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## **THE TRANSNATIONAL TEXTUAL CULTURE OF NORWEGIAN WOMEN SUFFRAGE, TIBLISI 2014.**

### I. INTRODUCTION. NATIONALISTIC MYTHS, 1905 AND THE NORWEGIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT.

Norwegian anniversaries have a tendency to become part of a mythical and nationalistic construction of the *Norwegian* as something that is inherently driven by a special capacity for freedom, independence and a deep skepticism towards authorities and hierarchies. This year's 200 anniversary of the Norwegian constitution (1814), and last year's 100 year anniversary of Norwegian women suffrage (June 11th 1913) are often cast as examples of such historical, nationalist myths.

Our account of the Norwegian women's struggle for suffrage—and with that our history of the Norwegian women's movement—is often retold within a similar framework—a related national myth about the special status of the Norwegian history of the development and policies of gender equality.

Part of this nationalistic version is of course owing to the fact that the women's collection of the 280 000 signatures took place in connection with the referendum against the union with Sweden in 1905, and that this is seen as an instrumental event in giving the women the right to vote.

The journal of the Norwegian women suffrage movement, *NYLÆNDE*, exemplify the entanglement of nationalist tendencies and the women's movement in this period. Frequently, this journal strategically exploited the nationalistic sentiments around 1900. The issues in this period frequently contained articles titled: "Norway's cause is the cause of Norwegian Women." The debate whether to establish a national protest day for Norwegian women—a debate that took place long before the international women's day on the 8th of March was established, exemplifies similar sentiments.

Since 1899 the labour women had organized a separate protest march on the Norwegian independence day, or constitution day on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May. This was, however, highly disputed within the women's movement. Many argued that although it was important to use the Norwegian constitution day to underline the need to expand paragraph 50 of the Norwegian constitution to include women, this was seen as problematic on a symbolic level—on accounts that this would be to claim male notion of "rights" that would just reinforce the exclusion of women. From 1899 and onwards, almost every single issue of the journal *Nylænde* contained arguments pro and against this protest day, and attempts at launching an alternative: Many argued in favor of a "Camilla Collett day" and that the cause of Norwegian women should be celebrated on the birthday of the author that many saw as the first to articulate a Norwegian feminist vision: on 23<sup>rd</sup> of January. The proponents of this specific day had to admit that the icy January weather in Oslo might be a problem. The most popular proposal, however, was to arrange a protest day on the eve of the religious holiday, Whit Sunday (or: pinseften) Significant figures in the movement, Gina Krog, Betzy Kjeldsberg and Aasta Hansteen argued in favor of this—and this question

emerged as a favorite topic of the journal in the following years. Gina Krog, editor and founder of the Norwegian association of women, even wrote poems and psalms about emancipation of women and the eve of Whit Sunday. At stake in this discussion, however, was more than just a narrow understanding of the suffrage issue as a Norwegian one. The debates reveal that “Pinsentag,” or the eve of Whit Sunday became a popular idea for several reasons:

Pinsentag was in one sense nationalistic and mythical, grounded on the happy, pietism -“light” of the Dane, Grundtvig. This day was associated with the recreation of the new Eve, the *New Norwegian* woman. But this utopian, imaginary feminine form was one that transgressed national boundaries. One of the important arguments was precisely that the women’s movement should use this day because it transcended the Norwegian independence day, and that it therefore perhaps could be a starting point for organizing an international women’s protest day!

The journal *Nylænde*, its contributors and editor, were conscious about the need to integrate the political struggle for the vote with a textual, rhetorical public culture that should serve as a basis for developing women’s voices in a wider sense: not only did they publish speeches and reports from the political world, but also poems, literary reviews and even musical scores. Several issues started with musical scores by the composer Agathe Backer Grøndal. Political representation had to be imagined also through cultural and poetical means. This enterprise was, however, not understood as a Norwegian one, but rather as an international, textual exchange.

This raises an implicit question: what is the relation between the literary field and the organized women’s movement, and in particular the suffrage movement? What role did the transatlantic Anglo-American textual culture play in the development of the idea of women’s suffrage—and the other way around: how did this “political” textual practice influence literary culture in this period? Did the Norwegian women’s movement in this period understand itself as continuing the American feminist pioneer Abigail Adams’ insistence from the 18th century: that the vote and political rights had to be *written*—not only as a legal text or within the genre of political resolutions, but imagined, tested and articulated through literary and aesthetic means.

My point is that below the seemingly nationalistic surface, the Norwegian movement was really engaged in transnational concerns—and that this engagement is deeply integrated into the textual cultures, especially the journals, that fueled the Norwegian movement.

## 2. ”HISTORY OF WOMEN SUFFRAGE (1881- 1922): WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE AS A TRANSATLANTIC, RHETORICAL PROJECT.

The American Suffrage movement’s own self-documentation project: *The history of Woman Suffrage* (HWS) served as a significant point of departure for the rhetorical culture that the Norwegian women’s movement developed.

This monumental work --published in six volumes, from 1881-1922, was edited by Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony. In the end it consisted of more than 2000 pages that recounted and documented the history and activities of the movement. The *History* was self-financed (they had problems financing editions and

conventions) and the editors thought it was very important to disseminate this work. Both Stanton and Anthony brought with them copies of the HWS during their travels in Europe (as exemplified by the copy received in Norway).

Their editorial strategies were consciously transnational. European reports and letters from different countries, organizations and persons were “pasted” into the text, which they also the same time put an effort into disseminating these texts back to Europe, hoping that this would help vitalize the suffrage movement on the other side of the Atlantic. The growth of modern feminism, as they saw it, was founded on the export and import of texts. These suffragettes underlined the significance of reading and reflection as the main tools in bringing about political change.

In fact, the last volumes of HWS became more and more focused on giving a detailed description of the activities and tracing the political development in the different American states and the European countries (through reports from their national organizations).

Rhetorically speaking, the *HISTORY OF WOMEN SUFFRAGE* is a polyphonic text, a multi-tuned collage—composed by different genres and different national contributors. But the work is also to a high degree self-conscious of this particular form of putting together a somewhat unconventional “history” and can therefore be seen as an example of how a social movement textualizes itself as part of its attempt at self-legitimation.

The rhetorical is usually understood as practical rules or advice for the art of public speech and the *HISTORY OF WOMEN SUFFRAGE* can be understood as part of such a rhetorical project in a wider sense. The history contains:

- Self-conscious experimentations with literary and textual forms: the struggle for women’s right to vote is thus not only a question of formal political rights and logical arguments.

- The text is self-conscious about the lack of a political language and voice — and thus thematizes the connections between linguistic and political representation.

- Women who spoke in public – were often accused of having become a public woman—a prostitute or labeled with mental instability, or hysteria. *HISTORY OF WOMEN SUFFRAGE* showed through examples – and even gave recipes for how women should act in public.

- The detailed minutes from meeting and conventions emphasized both the affective ability of women in the art of convincing the listeners—but also underlined their orderly, rational procedures of these meetings—consciously probably mimicking the procedure of a constitutional assembly.

But the text is also rhetorical in a more fundamental mode—understood as a performative attempt at creating a collective, transnational political identity through different narrative agencies. For the editors of HWS, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and eventually also Matilda Joselyn Gage and Ida Husted Harper—all central figures within the organized American women’s suffrage movement, the

history evolved as a part of attempts at documenting and transforming their own activism and personal experiences into an official, political and historical narrative. A significant part of this was the construction of a wider collective transnational identity.

### III TRANSATLANTIC AND TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE NORWEGIAN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT?

In this trans-national historical project, we also find textual traces and interventions from the Norwegian movement. The editors of the *History of Woman Suffrage* communicated with several persons in the Norway. In an anecdote they mention having received a greeting from the Norwegian queen, queen Maud. An important contributor was Camilla Collett .

In the description of the Norwegian situation, the *History of Women Suffrage* mentions the parliamentary representative and one of the founders of Norsk Kvindesagsforening (the Norwegian Association of Women's Rights), H. E. Berner, but also, "Miss Cecilie Thoresen, the first female student to matriculate at Christiania University" (in 1884). The opening of the University of Oslo/Kristiania for women is then presented as a part of a global, historical and teleological process driven by a deeper historical force—the emancipation of women—that aimed at its manifestation in women suffrage or right to vote. Significantly, *History of Women Suffrage* also mentions the journal *Nylænde* as part of this endeavor.

Central figures in the Norwegian movement aligned them selves with the American struggle and with the anti-slavery movement, and in this sense also the historical narratives of American movement. In some ways, *Nylænde* further developed the rhetorical strategies of the American history of women suffrage—they too emphasized and showcased women's ability to speak in public, in an orderly and representative manner (as ex. by their publication of numerous speeches by women), and when they finally gained the vote, *Nylænde* explained how the voting ballot worked! But equally important: *Nylænde* also continued the idea of the necessity of developing a literary culture in order to create a political voice.

Whereas the Americans suffragettes worked to expand the Declaration of Sentiments; the Norwegian women's movement had a more ambivalent relation to the Norwegian constitution: it was seen as connected to male concept of liberties. Instead a more visionary rhetoric was needed to reform and invent a new form of femininity: the new Norwegian Eve...

Finally, the exchange—or transatlantic metaphors were used consciously – not only to argue for the export of Norwegian ideas of gender equality, but as a way of combining a mythical version of Norwegian history with a visionary discourse of the new Norwegian woman. The Vikings and the Polar-expedition emerged as a favorite example: the imagining of something new and impossible—namely women's political rights—was not really new at all.

The metaphor chosen by Aasta Hansteen (who famously had exclaimed that America is the best place on earth for women) in *Kvinden i det nye norge (The Woman of the New Norway)*—is that of the Viking Leiv Erikson who only seemingly discovers a

new land, America, that had been inhabited all along. The image of the polar-expedition exploited as similar rhetorical trope: the clearing away of hundreds of years of ice, repression and misogyny. Commenting on her authorship and struggle for the women's cause, Camilla Collett likened her authorship to that of a polar expedition—the process of finding a seemingly new, but really a forgotten or hidden land, through the painful process of breaking open thick ice. And, inspired, as she so often was by Collett, Gina Krog also described the project of the Norwegian association of women's rights that of an expedition (an “opdagerfærd”).