

Feminism, Interplay, and Cooperation:
A Comparison of Selma Lagerlöf's
'Hem och stat' and Karen Blixen's
'En Baaltale med 14 Aars Forsinkelse'

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Selma Lagerlöf and Karen Blixen are two of the most prominent Nordic authors in world literature. While both authors are widely recognised as prolific storytellers, they both expanded their talents to a wide production of non-fiction prose, often in the form of essays and speeches. This paper is going to compare Selma Lagerlöf's 'Hem och stat' ('Home and State', 1911)¹ and Karen Blixen's 'En Baaltale med 14 Aars Forsinkelse' ('Oration at a Bonfire', 1951).² While the two authors had different public views on the subject of feminism, when comparing these two speeches it becomes evident that their thoughts on interaction and cooperation between the sexes are strikingly similar. Both speeches were written by Lagerlöf and Blixen at a time in their writing career when they were famous well beyond the Scandinavian literary market, and recognised as skilled storytellers and public speakers.

1. Lagerlöf 1911a; 1911b.

2. Blixen 1965; Dinesen 1979.

Home and State and Oration at a Bonfire

‘Hem och stat’ was given as a speech by Selma Lagerlöf in 1911 during the 6th Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in Stockholm.³ Having won the Nobel Prize for literature two years earlier, she was at the height of her celebrity status and thus the most prominent guest of the Congress. ‘En Baaltale’ was initially commissioned in 1939, on the occasion of the International Women’s Congress in Copenhagen. As Blixen herself recalls in her ‘*Baaltale*’, however, she eventually presented it for the first time in 1953, first at a Danish teachers’ seminar and then as part of a series of radio programmes that she broadcast on Danmarks Radio.⁴ ‘En Baaltale’ was then published in *Det Danske Magasin* in 1953.⁵

Already this brief contextualisation allows us to identify an interesting similarity. Both speeches were commissioned by the most prominent women’s organisation of the time, from the most prominent woman author in Scandinavia at the time. The historical context of conception, however, varies significantly.

In 1911, the central request of the Women’s Alliance was that of universal suffrage, while in 1939, when Blixen’s speech was originally commissioned, the major issues for the women’s movement regarded equal pay and equal rights.⁶ In the space of less than thirty years, the world had changed with the First World War, and the concepts of class and gender were being reshaped and readapted. When ‘En Baaltale’ was eventually delivered in 1953, the Second World War had forever changed the physiognomy of Western society, and 1949 had also seen

3. Stenberg 2014: 28–48.

4. Stecher 2014: 39.

5. Blixen 1953: 64–82.

6. See International Alliance of Women 1939.

the publication of the seminal work of Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*,⁷ which effectively started what is considered as the second wave of feminism.

Elaine Showalter divides the seminal part of the literature of women into three stages:⁸ Feminine, Feminist, and Female. The Feminine phase, dated by Showalter from 1840 to 1880, is the phase where women were writing to ‘equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture’.⁹ The Feminist phase, dated between 1880 and 1920, is the phase that coincides with women winning the vote: ‘women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatise the ordeal of wronged womanhood’.¹⁰ In the Female phase, started in 1920 and ongoing, ‘women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art’.¹¹

According to Showalter’s classifications, we could place Lagerlöf’s writing, and specifically ‘Hem och Stat’, within the Feminist phase of women’s writing. In fact, as Lisbeth Stenberg has noted, ‘the women’s movement at the turn of the twentieth century provided an important part of the context and preconditions for Selma Lagerlöf’s authorship. After being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1909, Lagerlöf actively engaged in the campaign for female suffrage’.¹² On the other hand, Karen Blixen can be placed within what Showalter defines as the Female phase. Contrary to Lagerlöf’s experience, she was never politically engaged with the women’s movement of her time.

7. de Beauvoir 1949.

8. See Showalter 1978.

9. Showalter 2016: 35.

10. Ibid.

11. Showalter 2016: 36.

12. Forsås-Scott et al. 2014: 24.

However, despite the difference in their political agenda and the socio-historical context of reception, both speeches contains similar opinions on gender, as well as similar style and rhetorical devices. The most important similarity between the speeches is the concept of mutual collaboration. In 'Hem och stat', Lagerlöf illustrates how society is based on two pillars, namely the Home and the State. While the creation of the Home is due to the work of women, the creation of the State is the invention of man. The difference in the genesis and consolidation of those two institutions, according to Lagerlöf, lies in how the collaboration between sexes has shaped them. While in the case of the Home, women have been, when needed, supported by men, in the creation of the State, men have only worked on their own and never reached for the collaboration of women. This, according to Lagerlöf, explains the fallacy of State as an institution versus the longevity of the Home.

In 'En Baaltale', Blixen illustrates her reasoning for the necessary existence of the two sexes and justifies it with the concept of interplay and interaction. According to Blixen, a functioning society will work when the two sexes are interacting and cooperating – that is, when they both are fully aware of their own individuality and able to respect each other. A further interesting similarity between the two authors is the concept of storytelling, and the following section will discuss how both authors employ storytelling and humour as rhetorical devices to convey their opinions on gender.

Storytelling, style, and humour

Throughout their writing careers, both Blixen and Lagerlöf were widely recognised as, and presented themselves, as storytellers. At the time in which their respective speeches were composed

and delivered, they were world famous and experienced public speakers. They had both practised and perfected their performative roles as storytellers, Lagerlöf with her renowned Nobel speech and Blixen with her public storyteller persona of Isak Dinesen. They were both able and confident speakers in a language other than their own, and both employed storytelling as a founding feature of their writing.

Eric Johannessen has underlined the inextricable connection between their formative years and the influence of storytelling: 'in view of their background it is not surprising that both Selma Lagerlöf and Isak Dinesen have become storytellers, because both grew up in an environment in which the story reigned supreme'.¹³ Because of their popularity, however, the receiving focus of their speeches was on their performance rather than the content. As Stenberg notes in the case of 'Hem och stat': 'Lagerlöf's celebrity and performance had defused her message'.¹⁴ In the case of Karen Blixen instead, what had made her 'En Baaltale' rather controversial at the time in which it was presented, and in consequent Blixenian criticism, was her opening statement '*Jeg er ikke Kvindesagskvinde*' ('I am not a feminist').¹⁵

Storytelling as a rhetorical device to capture the audience's attention, as well as a technique to present their arguments, is present in both speeches. Interestingly, both Blixen and Lagerlöf use similar techniques, imageries, and even style structure. For example, both papers start with the authors acknowledging their audience and thanking them for the invitation to speak. Both Lagerlöf and Blixen underline how writing these speeches has given them an opportunity to actually reflect upon the subject of feminism and the women's movement. For Lagerlöf, this is an opportunity to publicly declare her political alliance:

13. Johannesson 1960: 20.

14. Forsås-Scott et al. 2014: 29.

15. Blixen 1965: 73; Dinesen 1979: 66.

Och i detta mitt tack ligger inte bara ett erkännande av den heder, som uppdraget innebär, utan jag vill tacka också därför, att Ledningen genom att göra mig till talsman för rösträttssaken har nödgat mig att för min ringa del söka komma till rätta med den skiftande och törhända världsomvändande företeelse, som heter kvinnorörelsen.¹⁶

In making me a spokesman for the Suffrage Cause, they have not only conferred an honour upon me, but they have also impelled me to try to get a clearer comprehension of the ever changing and mayhap world transforming event called the Woman's Movement.¹⁷

Blixen also takes the opportunity to situate herself within the political panorama of feminism by stating: '*Idet jeg nu taler om Kvindesagen, maa jeg begynde med at sige, at det er en Sag som jeg ikke forstaat mig paa, og som jeg aldrig af egen Drift har beskæftiget mig med*¹⁸ (In speaking about feminism I must begin by saying it is a matter which I do not understand, and which I have never concerned myself with of my own volition)¹⁹ and that '*Jeg er ikke Kvindesagskvinde*²⁰ (I am not a feminist').²¹

The Danish word used by Blixen for feminist is '*kvindesagskvinde*', and, as Marianne Stecher has pointed out,²² it refers specifically to the Danish Women's Movement, from which Blixen is here distancing herself, and throughout her speech she will explain her reasoning.

16. Lagerlöf 1911a: 3.

17. Lagerlöf 1911b: 1.

18. Blixen 1965: 72.

19. Dinesen 1979: 65.

20. Blixen 1965: 73.

21. Dinesen 1979: 65.

22. See Stecher 2014.

It is relevant to underline that both Blixen and Lagerlöf are using a similar technique here, namely that of presenting themselves as non-experts, or as Brigitte Mral underlines in her analysis of Lagerlöf's speech, 'the gently ironic mask of a deeply uncertain suffragette'.²³ By doing this, both Blixen and Lagerlöf are presenting themselves as non-threatening to the audience. As Stenberg notices, Lagerlöf had already used this technique in her Nobel speech 'in which she had told a story with her father as the central character. She had thus established herself as non-threatening to the conservative gender hierarchy, which consisted on that occasion of the all-male Swedish hierarchy.'²⁴ Blixen achieves her non-threatening status with the use of humour, by stating how her invitation to speak at the International Women's Congress '*vistnok fremkom under forkerte Forudsætninger*'²⁵ ('presumably was given upon mistaken assumptions'),²⁶ and how, rather than actually attending the congress, she had gone to the theatre: '*Levede jeg en Uge [...] i en Shakespeare'sk Verden, og naar jeg hørte forkyndt: "Svaghed, Dit Navn er Kvinde!" – tænkte jeg ikke paa at protestere, mend tog det med.*'²⁷ ('I spent a week [...] in a Shakespearean world, and when I heard it proclaimed "Frailty, thy name is woman!" it didn't occur to me to protest; I accepted it as a matter of fact.')²⁸

She then explains how she declined her invitation to the organiser of the congress:

Jeg takkede Fru Hein mange Gange, men svarede: 'Jeg kan ikke paatage mig denne Opgave, for jeg er ikke Kvindesagskvinde.'

23. Mral 1999: 168.

24. Forsås-Scott et al. 2014: 28.

25. Blixen 1965: 72.

26. Dinesen 1979: 65.

27. Blixen 1965: 72–73.

28. Dinesen 1979: 66.

*‘Er Du da imod Kvindesagskvinde?’ spurgte Fru Hein.
 ‘Nej,’ sagde jeg, ‘det kan jeg heller ikke sige at jeg er.’
 ‘Hvordan staar Du da i Virkeligheden til Kvindesagen?’
 spurgete Fru Hein mig igen.
 ‘Ja, det har jeg ikke tænkt over,’ svarede jeg.
 ‘Saa tænk over det nu,’ sagde Fru Hein.²⁹*

I thanked Mrs Hein warmly but said, ‘I cannot accept this assignment, for I am not a feminist.’

‘Are you against feminism?’ asked Mrs Hein.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I can’t say that I’m that, either.’

‘How do you stand upon feminism?’ asked Mrs Hein again.

‘Well, I never thought of it,’ I answered.

‘Well, think of it now,’ said Mrs Hein.³⁰

In Blixen’s speech, the employment of storytelling is similar to her entertaining narrative fiction and fitting to the context in which it was eventually delivered – namely a series of radio speeches. Lagerlöf’s speech, on the other hand, is conscious of the historical importance of its delivery and clearly adapted to a defined political agenda, and to a politically engaged audience.

Home – domesticity as the sphere of femininity

Both Lagerlöf and Blixen structure their speeches around answering a pivotal question, and each of those questions exemplarily represents the historical context in which they were delivered. Lagerlöf, in 1911 in front of the audience of

29. Blixen 1965: 73.

30. Dinesen 1979: 66.

the International Woman Congress asks: *‘Vi kvinnor fordra rösträtt. Vad ha vi då att åberopa oss på som kan berättiga oss att ta del i riksstyrelsen?’*³¹ (‘We demand Suffrage. What plea can we advance that will entitle us to a voice in the Government?’)³² Blixen, in 1953, perhaps mirroring de Beauvoir’s existentialism, asks *‘Hvorfor er der to Køn?’*³³ (‘Why are there two sexes?’)³⁴

Lagerlöf engages her audience by questioning the exclusion of women from the political life of the State: *‘Men ha vi då ingenting gjort, som kan berättiga oss till samma fordringar på tillvaron som mannen? [...] Vår tid har varit lång på jorden, lika lång som hans. Har den gått spårlost forbi?’*³⁵ (‘Have we done nothing which entitles us to equal rights with man? Our time on earth has been long – as long as his. Has it left no trace in passing?’)³⁶ The main contribution of women, Lagerlöf will argue, is the creation of the Home as the founding structure of society.

*Vår gåva til mänskligheten har varit hemmet, detta och intent annat. Vi ha byggt på denna lilla byggnad sedan vår moder Evas tid. Vi ha ändrat planen, vi har experimenterat, vi ha upptäckt nytt, vi ha återvänt till gammalt, vi ha anpassat oss själva, vi ha gått ut och tämt dem bland de vilda djuren, som hemmet behövde, vi ha bland markens växter sokt ut sädesslagen, de fruktbarande träden, de välsmakande bären, de skönaste blommorna. Vi ha klätt vårt hem och prytt det, vi hat utarbetat dess seder, vi har skapat uppfostringskonsten, trevnaden, hövligheten, det glada, behagliga umgängessättet.*³⁷

31. Lagerlöf 1911a: 6.

32. Lagerlöf 1911b: 2.

33. Blixen 1965: 73.

34. Dinesen 1979: 66.

35. Lagerlöf 1911a: 6.

36. Lagerlöf 1911b: 3.

37. Lagerlöf 1911a: 8.

Our gift to humanity is the Home – that, and nothing else. We have been building upon this little structure ever since the time of our Mother Eve. We have altered the plan; we have experimented; we have made new discoveries; we have gone back to the old; we have adapted ourselves; we have gone forth and tamed such among the wild beasts as were needed in the Home; we have selected from the growths of the earth fruit bearing trees, luscious berries, seeds, and the choicest flowers, we have furnished and decorated our Home; we have developed its customs; we have created the art of child training, comfort, courtesy, and pleasant social intercourse.³⁸

Notice here the ironic use of *'detta och intet annat'* ('that and nothing else'), and the following listing of accomplishment necessary to the development of human civilisation. Lagerlöf then questions whether this accomplishment has ever been recognised: *'Är denna kvinnans insats i kulturen ringa eller värdefull? Är den uppskattad eller föraktad?'*³⁹ ('Is this woman's contribution to civilisation inconsiderable or valuable? Is it appreciated or despised?')⁴⁰ And the answer, according to Lagerlöf, can be found in her current society: *'Hun har den mannen kunnat bära alla sina olyckor? Det är därför, att hans hustru alltid har berett honom ett gott hem.'*⁴¹ ('How has that man been able to bear up under all his misfortunes? Because his wife has always eased his burden by making a good Home for him.')⁴² Because of this support, Lagerlöf explains, man has been able to create the State: *'Mannens främsta gåva till kulturen är den välordnade,*

38. Lagerlöf 1911b: 5.

39. Lagerlöf 1911a: 9.

40. Lagerlöf 1911b: 6.

41. Lagerlöf 1911a: 9.

42. Lagerlöf 1911b: 5.

*starka, skyddande staten.*⁴³ ('Man's greatest contribution to civilisation is the well-organised, strong and protecting State.')⁴⁴ This concept of the Home and the domestic sphere as a woman's domain, as opposed to a man's external realm of action, is present in Blixen's speech as well:

*Mandens Tygdepunkt, hans Væsens Gehalt, ligger i, hvad han i Livet udfører og udretter, Kvindens i, hvad hun er [...] dette vil da sige, at Manden skaber Værket af, men udenfor, sig selv [...] Kvindens Virke er at udvide hendes eget Væsen.*⁴⁵

A man's center of gravity, the substance of his being, consists in what he has executed and performed in his life; the woman's in what she is [...] that is to say, the man creates something by himself, but outside of himself [...] the woman's function is to expand her own being.⁴⁶

In her speech, Blixen refers to the time she spent in Kenya to depict the interaction between the feminine domestic sphere with the masculine external activities:

I Øst-Afrika, der i min Tid var et Pionerland, blev den Kvindens Virksomhed, hvorom jeg har talt, hendes Udvidelse af hendes eget Væsen, paaskønnet i en Grad, som man vistnok herhjemme vanskeligt kan forestille sig. En Blomsterhave eller Blomsterbuket føltes, tror jeg, af de Mænd, som ko mind fra haardt Arbejde i Marken eller paa Ekspeditioner, som en Gave, ja, som en Velsignelse. De spurgte os: Har I nu faaet Lavandler til at gro? Men ingen Mand derude fandt i min Tid paa selv at anlægge

43. Lagerlöf 1911a: 14.

44. Lagerlöf 1911b: 9.

45. Blixen 1965: 80.

46. Dinesen 1979: 73.

en Blomsterhave. I Virkeligheden tror jer, at Blomsterhavens Tilstedeværelse for Mændene derude havde sin egentlige Værdi deri, at den udtrykte eller betød vor egen Tilstedeværelse for Mændene derude havde sin egentlige Værdi deri, at den udtrykte eller betød vor egen Tilstedeværelse. Til Gengæld vurderede vi, I Samspillet mellem os, Mændenes Arbejde og Daad langt højere, end Kvinder I Europa kunde gøre det.⁴⁷

In East Africa, which in my time was a pioneer country, the woman's activity about which I have spoken became an extension of her own being, valued to such a degree that we here at home would find it difficult to imagine. A flower garden or a bouquet was, I believe, felt by those men who came in from hard work in the fields or from expeditions to be a gift, yes, a blessing. They asked us, have you been able to grow lavender? In my time, no man out there undertook to plant a flower garden. In reality I believe that there the existence of a flower garden had for men its real value in that it expressed or represented our presence, in recompense we valued the interplay between us, the work and deeds of man, far higher than women in Europe could or do.⁴⁸

Work, inclusivity, and cooperation

Conscious, perhaps, of how reactionary her views might sound to her radio listeners, before going ahead to develop her theory of cooperation and interaction, Blixen introduces in her speech a crucial reference to the previous generation of the women's movement:

47. Blixen 1965: 85.

48. Dinesen 1979: 78.

Jeg ved, i hvad Gæld jeg staar til de gamle Kvindesagskvinder I deres Grav. Naar jeg selv i mit Liv har kunnet studere, hvad jeg vilde og hvor jeg vilde, naar jeg har kunnet rejse alene Verden rundt, naar jeg frit har kunnet faa mine Ideer frem paa Tryk, ja, naar jeg i Dag kan staa paa en Talerstol, saa skylder jeg disse Kvinder det.⁴⁹

I know in which debt I stand to the older women of the women's movement now in their graves. When I myself in my lifetime have been able to study what I wished, and where I wished, when I have been able to travel around the world alone, when I have been able to put my ideas freely into print, yea, when I today can stand here at the lectern, it is because of these women.⁵⁰

It is interesting to underline that this intergenerational reference appears in Lagerlöf too:

Jag ställer mig framför Rembrandts gamla borgarkvinna, hon med de tusen rynkorna i det kloka ansiktet, och jag frågar henne, varför hon har levet [...] Vi läsa svaret i hennes milda och goda leende: Jag har ingenting annat gjort än skapat ett gott hem' [...] Vi veta, att om vi fragade mannen, om vi kunde ställa upp dem släktled efter släktled, tusental och milliontal efter varandra, skulle ingen komma på den tanken att svara, att de ha varit för att skapa ett hem. Det har varit kvinnans sak. Det finns ingen man, som gör anspråk på äran att ha skapat hemmet.⁵¹

I place myself before Rembrandt's old peasant woman, she of the thousand wrinkles in her intelligent face, and ask

49. Blixen 1965: 86.

50. Dinesen 1979: 79.

51. Lagerlöf 1911a: 7–8.

myself why she lived [...] We read the answer in her calm and kindly smile: 'All that I did was to make a good Home' [...] We know that if we were to ask the men, could line them up, generation after generation, thousands and millions in succession, it would not occur to one of them to say that he had lived for the purpose of making a good Home. That has been woman's affair. No man assumes the honour of having founded the Home.⁵²

Stenberg notes how the employment of Rembrandt's portrait and the reference to previous generations of women 'lends women's work an eternal, almost mythical significance'.⁵³ Lagerlöf argues for more inclusivity in the workplace, urging women to enter the job market: '*Var övertygad framför allt, att det har varit nödvändigt! Du måste in överallt, du måste finnas till hands överallt, om staten en gång skall kunna bli älskad som ett hem.*'⁵⁴ ('Be assured that it is necessary work! You must enter all fields; you must be on hand everywhere, if the State is ever to be beloved like the Home. Be certain that your services, now so despised, shall soon be sought after.')⁵⁵ Lagerlöf reasons that the State will never function effectively, unless it includes women.

To explain the necessity for cooperation between the sexes, Lagerlöf describes how the success of the Home, and its everlasting strength, are the result of collaboration: '*Jag har vågat säga, att hemmet är kvinnans skapelse, men jag har aldrig sagt, att hon har skapat det ensam. Till lycka för henne och för alla har hon alltid där haft mannen bredvid sig. Husbonde och matmor har*

52. Lagerlöf 1911b: 4–5.

53. Forsås-Scott et al. 2014: 31.

54. Lagerlöf 1911a: 19.

55. Lagerlöf 1911b: 13.

*suttit sida vid sida.*⁵⁶ (‘I have been bold enough to state that the Home is woman’s creation. But I did not say that she alone created it. Fortunately for her and for all of us, she has ever had the man with her. Master and mistress have sat side by side.’)⁵⁷ And while not all Homes are perfect, across all society and classes they do function and they continue to provide the foundation of society. She underlines that in the creation of the State:

*Har mannen stått ensam. Det har stått en drottning vid kungens sida under kröningspällen, men hon har inte varit med som drottning, bara som hustru. Intet har tvungit mannen att föra kvinnan med sig i domssalen, i ämbetsverket, i varumagasinet, han har strävat sig fram ensam med sina svåra värv.*⁵⁸

[M]an has stood alone. Nothing has impelled man to take woman with him into the hall of Justice, into the Civil Service Department, into the House of Commerce. He has forged his way alone.⁵⁹

The success of his endeavour is questionable, according to Lagerlöf: ‘*Vad vittna hatet mellan samhällsklasserna? Vad vittna de dova ropen nedifrån, allt hot om omstörtning? Vad vittnar all klagan från arbetslösa? Vad vittnar utvandringen.*’⁶⁰ (‘Witness

56. Lagerlöf 1911a: 17.

57. Lagerlöf 1911b: 12.

58. Lagerlöf 1911a: 17–18. Notice that ‘*Det har stått en drottning vid kungens sida under kröningspällen, men hon har inte varit med som drottning, bara som hustru*’ is absent from the English translation. It could be argued that less than a decade after the death of Queen Victoria, the translator would consider this sentence difficult to contextualise for an English-speaking readership.

59. Lagerlöf 1911b: 12.

60. Lagerlöf 1911a: 18.

the hatred between the classes; witness the stifled cries from beneath, all the threats of revolutions. Witness the complaints of the unemployed; witness emigration!')⁶¹ Including women in the State, and admitting the necessity of cooperation, would mean, according to Lagerlöf, the creation of the ideal State:

Ack, vi kvinnor äro inga fullkomliga varelser, ni män äro inte fullkomliga mera än vi. Hun skola vi nå fram till det, som är stort och gott utan att hjälpa varandra? Vi tro inte, att verket skall gå fort, men vi tro, att det vore synd, och dårskap att avvisa vår hjälp. Vi tro, att Guds vind för oss. Det lilla mästerverket, hemmet, var var skapelse men mannens hjälp. Det stora mästerverket, den goda staten, skall skapas av mannen, då han på allvar tar kvinnan till sin hjälpare.⁶²

Alas, we women are not perfect beings! You men are no more perfect than we are. How are we to attain that which is great and good unless we help each other? We do not think that the work can be accomplished at once, but we do believe that it would be folly to reject our help. We believe that the winds of God are bearing us onward, that our little masterwork, the Home, was our creation with the help of men. The great masterwork, the State, shall be perfected by man when in all seriousness he takes woman as his helper.⁶³

Under the disguise – reclaiming a feminine discourse

At the time of writing her 'Baaltale', and having witnessed the gradual achievement of women's emancipation, for Blixen the

61. Lagerlöf 1911b: 12.

62. Lagerlöf 1911a: 19–20.

63. Lagerlöf 1911b: 14.

matter is now that of reclaiming women's essential difference from men. Blixen argues that it is now time for women to reassess their own individuality, to not act like men but as themselves. Blixen's critique of the first generation of feminists, indeed, is that of making their way into the masculine world of the workplace by adopting male disguises: *'Thi de gamle Kvindesagskvinder var ikke alene retsindige, tapre og urokkeligt tro – de var ogsaa listige! [...] Eller de gjorde deres Indtog i Forklædning, i en mental og psykisk Mandssragt'*⁶⁴ ('The early women of the women's movement were not only just, courageous, and unswervingly loyal – they were also sly! [...] that is, they made their entrance in disguise, in a costume which intellectually or psychologically represented a male'),⁶⁵ and she is now encouraging women to act differently: *'Men i Dag er jo Kvinden ude af Lemmen i Træhesten og indefor Citadellernes Mure. Og hun har vistnok faaet saa fast Fodfæste i de gamle Borge, at hun frejdigt kan opslaa sin Ridderhjelme og vise Verden, at hun er Kvinde og ingen formummet Skælm.'*⁶⁶ ('But today, woman has sprung out from the wooden horse and walks within the walls of the citadels. And she has certainly such a firm footing in the old strongholds that she can confidently open her visor and show the world that she is a woman and no disguised rogue.')⁶⁷

Referring again to Showalter's distinction, the Female phase is the time to reject the two forms of dependency – imitation and protest – and reclaim the female experience. Anticipating post-war French feminism, Blixen seems to be suggesting that to reach true emancipation, women should be owning their own discourse and distance themselves from a male one: *'Under Forklædningen er vi, hvad vi er, og hvad vi gennem Tiderne har*

64. Blixen 1965: 87.

65. Dinesen 1979: 80.

66. Blixen 1965: 87.

67. Dinesen 1979: 80.

*været. For vi har, i fuld Troskab mod vort kvindelige Væsen, og med fuld Overholdelse af vor kvindelige Værdighed.*⁶⁸ ('Under the disguise we are what we are, and what we have been throughout time. With complete loyalty towards our female being and in complete accord with our female dignity.')⁶⁹ Blixen also notices that although women are still kept away from the higher roles of the workplace, the feminine element is present in all the grounding figures of the patriarchal Western society:

*For dem, der holdt paa, at Kvindeligheden maa skurre paa Prækestolen of i Dommersædet, vil det være værd at lægge Mærke til, at de mandlige Sagkyndige, der saa selvfølgelig har indtaget deres Pladser der, gerne – ligesom drevene af et særligt Instinkt – har ændret deres Apparition hen imod den kvindelige. Vor Præstekjole med den hvide, pibede Krave er jo en smuk og værdig Kvindedragt, Lægerens og Husmødrenes Kilter har meget tilfælles, og de høje Dommere bærer i Funktion folderige Klæder og forhøjer i nogle Lande deres Værdighed med langlokkede, krusede Parykker.*⁷⁰

For those who have believed that femininity would grate in the pulpit and on the bench, it is worth observing that the male experts who have, as a matter of course, taken their places there have, driven as it were by a special instinct, willingly changed their appearance somewhat towards the womanly. Our clergyman's robe with its white ruff is a beautiful and noble woman's costume; the physician's and housemother's white coats have much in common; high-ranking judges wear flowing robes when on the bench and in some countries enhances their dignity with long, curly wigs.⁷¹

68. Blixen 1965: 88.

69. Dinesen 1979: 81.

70. Blixen 1965: 91.

71. Dinesen 1979: 84–85.

Both Blixen and Lagerlöf identify the feminine element as the essential missing element in a patriarchal society. To be effective, society, or State, must acknowledge the necessity of including women and the feminine element. The feminine in both authors represents a strong grounding element – in Lagerlöf it is embodied in the Home as the foundation of the State, in Blixen in the way its representation is worn and used by the founding figures of Western society, such as church and justice. It is the essential grounding aspect of the feminine that is necessary for the development of society in Blixen:

*vor eget Samfund, – i hvilket Menneskene er naaet saa vidt i hvad de kan udrette og i de konkrete Resultater de kan vise, – det trænger til Mennesker, som er. Ja, selve vor Tid kunde siges at behøve at omlægge sin ambition fra at udrette mere, til at være [...] 'thi jeg vil lægge Tidens Kvinder lige saa vel som dens Mænd dette paa Hjerte: ikke blot at tænke paa, hvad de vil udrette, men dybeste at vide, hvad de er.'*⁷²

precisely our small society – in which human beings have achieved so much in what they are able to do and in what concrete results they can show – needs people who are. Indeed, our own time can be said to need a revision of its ambition from doing to being [...] I wish to insinuate into the minds of the women of our time as well as those of the men, that they should meditate not only upon what they may accomplish but most profoundly upon what they are.⁷³

In both Blixen and Lagerlöf, the ultimate aim of their speeches is not to argue for one gender's superiority against the other, but

72. Blixen 1965: 92–93.

73. Dinesen 1979: 85–86.

rather to advocate the necessity of interplay and interaction of both in order to establish a healthy and strong society. Lagerlöf reasons ‘*Ack, vi kvinnor äro inga fullkomliga varelser, ni män äro inte fullkomliga mera än vi. Hun skola vi nå fram till det, som är stort och gott utan att hjälpa varandra?*’⁷⁴ (‘Alas, we women are not perfect beings! You men are no more perfect than we are. How are we to attain that which is great and good unless we help each other?’)⁷⁵ and, as if completing this consideration, Blixen writes ‘*Jeg selv anser Inspiration for at være den højeste menneskelige Lykke. Og Inspirationen kræver altid to Elementer [...] Ja, jeg tror at jo mægtigere denne gensidige Inspiration virker, jo rigere og mere levende vil et Samfund udvikle sig.*’⁷⁶ (‘I myself look upon inspiration as the greatest human blessing. And inspiration always requires two elements [...] Yes, I think that the more strongly the mutual inspiration functions, the richer and more animated a society will develop.’)⁷⁷

Conclusive thoughts

This paper was inspired by Bjarne and by his research into Selma Lagerlöf, especially his work in *Re-Mapping Lagerlöf: Performance, Intermediality and European Transmissions*, which he co-edited with Helena Forsås-Scott and Lisbeth Stenberg. This paper was also inspired by Bjarne’s lecturing work and, on a more personal note, by his invaluable guidance as a supervisor while writing my doctoral thesis on Karen Blixen.⁷⁸ In celebration of his long and admirable career, and in everlasting

74. Lagerlöf 1911a: 19.

75. Lagerlöf 1911b: 14.

76. Blixen 1965: 77.

77. Dinesen 1979: 70.

78. See Tesio-Ryan 2019.

gratitude of what his academic support has meant to me, I thought it fitting to write about two of his, and my, favourite women writers of all time.

When Bjarne kindly gave me a copy of *Re-Mapping Lagerlöf* and I first read Lisbeth Stenberg's chapter on Lagerlöf's 'Hem och Stat', I immediately thought of Karen Blixen's 'En Baaltale'. At the time, I was a tutor in Danish Literature and my classes were designed around Blixen's 'En Baaltale', her conceptualisation of femininity, the impact of her years in Kenya in the development of so many of her female characters, and her understanding of gender and social roles.

'En Baaltale' always triggered lively discussion in the class – Blixen's approach to gender, the idea of interaction and inspiration, seemed to be very relevant still to this day. However, because the life of a part-time PhD student is doomed to always be a hectic affair, I never actually had the time to explore how Blixen's and Lagerlöf's thoughts on feminism and the feminine compared – and even worse, I never fully discussed the topic with Bjarne during our supervisions. Hence, I took the opportunity to write this paper to finally do it. Bjarne himself has compared Lagerlöf to another iconic Dane, Hans Christian Andersen, in his paper 'Comparative Considerations: Lagerlöf, Andersen and the British Perspective', where he observes 'some notable similarities and direct influences between texts'.⁷⁹

In comparing 'Hem' and 'En Baaltale', I was struck by the similarities between them. Despite their stylistic differences, as well as the notable historical distance, I found it compelling that both authors had such similar approaches to the subject of gender. While Karen Blixen was certainly a Lagerlöf reader – which can be seen from the several annotated copies of Lagerlöf

79. Thomsen Thorup 2011: 2.

novels among her library holdings in Rungstedlund⁸⁰ – it is not clear whether she had the opportunity to read ‘Hem och Stat’, making a direct correlation between the two papers difficult to establish. Yet, in comparing the two texts, I had the impression that they somehow complemented each other, as if they were, in a way, dialoguing. The post-suffragette, almost existential consideration of gender in ‘En Baaltale’ could be read as a commentary to ‘Hem och Stat’. Perhaps it could be considered as Karen Blixen’s way to finally repay the debt she knew she owed to those ‘gamle Kvindesagskvinder’ with an oration which aims to inspire a new generation to reconsider their roles and adapt them to an evolving and developing society. I believe that those two papers demonstrate that both Lagerlöf and Blixen were not only remarkably brave, versatile, and accomplished authors, they were also original thinkers and, each in their own way, very ahead of their time.

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80. See Bondesson 1982: 207, 208, entries: 903–907.

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