

even though we are warned that 'it would be dangerous to generalise from it about practices elsewhere in the viking world'. I'm sure it would! especially for scholars! We have been deprived of so much Viking depravity by modern scholarship that it is good to know that we can still believe in the awful goings-on on the banks of the Volga if nowhere else!

The author finally takes us into the world of literature – and one feels that it is very much her own world. The mythology of Snorri Sturlason's Edda, the skaldic poetry and the Icelandic sagas are life and breath to Judith Jesch, and she makes them live and breathe for the reader. She interprets these sources and the role of women in Icelandic society which they reveal with a touch of genius. I have never been entirely caught up in the world of Icelandic sagas, but with her to guide me I think I could be. She makes that world believable and the women who inhabited it become real people. It is not until the reader reaches this section that the Viking woman becomes alive, instead of being a skeleton, a commemorating patron of a runic stone or an ominous valkyrie flying above the field of battle. It is a pity in a way that one has to wade through all the other evidence before reaching this, but perhaps it is just as well; if it had come first the rest would have been something of an anti-climax!

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Helena Forsas-Scott (ed.), *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London, 1991, 342pp.

At a time of great change in European history, attempting to provide an international survey of recent feminist writing is an ambitious project indeed. The editor and her contributors have done an excellent job in producing a scholarly survey to, as she says, 'provide a set of initial maps for the English-speaking reader'. There are nine chapters, surveying Britain, Scandinavia, Germany (East and West), Eastern Europe, Russia, France, Spain, Italy and Turkey. In a very readable introduction, Helena Forsas-Scott succeeds in drawing together the many threads from these different countries and indicating the parallels between them, the common patterns which are emerging despite the radically different circumstances in which women writers have been able to work. It is interesting to note that the pace of feminist advances in northern Europe, dominated by liberalism, Protestantism and a middle class providing intellectual leadership, has been faster than in southern Europe, where Roman Catholicism (and in Turkey Islam) has been more hostile to feminist ideas.

Many genres are covered, from novels, diaries, poetry and drama to essays, documentaries and journalism. But as Helena Forsas-Scott points out, the emphasis in all the chapters turns out to be on the novel, that genre which Virginia Woolf, discussing the woman writer in *A Room of One's Own* called 'young enough to be soft in her hands'. Another pattern which emerges in this book is the way in which women's writing from the early part of the century is being rediscovered and reinterpreted in the light of knowledge about the situation of oppression or censorship in which it was produced.

From the contributors to this volume, re-ordering the past is in many ways the easiest part of their task. Far more difficult is to fix, even in a snapshot, the rapidly changing pattern of women's life in today's Europe, especially where recent revolutionary events have toppled regimes and radically altered boundaries. It always becomes harder to select and evaluate

authors, the nearer one gets to the present. Rosalind Marsh, writing about Russia, Chris Weedon on Germany and Celia Hawkesworth on Eastern Europe have had an even more difficult task in view of the dramatic political and social upheavals in those regions. They have had to settle for brief concluding sections looking forward to a flowering of feminist writing under the more liberal new regimes. In a survey spanning more than ninety years, it is always hard to know where the emphasis should lie, and the more historical sections will of course wear better, because a book like this is always open to the charge that it is out of date before it is even published. Attempting to spot the rising stars of feminist writing is possibly particularly relevant, however, in a volume wishing to alert English-speaking readers to the existence of exciting literature in other languages, since in the current publishing climate, new books seem to stand a better chance of being published in English translation.

As well as providing a skilful panoramic summary in her introduction, Helena Forsas-Scott has also been responsible for a chapter on Scandinavia, which is of special interest to the readers of this journal. The chapter is of generous length, and covers Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland, although in Finland it is confined to authors writing in Swedish. Helena Forsas-Scott's involvement in the project to write a history of women's literature in Scandinavia (the *Norsk kvindelitteraturhistorie*, to be published in five volumes, in Danish and Swedish) makes her well-qualified to produce an authoritative overview, which she does with her customary enthusiasm and depth of scholarship. Particularly fascinating for those familiar with her long-standing interest in the Swedish writer Elin Wagner, is to see Wagner's feminism and pacifism set in their European context. The chapter is called 'Egalitarianism and feminine consciousness', and charts the development of feminist ideas from the fight for equality in the early part of the century to pleading for women's 'otherness' and the emergence of a distinctive women's culture in more recent years. What Helena Forsas-Scott terms 'radical celebrations of specificity' and 'far-reaching assertions of textual difference' dominate feminist writing of the 80s and 90s in the work of, for example, the Norwegians Karin Moe and Cecilie Loveid.

The essay highlights some interesting differences between the individual Scandinavian countries. In Finland, for example, women have always worked outside the home to a greater extent than in the other countries, and feminist ideology, unusually, has lagged behind feminist practice. In Sweden, surprisingly, there has been comparatively little feminist writing since 1970, which Helena Forsas-Scott attributes to the fact 'that second-wave feminism never gained the strength of the movements in Denmark or Norway, as equality between men and women was part of official government policy in Sweden by the time the new women's movement emerged'. That is not to say that there has not been a great deal of very exciting literature produced by Swedish women in recent decades. The author herself discusses some of Kerstin Ekman's works (although it is a shame that her most recent and possibly most relevant book, *Knivkastarens kvinna*, 1990, an intense account of how woman's utter vulnerability in hospital in the hands of the male-dominated medical profession, is not included, presumably because the survey went to press too soon). Personally I missed some of Sara Lidman, Gun-Britt Sundstrom and the Finland-Swedish writer Solveig von Schoultz; others will doubtless favour other candidates for inclusion. This brings us to one of the central problems, as I see it, of not only the Scandinavian chapter but the volume as a whole, namely how to define 'feminist' writing and judge what merits inclusion. Helena Forsas-Scott, who herself readily admits that it is a tentative selection, makes a distinction in her own chapter between 'the broad category of *kvinnolitteratur*, literature by and about women', and specifically feminist writing. The working definition of feminist writing for the book as a whole is texts by women writers that show a critical awareness of women's role and

status in society. This is experienced differently by different contributors. Celia Hawkesworth, for example, feels impelled by the impatience of the women writers of Eastern Europe with the more obvious aspects of feminism, which they perceive as irrelevant, to look beyond specifically feminist groupings to find fresh and innovative writing by women. Other contributors have clung more closely to writers associated with the rise of women's movements and political activism, possibly at the expense of 'softer' women's writing. This rather artificial distinction leads to a certain lack of balance, the risk being that English-speaking readers encountering these literatures for the first time will receive a slightly distorted impression.

Of course, given unlimited space, the contributors would clearly have wished to include many more writers, and having to select ruthlessly from a gloriously rich supply of literature must be gruelling. This lack of space seems nowhere more disappointing than in the minimal number of words devoted to direct translations from the works under discussion, particularly fiction. Every extract naturally cuts down the space available for biographical and other background information, and this is a seemingly insoluble problem for surveys of this kind. One unlooked-for consequence here is the predominance of quotations from poetry, given its compact form. It is nonetheless frustrating to have no sample of the style of many of these outstanding writers. Helena Forsas-Scott rightly includes in her bibliography Arkin and Shollar's *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women 1875-1975* (1989), which is a selection of texts in English (including many Scandinavian ones) with brief biographical details. By being so generous with space for the texts, however, as well as having worldwide coverage, it runs into a problem of a different kind: it does require a small suitcase and strong arm muscles to carry it about! *Textual Liberation*, while eminently portable (although a paperback edition would make it more accessible to the students at whom the publishers say it is principally aimed), does at times fall into the trap of becoming a disjointed catalogue of authors and titles. Contributors to a cross-national survey like this clearly cannot avoid reference to numerous editions, published and unpublished translations. Even so, some longer extracts might have given readers a taste for the works discussed and led them to seek out whole texts. If the demand became apparent, then perhaps British publishers would show a greater interest in commissioning more translations of important feminist writers from other parts of Europe. Special emphasis has been placed in this book on texts already available in English, but the paucity of English material in most of the bibliographies is a sad reflection on the insularity of British publishers – and possibly of the British reading public.

Where then does European feminist writing stand today? The present trend, particularly in the West, is towards the breakdown of conventional boundaries between different types of writing: a move away from conventional realism towards textual experimentation and the transgression of genre boundaries. The influence of recent feminist theory is evident, and the names Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, particularly Kristeva's notion of 'women's time', surface in several chapters. But at the moment, the contrasts remain more striking than the parallels. Whether the opening up of European frontiers in the 1990s will cause European feminist writing to evolve in a more uniform way, in an atmosphere of cooperation, remains to be seen. One of the most heartening things about this book is that the writers have been ready to ask for help. The contributors, especially those with a large and diverse geographical area to cover, have readily consulted, and acknowledged their debt to, sister scholars with more specialised knowledge of particular countries. Such pooling and cooperation can only add to the authority of this useful international survey.

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