional restraints. As early as 1833, she was clear in her own mind on the intellectual equality of woman with man, though neither her brother nor J. S. Welhaven, the man she loved, agreed. In her diary she recorded her sense of frustration.

My life passes uselessly and without importance, suffocated by the eternal question whether this is really the kind of existence to which I am destined. It awakens me suddenly at night, I arise with it in the morning, and when I put on my night-cap in the evening and contemplate what I have done the whole day since I took it off I am saddened and ask myself why I dress at all, why I do not always wear it, for that would be most appropriate to such a night-cap life.

The experiences of her youth were interwoven with happiness and grief. Though freedom marked her father's liberal household, she could not escape the constraints of an illiberal society; she fell passionately in love with her brother's bitter rival, Welhaven, and, already torn between conflicting loyalties, lost her lover in part, at least, because her open adoration offended his sense of feminine propriety. Later Camilla Collett married the understanding and honorable professor of jurisprudence, John Collett, whom she could respect but never fully love. Hence, when she wrote *Ammandens d tre*, she drew from her own experience the devastating realism with which she indicted the tyranny of convention over Norwegian women. Love and marriage was woman's career? Beautiful. But what woman was free to marry for love? In this and in her subsequent work the influence of George Sand is manifest. Though a bitter and disappointed woman, Camilla Collett made two important contributions to Norwegian culture: she inaugurated the woman's movement, and she ranks as the first pioneer in literary realism. *Ammandens d tre* was at first denounced as an ugly book, even by Bj rnson, both for "feminine immodesty" and for its realism. But three of Norway's greatest literary artists have readily acknowledged their indebtedness to its authoress, namely Jonas Lie, Alexander Kielland, and Henrik Ibsen. In Ibsen's mind it planted the seed of *A Doll's House*.

Had it been left to the women to win their battles by their own pressure, nothing would have been won before 1865, for it is hardly possible to speak of a woman's *movement* until the early 1870's. But, as has been said, there were more fundamental forces at work which caused the men to begin reform before the women themselves became active. As early as 1825 the draft of the reformed Swedish legal code, due to the efforts of J. G. Richert, proposed to make women independent of guardianship at the age of twenty-five. Significantly, the two lower chambers supported it, but the nobility and the clergy successfully resisted adoption. As late as 1854, Swedish law classified unmarried women as minors along with children and the insane. Finally, in the session of 1856-58, the *riksdag* adopted the proposition, but only with reservations. Unmarried Danish women were made independent of guardians in 1857, Norwegian in 1863.

The adoption of equal rights in inheritance for women and men is, in each country, usually described as the true beginning of legal emancipation. It came first in Sweden (1845), then in Norway (1854), and finally also in Denmark (1857).

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A famous proposal by the city physician of Copenhagen, Dr. Paul Scheel, in 1810, to combat prostitution by affording women opportunities to engage in trades and crafts was defeated by the gilds. After 1830, however, the problem became increasingly acute. On the one hand people realized that, "However much there may be conceded to the woman in thought, song,

and speeches, she is denied practically everything as long as she is denied a personal life work." On the other, here were many who felt instinctively that "... the young woman who wants to earn a living represents an active social danger. She forecasts the twilight of many ancient gods. Beyond her lies a day when even the services of the wife do not belong to the husband but to herself." The pressure of surplus women and the triumphant course of the capitalistic motive of profit proved too strong to resist, however, especially when the growing complexity of life and increasing emigration created a demand for female labor. Hence it is not strange to find occupational freedom extended to unmarried women as part of the larger movement to establish occupational freedom. The Danish law of 1857, the Swedish of 1864, and the Norwegian ones of 1842 and 1866 established the right of the unmarried woman to earn her living in any craft or trade. But this concession only began the struggle for the economic equality of woman with man.

4.1.3 Henrik Ibsen, *Speech at the Festival of the Norwegian Women's Rights League, Christiania, 26 May 1898*

Translated by Evert Sprinchorn

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the *description of humanity*. To be sure, whenever such a description is felt to be reasonably true, the reader will read his own feelings and sentiments into the work of the poet. These are then attributed to the poet; but incorrectly so. Every reader remolds the work beautifully and neatly, each according to his own personality. Not only those who write but also those who read are poets. They are collaborators. They are often more poetical than the poet himself.

With these reservations, let me thank you for the toast you have given me. I do indeed recognize that women have an important task to perform in the particular directions this club is working along. I will express my thanks by proposing a toast to the League for Women's Rights, wishing it progress and success.

The task always before my mind has been to advance our country and to give our people a higher standard. To achieve this, two factors are import-

ant. It is for the *mothers*, by strenuous and sustained labor, to awaken a conscious feeling of *culture* and *discipline*. This feeling must be awakened before it will be possible to lift the people to a higher plane. It is the women who shall solve the human problem. As mothers they shall solve it. And only in that capacity can they solve it. Here lies a great task for woman. My thanks! And success to the League for Women's Rights!