

## CAMILLA COLLETT: THE WITTY IRONIC VOICE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S POETIC REALISM IN NORWAY

### *Introduction*

“Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it but cherished by those who do”<sup>1</sup>. Among the first writers to cherish and master irony as a critical tool was Norwegian feminist writer Camilla Collett. Born one hundred years before women were granted the right to vote in Norway (in 1913, as the second country in Europe after Finland, in 1906), Camilla Collett is one of the most important Norwegian writers, best known for her (only) novel, *Amtmandens Døtre* [*The District Governor's Daughters*], published in 1854–1855, which confirms Collett's position in the canon of Norwegian poetic realism. Breaking the literary norms of the time in terms of both form and content, Collett wrote the very first novel published in Norway, and revealed the truth about the lives of women in the nineteenth century, writing from a woman's critical perspective. What is more, her literary production is much broader, consisting mainly of essays, but also letters, memoirs, diaries and short stories, and dominated by irony from the very beginning, which is used as a device to criticise the condition of the woman in a patriarchal society. Much has been written about her novel in Norway, but rather less about the rest of her work, and it is this lesser-known part, which represents a critique of society as a whole, that played a major role in the women's emancipation movement and first wave of feminism in Norway, influencing the feminist organizations and inspiring numerous internationally renowned Norwegian authors. I thus intend, in this article, to examine Camilla Collett's ironical overtones, highlighting her contributions to poetic realism, world literature and women's writings, considering the historical context of the nineteenth century in Norway.

Collett made a name for herself through her witty remarks, mostly emphasised in the second part of her authorship, notably through her essays, which have recently started to be explored from critical perspectives. Tone Selboe, professor of comparative literature at the University of Oslo, has published an illustrative analysis entitled “Camilla Collett: Engasjerende Essays” [“Camilla Collett: Engaging Essays”], aiming at popularising “the older Camilla Collett who focussed

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 326.

on essay writing. This is the Collett who doesn't yield to men and who's not afraid to sign her work with her own name"<sup>2</sup>, which was unthinkable for the female writers of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Selboe alerts the readers that "even though we know Collett as a champion for women's rights, few are aware that she wrote many other types of texts as well as this famous novel"<sup>3</sup>, confirming that part of Collett's work is not as well-known or impactful today as it was in her time. Nevertheless, apart from her essays, Collett carries irony in her nature, which is best depicted in her letters and diaries. Another Norwegian literary critic, Kristin Ørjasæter, stands out in this sense, with her several consistent analyses on Camilla Collett's authorship, starting with her doctoral thesis, *Selviakttakelsens poetikk. En litterær analyse av Camilla Wergelands dagbok fra 1830-årene* [*Self-observation Poetics. A Literary Analysis of Camilla Wergeland's Diaries from the 1830s*].

Camilla Collett is highly praised in her country. What is more, she has played a substantial role on the emancipation of women at a worldwide level, an aspect not promoted enough. Her most famous work, the feminist novel *Amtmandens Døttre*, a classic in Norwegian literature, finally crossed the Norwegian borders with Kirsten Seaverl's translation into English under the title *The District Governor's Daughters* published by Norvik Press in 1992, after almost 140 years, with a new edition published in 2017. Her authorship consists of 194 works in 636 publications and in 8 languages, out of which only the novel has officially transcended the national boundaries<sup>4</sup>.

The article proposes a threefold structure: while the first part introduces the reader to Camilla Collett and Norway's historical and literary framework, the second part theoretically integrates the concept of irony as it is to be understood here, mostly through Søren Kierkegaard's conceptualization, an author that Collett herself read and appreciated. The third section represents the core of the article, as it develops upon the first two parts, exploring the use and impact of irony in two selected essays in Camilla Collett's authorship: "Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger" ["Some Reflections While Knitting"] (1842) and "Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["About Women and Their Status"] (1872). I have selected these essays because each of them stands out in Collett's work. While the first essay marks her literary debut, the second one reflects a change in Collett's style, which moves away from poetical realism towards a purer realist tone that is to be discussed in detail in the dedicated chapters.

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<sup>2</sup> Ida I. Bergstrøm, "Camilla Collett: Older, Brighter and Funnier". Translated by Cathinka Hambro, *Kilden*, 2013, [kjonnsforskning.no/en/2015/09/camilla-collett-older-brighter-and-funnier](https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2015/09/camilla-collett-older-brighter-and-funnier). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> "Camilla Collett", *WorldCat Identities*, OCLC, 2021, [www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n87882938/](https://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n87882938/). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

My purpose in this article is therefore to explore the usage of irony in Camilla Collet's works before and after *Amtmandens Døttre*, interpreting the methods and reasoning of this critical tool and its echoing tones on the emancipation of women, by making use of available research on the author's work and through a close reading of selected essays. Considering the complexity of Collett's authorship in terms of variety of types of writings, I find the essay to be the most suitable for the scope of my paper, as it provides the author's argument and critical reflections built through the use of irony, which may serve as a political manifesto through its very definition, and exert a powerful influence not only on fiction, but also on political and social affairs. Moreover, by translating the selected quotations from the original Norwegian texts into English, thus making part of her lesser-known writings available in a world language, I will also highlight Camilla Collet's universal significance for both world literature and for the women's rights movement, hoping to contribute to the international acknowledgement of the author.

*Camilla Collett – the First Norwegian Feminist and a Poetic Realist*

Camilla Collett (1813–1895) is acknowledged as the first important woman writer in Norway, as well as the first Norwegian feminist, a pioneer in the fight for women's liberation in her country, and a quintessential voice for poetic realism. The historical context depicts Norway in transformation, on its way from poverty and agriculture to industry and welfare, from a developing country to a developed country, with the growing working class and bourgeoisie, modernity and democracy on the rise. However, these concepts are at their earliest stages of development, as gender inequality represents the foundation for many writings and controversies, the reality of the time being the absolute source of inspiration for Camilla Collett.

Literature is always influenced by the cultural and social context of the time, and in the second half of the nineteenth century, Norway's transformation is mirrored by the literary movement of poetic realism, which represents a transition from romanticism (1830–1850) to realism (1870–1890) between 1850 and 1870. The focus shifts from the individual, the self, the mystical, from nature, poetry and feelings, from an idealized reality to a new type of literature that would *put problems under debate*<sup>5</sup>, underlying the failures of society while describing reality as it should be as compared to the pure realist intention of describing reality as it is. The prized Norwegian literary historian Per Thomas Andersen has concluded that “the project of poetic realism was to write about situations in everyday life yet

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<sup>5</sup> “Å sette problemer under debatt” (“putting problems under debate”) is the slogan of Scandinavian realism, an echoing expression for Norwegian scholars inspired by Georg Brandes' lectures on the Modern Breakthrough in the 1870s.

measured against the high standards of the ideal”<sup>6</sup>, the result being some idealized depictions of accurate reality. Inspired by Young Germany (Jung Deutschland), the progressive group of German writers concerned with the relationship between art and society between 1830-1850, fighting for a democratic society built on equality and supporting women’s rights, the poetic realist literature becomes socially and politically engaged, setting the stage for the propaganda writing (Norwegian *tendenslitteratur*) of the Modern Breakthrough, which marks the beginnings of the realist era in Scandinavia, with debates on topics such as “prohibition, peace, morality between the sexes and women’s rights”<sup>7</sup>.

Camilla Collett was born to the Wergelands, an upper-class intellectual and affluent family, one year before the national Independence Day, at a time when Norwegian identity was just taking shape. While her father, Nicolai Wergeland, had fought for Norway’s independence from Denmark, and played a significant role in the writing and drawing of Norway’s Constitution on May 17, 1814, her famous brother, the romantic national poet Henrik Wergeland, continued his father’s patriotic legacy by contributing to the foundation of a national identity, not only through his political activity, but also through his poetry and entire authorship. The politically and socially engaged family played a major role in our authoress’s future interests. While they were involved in the liberation of Norway, Collett would become preoccupied with the independence of women, who should enjoy the same freedom and rights as men in the newly established country. Nicolai Wergeland struggled to provide his daughter with more access to education than it was usual for the girls at the time. She followed her brothers’ education when they were home-schooled by private tutors, and attended Miss Pharo’s School for Young Ladies (*Jomfru Pharos Pigeskole*) in Kristiania (today’s Oslo), and the Moravian Brethren School (*Brødremenighetens skole*) in Christiansfeld, Denmark, a school for both boys and girls established by a religious community with a philosophy that made an impression on young Camilla<sup>8</sup>, who grew up believing that men and women are equal under God, while accepting their differences<sup>9</sup>. Her upbringing was also marked by voyages through a more liberal Europe, especially Paris and Hamburg, but also Amsterdam, Stockholm and

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<sup>6</sup> Per T. Andersen, *Norsk litteraturhistorie [Norwegian Literary History]*, second edition, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2012, pp. 205-206.

<sup>7</sup> Harold S. Naess, *A History of Norwegian Literature*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> It may be interesting to note that one of Collett’s deepest desires was to change the marriage ritual so that the bride would not have to promise to obey the bridegroom, which remained unchanged to this day, proving Collett’s validity even in modern times. See Heidi E. Sandnes and Ingrid W. Kåss, “Ville frigjøre kvinners følelser” [“Wanted to Eliberate the Feelings of Women”], *KvinneHistorie.No*, 2013, [kvinnehistorie.no/person/t-687](https://kvinnehistorie.no/person/t-687). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett: Translating Women’s Silence in Nineteenth-Century Norway*, University of Colorado, 2011, pp. 17-19, <https://scholar.colorado.edu/downloads/41687h50f>. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

Copenhagen, which helped enrich her cultural and writing experiences. She enjoyed the salon life in Hamburg, improving her language and musical skills, and soon made a reputation as *the Nordic Sylph*, as Theodor Mundt, the German critic, novelist and member of the Young Germany writers' group, described her<sup>10</sup>.

By falling in love with her brother's political and literary rival, the poet Johan Welhaven, Camilla Wergeland experienced the "forbidden" love, a story often read as Norway's Romeo and Juliet. However, Welhaven considered her too much to handle, confirming in a letter to his friend, Bernhard Herre: "Alas, it would never work! Everything has Wings with her"<sup>11</sup>, which may refer to her complex temperament, but also to her special, extra-ordinary nature. Thus, on July 14, 1841, Camilla Wergeland became Camilla Collett, choosing the mature trustworthy love by marrying Peter Jonas Collett, the lawyer, literary critic, professor and politician whom she had met two years earlier, who shared her intellectual interests and who supported and encouraged her to write. Sadly, he died ten years later, leaving the thirty-eight year old widow with five children and financial problems. It was then that she took her life in her own hands and decided to become a professional writer, a career path not meant for women at that time. She could have accepted her husband's family's financial support and embark on a domestic life as it would have been the proper choice for a woman, but instead she chose a life of independence, travelling through Europe to continue writing and fight for the emancipation of women. It was not an easy journey for a woman, since male writers were financially supported by the authorities, while women writers were hardly even recognized. It is therefore worth mentioning that she only managed to receive *half* of a writer's support from the Government at the age of sixty-three, in 1876<sup>12</sup>.

Camilla Collett stands out as one of the first advocates for women's rights, even before the establishment of any feminist organization. As a matter of fact, she was a true inspiration for the feminist movement and for future associations for the cause, such as *Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (Norsk Kvinnesaksforening)*. What is more, Collett distinguishes herself as a feminist (even though she never called herself one), not only through her early emancipated ideas, but also through a special approach to feminism, one with romantic overtones. One may thus call Camilla Collett a romantic feminist, since she

<sup>10</sup> Josef Wiehr, "Camilla Collett", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 24, 1925, 3, p. 338.

<sup>11</sup> Alf Collett, *Camilla Colletts livs historie: belyst ved hendes breve og dagbøger* [*The Story of Camilla Collett's Life: Enlightened by Her Letters and Diaries*], Kristiania, Gyldendal, 1911, p. 53: "Ak det vilde ikke gaa! Alt er Vinger hos hende". Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Heidi M. Solbakken, Jorunn Ø. Nyhus, "Camilla Collett og Amtmannens Døtre" ["Camilla Collett and *The District Governor's Daughters*"], *Nasjonal Digital Læringsarena*, 2019, [nbla.no/article-iframe/urn:resource:1:195297/17083?removeRelatedContent=true](https://nbla.no/article-iframe/urn:resource:1:195297/17083?removeRelatedContent=true). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

focused on “the importance of the heart”, fighting for a woman’s personal life, not for political reforms, demanding equality and respect for the difference: “Feminists... do not call for the same upbringing as men; but they call for the same degree of education for their abilities as men enjoy for theirs”<sup>13</sup>. Camilla Collett was primarily concerned with changing the women’s mindset, as most of them were accepting their social condition and female compliance as the normal order of things.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings of the Concept of Irony*

Irony has been conceptualized from ancient times with a variety of theories as a result, out of which I chose to refer to Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813–1855), the Danish philosopher who elaborated his views on irony in his doctoral thesis entitled *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, originally published in 1841. As suggested in the title, Kierkegaard builds his thesis on Socratic ideas, and just as Socrates’ ideas were still valid for Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard’s philosophical interpretation maintains its relevance today. Interestingly enough, Kierkegaard was born the same year as Collett, and their authorship was influenced by the same historical context, an aspect that supports my choice for this theoretical framework as detailed further.

A philosopher of subjectivity and individualism, Kierkegaard considered irony as the first step that a person takes towards subjectivity – a Socratic approach. The ancient Greek philosopher reveals a change in philosophy, building his ideas on subjectivity, the quest for personal truth and individual conscience as opposed to the philosophy of objectivity, breaking away from tradition and inaugurating Western ethics. Socrates proposed a new type of ethics, showing people that they can think for themselves without relying on traditions and laws believed to be sanctioned by the gods, by constantly questioning them and their own knowledge and by adopting a negative, ironic, subjective and free position<sup>14</sup>.

Kierkegaard argued that irony appears when the essence contradicts the phenomenon: “when I am speaking, the thought, the meaning, is the essence, and the word is the phenomenon”<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, if these two concepts do not match, irony is developed, which provides the ironist with a certain superiority coming from not being immediately understood. The Danish philosopher suggests that without ironists there wouldn’t be any progress, acknowledging the ironist’s power of leading change and opening the way to new possibilities, comparable to those available to a prophet:

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<sup>13</sup> Torill Steinfeld, “Story of the Gemale Heart”, in *The History of Nordic Women’s Literature*. Translated by Gaye Kynoch, 2011, [nordicwomensliterature.net/2011/08/19/story-of-the-female-heart/](http://nordicwomensliterature.net/2011/08/19/story-of-the-female-heart/). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 247.

...the tragic hero... battles for the new and strives to destroy what for him is a vanishing actuality... For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea. He is the one who must pass judgment. In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know... The prophet, as was noted above, is lost to his generation, but essentially that is the case only because he is preoccupied with his visions. The ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it. That which is coming is hidden from him, lies behind his back, but the actuality he so antagonistically confronts is what he must destroy; upon this he focuses his burning gaze<sup>16</sup>.

Irony is hence an assertion of subjectivity, the ironist adopting an isolated position, free from traditions, undermining society as a whole and rejecting all previously established conditions in society, cunningly interjecting irony into language and using it as a strategic critical tool, but also generating a more subtle and sophisticated speech. The ironist stands out through individuality, not as part of the mainstream but rather as an outsider, searching for truth and for an authentic life that is true for oneself.

Up until the turn of the nineteenth century, irony had been classically regarded as a figure of speech within the field of rhetoric. The modern acceptance of irony as a critical instrument started during the romantic literary era with Friedrich Schlegel, who differentiated between the rhetorical use of irony in isolated passages as opposed to poetry and philosophy, where the author is ironic throughout, precisely in the same way as Socrates was in his dialogues<sup>17</sup>. Schlegel described irony as a “constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction” with the purpose of unfolding the various expressions of highest knowledge, thus also diminishing the authorial omniscient quality<sup>18</sup>. At the opposite pole was Georg Friedrich Hegel, the German idealist philosopher whose aim was to reach “absolute knowledge”, and who felt thus threatened by the Schlegelian notion of irony. Hegel had constantly and publicly expressed his disapproval of Schlegel’s views of irony during his lectures, criticizing it as a “divine ingenuity for which everything and anything is nothing but an insignificant creation, unrelated to the free creator, who feels himself rid of his products once and for all because he can just as well create as annihilate them”<sup>19</sup>. It was one of the participants in the lectures who solved the Schlegel-Hegel dispute on irony, and this scholar was

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 260-261.

<sup>17</sup> Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2017, pp. 73-74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

Søren Kierkegaard. He motivated Hegel's rage with the Schlegelian acceptance of irony by noticing that Hegel's own position was actually so close to Schlegel's concept of irony, which blurred his entire conceptualization of the matter. What is more, the "Hegelian dialectic [...] also appears to be animated by a constant yes and no, a permanent construction and suspension, an alternation of self-creation and self-destruction, an inherent 'negativity'"<sup>20</sup>. In his book *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Ernst Behler details the way Kierkegaard asserted his conclusion by referring to Hegel's statement on the universal irony of the world in relation with its quality of self-destruction for the purpose of self-creation:

Hegel draws a parallel between irony and dialectics by saying in one single parenthesis, *All dialectic respects everything that should be respected as if it were respected, lets the inner destruction generate on it – universal irony of the world.* [...] Kierkegaard tried to explain this irony using the world-historical individual, the tragic hero of world history. Such a hero has to bring about a new level of historical reality by displacing the old order, but is bound to an actuality that will equally become subject to change. Kierkegaard thought that Hegel had quite correctly described this "universal irony of the world": *Inasmuch as each particular historical actuality is but a moment in the actualization of the Idea, it bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction*<sup>21</sup>.

In order to ensure a precise identification of irony as applied in this article, I wish to distinguish it from other similar concepts, such as sarcasm or satire. Professor of Psychology Rod Martin defines and exemplifies the three concepts as follows:

1. Irony – the speaker expresses a statement in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning (e.g., saying *What a beautiful day!* when the weather is cold and stormy).
2. Satire – aggressive humor that pokes fun at social institutions or social policy.
3. Sarcasm – aggressive humor that targets an individual rather than an institution (e.g., At a fashionable dinner, a dignified lady rebuked Winston Churchill: *Sir, you are drunk. Yes, replied Churchill, and you are ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober, and you shall still be ugly*)<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, irony may be considered satirical when used as a tool for criticizing society. The *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* connects satire with irony by recognizing this satirical feature as one of the "aspects" of irony and characterising satirical irony, or "to blame by praise", which "reveals the defeat of an unsympathetic victim", from comic irony or "to praise by blame", which "reveals

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> Rod A Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Amsterdam, Elsevier Academic Press, 2007, p. 13.



the triumph of a sympathetic victim”. Moreover, Socrates is hereby confirmed as “the most influential model in the history of irony”, and “the dominant conception of irony [remains] *satiric blame through praise*”<sup>23</sup>.

After having described the Kierkegaardian concept of irony as based on the Socratic approach and limiting its understanding to ensure more precise applicability, I will now proceed with a close reading of Collett’s text and her use of irony, which represents the core of this article.

### *Camilla Collett, the Ironist*

“Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so too a life that may be called human begins with irony”<sup>24</sup>. Camilla Collett was one of the first women who did not settle for being a housewife, nor for living a life led by men, despite the fact that she was born in a patriarchal society. The woman’s position, gender roles and social problems are recurrent themes in the author’s work, which aims at highlighting injustice to create change by unravelling a realistic critique of the bourgeois society of the time and thus “putting the problems under debate”, an emblem of Scandinavian realism.<sup>25</sup> And how better to achieve disturbing tradition and society norms in an elegant manner other than by starting from irony – that very first step towards subjectivity – and moving away from the collective towards the individual.

Collett masterfully uses irony as an instrument to accomplish her critical mission. The author’s ironic overtones are skilfully blended together with intense lyricism, creating a kind of agile, witty, but also figurative poetic language at a time when Norwegian authors were deeply searching for their writerly voice in a country with a re-forming mother tongue, evolving from Danish and old Norwegian. Her style is thus also representative for poetic realism, a transition from the romantic and the poetic to the realist stance. She tackles realist themes, triggering the alarm signal on what is wrong with society, but in a poetic, witty and passionate language. Her son, Alf Collett, revealed that his mother’s search for her style was intensely determined by her constant correspondence with her friend, Emilie Diriks. He describes her work as “condensed, yet clear and proper, witty, often ironic, vitalized by suitable images (like that of the brother), always fresh

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<sup>23</sup> Norman D. Knox, “Irony”, in Philip P. Wiener (ed.), *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, electronic edition, vol. II, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003, pp. 626-634, [xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaGenText/tei/DicHist2.xml;chunk.id=dv2-70;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv2-70;brand=default;query=irony#1](http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaGenText/tei/DicHist2.xml;chunk.id=dv2-70;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv2-70;brand=default;query=irony#1). Accessed on May 22, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “The Concept”, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Harold Naess, “A History”, p. 359.

and never tiring”<sup>26</sup>. Collett’s style was also influenced by her travels to France and Germany, where she was inspired by contemporary foreign authors, especially by George Sand, whom she deeply admired. The author confesses in a letter from 1837 to Emilie Diriks that the most important feature in writing is naturalness:

...however, my letters lack a certain Naturalness – it’s like being ashamed of the simple, artless way of expression. [...] You see, one must only always write as if one were speaking, as if the Addressee were standing there listening; should one choose to look for Expression, that would be a bad sign<sup>27</sup>.

However, the writer recognizes the shortcomings of her authorship, caused by her limited access to education as a young girl in the nineteenth century. It is thus striking that even though Camilla Collett did receive a more advanced education than most women in her time, this lack of equal rights to education and access to knowledge would torment her forever, so much so that she made it her life mission to raise her voice and change the world in this sense<sup>28</sup>. For this, she needed to conjure for herself a powerful pen, sharpened through irony.

Collet started her official literary career in the 1840s by writing essays and articles for the political newspaper *Den Constitutionelle* [*The Constitutional*], the voice of Intelligensen [The Intelligence] party, the same political party that both Johan S. Welhaven and Peter J. Collet supported, which envisioned a new Norway founded on European culture, as opposed to *Morgenbladet* [*The Morning Paper*], the newspaper of Patriotene [The Patriots], the party led by Henrik Wergeland, who aimed for a revitalized Norway based on historical traditions. Ironically enough, this was only possible after the authoress got married, and with the support of her husband, Peter Jonas Collet, who was a literary critic for the newspaper, as well as a member of academic and literary circles in Kristiania. Her marriage thus provided the young writer with access to the intellectual elite and allowed her to participate in official debates and satirically criticize the woman’s position in society, if only behind her husband’s name, not her own, as this was still something unsuitable for a woman of the time.

“*Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger*” [“*Some Reflections While Knitting*”] (1842)

The couple worked together on various texts published under her husband’s name, but her first published essay, “*Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger*”, [“*Some*

<sup>26</sup> Alf Collett, *Camilla Collett*, p. 34: “sammentrængt, men dog klar og rammende, vittig, ofte ironisk, oplivet af træffende billeder (ligesom broderens), altid frisk og aldrig trættende”.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35: “dog savne mine Breve en vis Naturlighed — det er ligesom man skam mede sig for den simple, kunstløse Udtryksmaade. [...] Seer du, man maae kun altid skrive, som om man talede, som om den Tiltalte stod og lyttede; vil man vælge og lede efter Udtryk, er det et slemt Tegn”.

<sup>28</sup> Josef Wiehr, “Camilla Collett”, p. 341.

Reflections While Knitting”]<sup>29</sup>, was issued anonymously in March 1842 and it was all hers. She makes her official literary debut by writing about what was soon to become her critical mission and life cause, namely the oppressed condition of the woman in society as opposed to that of the man. What is more, the article is acknowledged as the beginning of feminism in the history of Norwegian literature.

The paper represents a critique not only of society as a whole with its established norms and traditions, but most specifically of men who choose to adopt this superior position over women by refusing to share knowledge gained through their privileged access to education, thus supporting the world division between the two sexes, and most importantly of women themselves for accepting their subordinate condition without even trying to aim for their full potential. The author therefore adopts the subjective Socratic position by questioning tradition and drawing attention to what is really natural in the world in a very subtle and poetic language filled with refined ironic interjections.

The title itself is an ironic illustration of what the discourse stands for, alluding to the fact that a woman’s thoughts were worthless at a time when only men were credited with intellectual capabilities. It goes without saying that knitting was considered a feminine, domestic activity, but the question that Donna Stockton aptly raises in her dissertation is whether it is a mindless or a mindful activity, demonstrating that the author meant it as thoughtful and reflective due to its calming, mind-focusing effects. By means of a reference to a scene in Henrik Ibsen’s famous play *Et Dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*], where Nora’s husband, Torvald Helmer, expresses his preference for embroidery, which is “So much prettier. [...] Whereas knitting on the other hand just can’t help being ugly”, Stockton concludes that “Collett chooses knitting as her central metaphor because knitting is quintessentially a woman’s work, but not especially pleasing to the male gaze. She is not writing her essay to please, but to provoke debate”<sup>30</sup>. This represents indeed a very possible and suitable interpretation.

The essay is written from an anonymous knitting woman’s perspective in which we identify the author’s own voice, and it starts with her ironic reflections on the opposite, dominant sex: “It is strange that nowadays, when people write about everything and nothing, no one ever thinks of writing anything about our Gentlemen”<sup>31</sup>. The author goes on, intensifying the ironic overtones and the blame

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<sup>29</sup> I used Donna Stockton’s translation for the title (Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett*, p. 4), as I find it the most suitable adaptation into English. Stockton translated in her dissertation part of the essays that I have hereby analysed. However, for the purpose of text coherence and for asserting my own vision, I have added my own translation of all of Collett’s selected quotations, referring to the original in the footnotes.

<sup>30</sup> Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> Camilla Collett, *Samlæde verker. Mindeudgave* [*Collected Works. Memorial Edition*], Vol. II, Kristiania, Kristiania Gyldendalske boghandel, Nordisk forlag, 1913, p. 296: “Det er underligt, at det nutildags, hvor der skrives om alt og ingenting, dog aldrig falder nogen ind at skrive noget om vore Herrer”.

through apparent praise, by referring to the *gentlemen* as “Our lords! Earth’s firstborn, Heaven’s favourites. The Lions here in our Northern Zone! There was a subject! Strange, I dare say, that no one writes about them?”<sup>32</sup>, and she provides an ironic answer as well: “No, certainly not strange... To trust them with the impartiality that goes with this trust would be almost too much to ask”<sup>33</sup>. The writer hence uses irony as a strategic tool to criticize gender inequality and the way men treat women tactfully, by accusing them of not sharing their knowledge and of not reaching their full potential, even though, in contrast to women, they are enabled and have the means to do so. From a woman’s perspective, the author actually sees men as shallow beings, raw, immature and not at all as educated or as cultivated as they like to think of themselves, Norwegian men especially. The author is thence adopting a position which is subjective and isolated from tradition, making the individual the centre of attention and criticizing the impact of society and tradition on the individual.

The knitting woman then redirects her ironic gaze upon her own gender, the compliant women that accept their subordinate condition as if there were nothing they could do, as if they could not think and act for themselves, something that reinforces the initial statement that irony is the first step towards subjectivity, reverberating from Socratic times through Kierkegaard’s ideas:

What about the ladies? Yes, ladies have a lot of time and nothing to do at all... They all end their letters or thanks you notes... with the classic phrase: “For God’s sake, do not show this to anyone”. That’s exactly how mine end too. Now to think of these little wretched, day-shy thoughts published! Oh, even one single printed line must exert on the authoress a Medusa-like effect; she would be petrified over her own work even before others could stone her.

You may have heard about such an amphibian from which, although it is mute, certain pains are capable of squeezing out sound from it; but I have no idea of such a distress that could get the Norwegian ladies to speak, even though the distress is not just great; it is extremely great. The paralysis that strikes them through Norwegian upbringing and customs from the moment of their birth, will already prevent any such appearance...

You can therefore be safe, you our Rulers and Lords!... The ladies shall not interfere in your power. If one of them dares to express her mute thoughts, then these should not disturb you; they will only buzz your ears for a moment, like a swarm of flying mosquitoes<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 296-297: “Vore Herrer! Jordens førstefødte, Himmelens begunstigede. Løverne her i vor nordlige Sone! Det var et Tema! Underligt, siger jeg, at der ingen skriver om dem?”.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297: “Nei, visselig ikke underligt... At tiltro dem selv den Upartiskhed, der hører dertil, vilde næsten være for meget at vente”.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297: “Men Damerne? Ja, Damerne har god Tid og hører slet ikke til de handlende. ... De ender alle sine Breve eller Billetter om Tak for sidst eller Laan af et nyt Kravemønster med den klassiske Frase: ‘For Guds Skyld, vis ikke dette til nogen’. Akkurat saa ender ogsaa mine. Og nu at se

Women are thus also ironized for their choice of silence and submission, for the fact that they seem satisfied with their traditional upbringing, not daring to raise their voices, whether out of fear of failing, of being ridiculed or simply out of resignation and lack of individuality. The latter part of the extract is a pure example of the “blame through praise” definition of irony detailed in the previous part of this article. Camilla Collett praises men meaning the contrary of what she states, the essence (the thought) contradicting the phenomenon (the words), as per Kierkegaard’s conceptualization. She eventually explicitly criticizes men’s attitude towards women and their inability to reach their intellectual potential, thus remaining stuck in the grip of tradition<sup>35</sup>.

Subsequently, Collett goes on to disapprove of the superficial traits that men praise in women, namely outer beauty. She makes an ironic observation on this matter in order to emphasise her meaning: “the balls are precisely the only setting where these poor ladies matter”<sup>36</sup>. In another ironic remark, “The sword bearers, or as they should be called nowadays: the penknife bearers, look vexed surrounded by joy”<sup>37</sup>. By depreciating their masculinity and replacing the sexually connotated *sword* with the small, insufficient *penknife*, the author may insinuate that the men of her time could not aspire to measure themselves either against their Viking grandfathers, or against more potent European men, who could better appreciate feminine values<sup>38</sup>.

After ridiculing both men and women for their superficial collective attitudes and lack of individuality and showing her disapproval of gender inequality, the author extends her critique to outward, to the formation of the Norwegian nation. All these inconsistencies in human nature and order, which lead both men and

disse smaa undselige, dagsky Tanker offentliggjorte! O en eneste saadan trykt Linje maatte paa Forfatterinden øve noget som en Medusalignende Virkning; hun vilde forstenes over sit eget Verk, førend hun endnu kunde stenes af de andre. Man har vel hørt om et Slags Amfibier, af hvis Stumhed visse Smerter er istand til at udpresse Lyd; men jeg har ikke Begreb om en saadan Nød, der kunde bringe de norske Damer til at tale, og endnu er ikke Nøden saa stor; den er blot meget stor. Den Lamhed, hvormed norsk Opdragelse og Fordom fra Fødselen af slaar dem, vil allerede forebygge enhver saadan Fremtræden... I kan derfor være trygge, I vore Herskere og Herrer!... Damerne skal ikke gribe ind i eders Magt. Vover en af dem end her at udtale sine stumme Tanker, saa skal disse dog ikke foruroelige eder; de skal kun surre eder et Øieblik om Ørene, lig en Sværm forbiflyvende Myg”.

<sup>35</sup> The authoress’s critique of men for not fulfilling their duty of sharing their knowledge with women stems from a very personal experience, that is her own relationship with Johan Welhaven. She had expressed these arguments in their correspondence, already in 1835, and blamed the leader of The Intelligence party for not passing his learning over to the uneducated women – see Kristin Ørjasæter, *Camilla. Norges første feminist [Camilla. Norway’s First Feminist]*, J.W. Oslo, Cappelen forlag, 2003, pp. 79-80.

<sup>36</sup> Camilla Collett, “Samlede”, p. 299: “Ballerne er netop den eneste Scene, hvor de arme Damer betyder noget”.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 300: “Sverdsiden, eller som den nutildags heller burde hede: Penneknivsiden, ser fortrædelig ud midt under Glæden”.

<sup>38</sup> Donna Stockton, “Camilla”, pp. 77-78.

women to the impossibility of developing their full potential, have a significant impact on the entire nation, since a society made up by individuals cannot reach its full potential as a whole if it is made up of incomplete, weak, rudimentary bits and pieces. Camilla Collett is hereby proposing a solution, suggesting that only by means of knowledge sharing and education for all and by inviting women to participate in forming the country's national culture can the nation reach unity and integrity both in regard to its individuals and to itself. Kierkegaard's belief that subjectivity starts with irony is therefore extremely relevant here.

It is noteworthy that Camilla Collett reprinted the article under the simpler and more striking title "Strikketøisbetragtninger" ["Reflections While Knitting"] (removing the tentative "Some"), in the third volume of her essay collection entitled *Sidste Blade* [*Last Leaves*] in 1873, while for the first time signing a piece of her work with her own name at the age of sixty. She included an introductory note to the essay, mentioning that on reading it again she found it "so significant for the cause that has become my life's mission"<sup>39</sup>. The cause in question is "the women's cause"<sup>40</sup>, the fight for women's rights, she militates first of all for equal access to knowledge, education and public life, and essentially deplores men's sense of unjustified superiority over "the 'knitting' gender"<sup>41</sup> – as the more mature ironist refers to women – a superiority that, three decades after the original publication, is depicted as "Evil itself, the great fundamental cause"<sup>42</sup>, a position that the individual man and patriarchal society deliberately take advantage of.

Furthermore, the motto of the essay collection is purely illustrative in this sense: "Suffer, tolerate, keep silent when it comes to something mere personal; suffer, do not tolerate, do not keep silent when it comes to the idea"<sup>43</sup>. It shows a stronger and bolder Camilla Collett, one who advises others to speak up and join her in the fight for gender equality. Armed with an ironic pen, Camilla Collett has started in this essay, like the Kierkegaardian Prophet, to denounce the old and make way for the new, taking forward the women's cause.

*"Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["About Women and Their Status"] (1872)*

After the 1860s, Camilla Collett limits her work to essay collections exclusively, finding the essay to be the best literary form for expressing her polemical views on the women's cause, which she has finished defining for herself. This is also what emphasises my selection of the essay for my close

<sup>39</sup> Camilla Collett, "Samlede", p. 295: "saa betegnende for den Sag, som det er blevet mig en Livsopgave".

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 296: "Kvindesagen".

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 296: "det strikkende Kjøen".

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 296: "Ondet selv, den store Grundaarsag".

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 279: "Lide, taale, tie, naar det gjælder noget blot og bart personligt; lide, ikke taale, ikke tie, naar det gjælder Ideen".

reading exercise. Collett thus publishes her first collection of essays entitled *Sidste Blade* [*Last Leaves*] in 1868, continuing with two new volumes in 1872 and 1873. Besides breaking the already mentioned tradition of keeping the woman's name out of the public sphere by signing the latter volume with her own name, the fearless mature Collett breaches another patriarchal rule: women's publications were supposed to be endorsed by a respected male author in an introduction or foreword, something she deliberately disregards. By breaking both rules, Camilla Collett is now writing from a powerful position that only men of her age were supposed to take, but she chooses to adopt it for herself, thereby stressing once again her point that women's rights should be equal to those of men.

"Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" is recognized as the most important essay of the *Sidste Blade* anthology, published in the second volume in 1872 even though dated from 1868, and written in Paris, the city of the Revolution in Europe. The author continues her critical mission of obtaining equal rights for women, but in a more formal and persuasive manner, by speaking like a true activist and by renouncing the light fictional introductions while preserving the beautiful poetic expression. The essay thus marks a change in Camilla Collet's literary style. The ironic overtones are now even more subtle, while the sarcastic tone has been considerably tuned down in favour of a more official, appealing and eloquent argumentation.

The beginning of the essay continues on this very note, as the author explains how a writer needs to "convey the truths meant to be acknowledged in a sympathetic, that is in a pleasant, invigorating way, for unless this way manages to awaken a promising atmosphere through own or borrowed means, it will be perceived in its entirety as powerless"<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, in order to stress this point, she makes an appeal to her favourite critical tool, irony: "Here, the crowd is exactly like the child who must be lured with lies and tricks to take her medicine"<sup>45</sup>. She suggests that unpopular or taboo subjects (such as the emancipation of women), must be presented in a camouflaged, enjoyable manner in order to trigger a favourable mood in the readers. Sarcasm is therefore no longer a suitable instrument because of its aggressiveness, while irony remains the preferable device due to its perfect ability to convey a hidden meaning, while leading to change. She continues justifying this strategy by showing how unconventional works by Henrik Ibsen and Henrik Wergeland were initially disregarded in Norway while having enjoyed a very good reception in Denmark. Stating that she "could use several features from our *fatherland's recent history* to illustrate this"<sup>46</sup>, she ironizes her

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207: "bibringe de Sandheder, det vil have erkjendt, paa en sympatetisk, det vil sige paa en behagelig, oplivende Maade, formaar det ikke ved egne eller laante Midler at vække denne gunstige Stemning, vil det i sin Helhed spores som magtesløst".

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207: "Mængden ligner heri akkurat Barnet, hvem man ved Løier og Kneb maa lokke til at tage Medicinen".

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207: "Jeg kunde med flere Træk af *Fædrelandets nyere Historie* belyse dette".

country, referring to it through the masculine word *Fædreland* (fatherland), deliberately italicizing it to underline the shortcomings of her patriarchal, backward nation.

She intensifies her ironic remarks in the next paragraph, targeting the Norwegian readership for overlooking women's writings (understood as both writings by women writers, and as stories about women) that are not properly disguised in such a way as to please the eye, redirecting the irony towards the way they are interpreted:

A cause that carries a great message for humanity must therefore beautifully refrain from relying on its "silent power". It must have arms to seize with, wings to soothe, eyes and voices to flatter with; above all, it must be able to act on a mechanism that here in our heavy, foggy atmosphere is always in disarray: people's smile and laughter muscles. Poor, sad, boring, always inconvenient Women's cause, where can you get all this from?<sup>47</sup>

The author continues her critique of the nation by comparing it with the other Scandinavian countries and bringing Sweden into focus. Collett argues that the Swedes are much more advanced in terms of the emancipation of women, but does not mention any names, nor exact details on their progress. While making several vague references, the author adopts an indirect tone, possibly to avoid triggering aggressive reactions, since her essay is a cry for support directed to Norwegians. She follows her persuasive flattering language strategy when referring to the Swedes as a "chivalrous people; they made instant concessions, grand and chivalrous"<sup>48</sup>, to arouse competitive feelings in her compatriots, thus continuing her attempt, but without failing to slip in a few ironic, cryptic comments:

The Norwegian part of the Union could not simply remain quite untouched by these events in the Brotherland. They trailed slowly afterwards, almost like a bear on the tracks of a flock of frightened reindeer. This cause is just as promising as a noble cause in our Government whenever there is a strong and comfortable majority. However, the movement does not have a completely hopeless future ahead<sup>49</sup>.

In the picture of the bear hunting the reindeer, the bear may symbolize the stronger sex, the man or patriarchal society, while the reindeer seems to represent

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 208: "En Sag, der bærer et stort Bud til Menneskene, maa derfor smukt lade være at stole paa sin 'stille Magt'. Den maa have Arme til at gribe med, Vinger til at kjøle, Øine og Toner til at smigre med; den maa fremfor alt kunne virke paa en Mekanisme, der her i vor tunge, taagede Atmosfære altid er i Ulave: Folks Smile- og Lattermuskler. Stakkels triste, kjedelige, altid ubeleilige Kvindesag, hvor skulde du tåge alt dette fra?"

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209: "et ridderligt Folk; de gjorde øieblikkelig Indrømmelser, og de indrømmede stort og ridderligt".

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209: "Det unionelle Norge kunde ikke passende holde sig ganske urørt af disse Bevægelser i Broderlandet. De sakkede langsomt bagefter, omtrent som en Bjørn i Sporene af en Flok opskræmte Rensdyr. Denne Sag staar akkurat saa lovende som en nobel Sag i vort Storting, naar Majoriteten er fuldtallig og befinder sig vel. Bevægelsen har alligevel ikke en fuldkommen trøstesløs Udsigt".



the suppressed part, the woman or her (missing) rights. The author suggests that in her country, the women's cause has been ravaged by tradition and disowned through the politics and rules of a worthless Government. However, she gracefully ends her argument with hope and trust in the young generations, prompting younger men to form their own identity, do away with the old conventions, and act for a new, improved life.

Thirty years after her feminist debut on the literary scene, women still did not respond to her repeated invitations to raise their voices. In what follows, frustration and anger rise to the surface in a more aggressive voice. Recalling the mighty power that women once possessed, a power acknowledged only as associated with evil, Collett invokes the atrociousness of the mother troll, who has "both the will and the ability to do evil"<sup>50</sup> as opposed to *Jutulen*, who is just a big troll that falls asleep when hit on the head; or the Biblical image of Eve, who was essential in the Snake's plan by first tempting the Man to achieve his evil purpose still called the Fall of *man* (although both Eve and Adam were part of it, and even though Eve is blamed for it). Collett argues that ever since men sensed the female power, they did everything to diminish it, to "demoralize and idiotize her... narrowed her existence, deprived it of light, freedom, power of action"<sup>51</sup>. She goes on urging men to make things right by liberating the woman. Collett hereby deepens her younger reflections on the importance of education from *Strikketøisbetragtninger* by concentrating, in a more mature manner, on the negative impact that traditional upbringing has on women, their being denied education resulting in their inability to know their true selves, thus ending up living a false life. Moreover, she responds to her critics who, according to the ironist writer, believe that emancipated women would turn into a caricature of the Man, by stating that women will still be women, but by their education and liberation, that is a liberation of abilities enabled through education, they will become more natural, true to themselves and therefore complete beings, thus also increasing their self-confidence and self-respect, features they lost in the subjection process.

The author describes this loss of self-respect as the most sorrowful consequence of the subjection of women, proceeding by illustrating the roles women play in the patriarchal society, ironizing them for working for the Man: "the Housekeeper for single Gentlemen"<sup>52</sup>, "Doormen's Wives"<sup>53</sup>, "the Laundry Wife"<sup>54</sup> who must get a Man's Clothes ready ("Unfortunately, I could not keep my

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213: "baade Viljen og Evnen til det onde".

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213: "demoralisere og idiotisere hende [...] indsnævrede hendes Tilværelse, berøvede den Lys, Frihed, Handlekraft".

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Husholdersken for enlige Herrer".

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Portnerkoner".

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Vaskerkonen".

promise to prepare my clothes for the trip. Miss, as a couple of hours after I took the clothes from Miss, eight cufflink shirts came from the shop assistant”<sup>55</sup>, “Mothers who have had at least three daughters brilliantly married”<sup>56</sup>, “Wives”<sup>57</sup>, “Old noble ladies who once played a certain role, but who soon found themselves replaced, in a position of ambition or sentiment, by a younger and more beautiful one”<sup>58</sup>. All women’s roles are hereby ironically described based on their traditional positions ruled by men, the evident irony thus being present in the author’s words that contradict her meaning, since she describes the positions as they are and pretends to believe that this is just what ought to be done, as in Bergson’s conceptualization.

The author eventually redirects her critical gaze towards contemporary writings that encourage women’s subordination. She refers to *La Femme* by Adolphe Monod, a book written in Collett’s time but which the author ironically charges for its old-fashioned conventions, stating that “it could have easily, after many of its statements, been written in the darkest times of the Middle Ages”<sup>59</sup>. She responds to Monod’s religiously enslaved portrayal of the Woman as created for the Man, just like the Man was created for God, a perspective based on the Original Sin according to which Eve is responsible for by having tempted Adam to sin, thus bringing down collective guilt upon all women, with two ingenious questions (that remain unanswered to this day): one – wasn’t Eve also tempted? And two – didn’t Mary redeem their sin through the holy Virgin’s birth of Jesus Christ? Camilla Collett makes her point in a more acute ironic tone:

This is beautiful and significant; one should expect Mr. Monod to find it satisfactory, and the guilt to be thereby lifted. No, nevertheless the Guilt for Eve’s Crime rests upon every single Woman, and every single Woman is obliged to atone for it in Relationship with her Man by being obedient and submissive to him<sup>60</sup>.

She closes her argument on religion by referring directly to the Bible, wondering how women could have missed the “clearest, most indisputable

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Jeg kunde nok desværre ikke holde mit Løfte at skaffe Tøiet til Reisen, jeg, Frøken, for et Par Timer efterat jeg tog Frøkenas Tøi, kom der otte Manschetskjorter fra Ekspetionssekretæren”.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Mødre, der har faaet mindst tre Døtre brillant gifte”.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Koner”.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Gamle adelige Damer, der har spillet en viss Rolle, men engang har set sig fortrængt fra en Ambitions- eller Hjerterplads af en yngre og smukkere”.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217. “den kunde gjerne efter mange af sine Udtalelser skrive sig fra Middelalderens mørkeste Tider”.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217: “Dette er smukt og betydningsfuldt; man venter, at Hr. Monod skulde finde det tilfredsstillende, og at Skylden hermed var hævet. Nei, ikke destomindre hviler Skylden for Evas Forbrydelse paa hver enkelt Kvinde, og hver enkelt Kvinde er pligtig at udsone den i Forholdet til sin Mand ved at være ham lydige og underdanig”.

statement of the Bible ... [namely:] Fear God in your body and in your spirit”<sup>61</sup>. The author argues that this clearly demands equality between men and women, concluding that by staining the woman’s purity, the entire society collapses. Once again, her most passionate irony, conceived as a powerful call for action, is directed towards the self-submissive women, this time the “Bible-citing” ones:

And you Bible-arguing Ladies, you who are inspired by such a strange suicidal Drive to undermine your own Cause, arming yourself with the plump Weapon of the Letter, – against this Disparity, the Plague of Family Life, the true Source of our Degradation and Humiliation, our Desertion and even our Decay – against this Inequality, raise your voice, you Bible-savvy Ladies!<sup>62</sup>.

Collett was an early modern feminist fighting for equal rights for women while recognizing the natural differences between the two sexes. She ironizes men for twisting the natural universal difference between the two sexes, stating that since they were “not satisfied with the deviation... they have gradually created an artificial, unnatural difference, setting the ideal of the female character at the exact opposite end of that of man’s”<sup>63</sup>, which would also contribute to the woman’s dependence on the man.

She continues her critique on contemporary literature by targeting works of fiction, all the well-known poems, plays and novels, where the woman is portrayed as the victim, as the suffering, poor, weak soul that must sacrifice herself for others, ending in wreck and ruin, most often in death. Irony occurs again as an inconsistency between the phenomenon (what she is writing) and the essence (what she means, what she really thinks). She criticises her fellow writers’ preference for the sacrificed dead woman motif in their books, which is also contradictory in terms of the phenomenon (the idealised sacrificing woman) and the essence (the woman as victim): “How could one count this unmanageably long Line of poetic Victims!”<sup>64</sup>. The essence is that in reality there is no such thing as a poetic victim.

The author considers the status of the woman all over the world, comparing Norway with other European countries. She refers to the French Revolution and rhetorically inquires whether it would have ever been needed if the woman had

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219: “Bibelens klareste, uimodsigeligste Udsagn... Frygter Gud i eders Legeme og i eders Aand”.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 220: “Og I bibelargumenterende Damer, I, som besjæles af en saadan besynderlig selvmorderisk Drift til at underminere eders egen Grund, idet I væbner eder med Bogstavets plumpe Vaaben, – mod dette Misforhold, Familielivets Peststof, den sande Kilde til vor Nedværdigelse og vore Ydmygelser, til vor Forladthed og undertiden vor Fordærvelse, – mod dette Misforhold løfter eders Røst, I bibelsterke Damer!”.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 221: “Ikke tilfreds med den Afvigelse... har man efterhaanden dannet en kunstig, en unaturlig Forskjellighed, der satte Idealet af den kvindelige Karakter i noget stik modsat Mandens”.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22: “Hvor kan man opregne denne uoverskuelig lange Række af poesitilslørede Ofre!”.

occupied the rank and place she deserved in the world order. She points out that the women's cause was not even part of the Revolution. It was all about freedom and class equality before even considering equality between the sexes. Then the author brings England into the frame in the ironic story of the Englishman who was so miserable as he couldn't get his wife to contradict him in any manner, no matter how hard he tried. The wife would have no opinion of her own, she would dress according to her husband's taste, she would have no preference for where and how to spend their evenings, everything she was and did was dictated by her husband. "Desperate, he proceeded to Divorce. But you see, she did not want that, and the delighted Man required nothing else than for the first time to enjoy the Bliss of being the compliant one"<sup>65</sup>. She hereby ironizes once again the women's choice of remaining submissive and ignorant, and men's attitude towards them. Nonetheless, the author eventually throws a milder gaze on them while still pointing out the failures of their absent education in a beautiful, metaphorical, characteristic language: "The left Hand is constructed just as the right one, just not evenly trained. The so often emphasized spiritual Inferiority of the Woman, what if it is nothing but the clumsiness of the untrained Left?"<sup>66</sup>.

The poetic tone is preserved to the end of the essay where the author makes another shrewd observation on the fact that there are no autobiographies written by women. She reckons that such writings would reveal a whole different world to the audience, namely the dark side of life, which would therefore disturb them deeply. But they need not worry, for such works would not come to light, since no woman would ever dare such a thing. The author continues ironizing her fellow countrywomen by comparing them with their more advanced contemporaries, the German and the French women, quoting Rahel Varnhagen on the fact that "us women always have to perform"<sup>67</sup>, and George Sand that "the woman carries the weight of life"<sup>68</sup>, and proposes a translation of these statements that would apply to Norwegian women: "A woman must possess the ability to remain silent"<sup>69</sup>. As it is recognizable in her style by now, after reiterating once again her deepest frustration with her silent sisters and with her traditional compatriots, the heirs of women's voices, Camilla Collett ends her essay in a mixture of hope and disbelief, summoning both men and women to join her in the fight for women's liberation.

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238: "Fortvilet skred han til Skilsmisse. Men se, det vilde hun ikke, og den henrykte Mand forlangte intet mere end for første Gang at nyde den Lyksalighed at være den eftergivende".

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238: "Venstre Haand akkurat konstrueret som den høire, kun ikke øvet som den. Den saa ofte udhævede aandelige Underlegenhed hos Kvinden, hvad om den ikke er andet end den uøvede Venstres Keitethed?"

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241: "Wir Frauen müssen immer leisten".

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241: "La femme porte les poids de la vie".

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241: "En Kvinde maa kunne tie".

*Ending on a Praising Note*

Camilla Collett is an emblematic figure for Norway and an inspiration not only for Scandinavian scholars and literary critics, but also for several other famous Norwegian writers, among which I will only mention one name that is resonant for literature enthusiasts all over the world: Henrik Ibsen. Collett's connection and friendship with the Ibsen couple (Henrik and Susanna) is illustrated in the letters they have exchanged, while Collett's influence is visible in Ibsen's plays where the protagonist is most often a woman in search of her real identity and purpose in life. Although Ibsen claims to be an advocate of the individual's cause in the search for one's true self, his powerful female characters played a significant role in advancing the women's cause that Collett had started. Moreover, even though the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes officially announces the beginning of the so-called Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavia as well as the advent of realism around 1870 by summoning writers to move in the realist direction by placing the problems under debate and exposing the failures of society in their writings, Camilla Collett has already begun this work and has even already been criticised for her feminine boldness and emancipated ideas, so ahead of her time.

Her authorship and life have been explored from various perspectives, whether literary, critical, political, social, or cultural, her impact on the evolution of feminism, women's writings and gender studies being recognized mostly in Norway and Scandinavia, but also in Europe, most notably in Germany and France, countries dear to her heart and important for her self-development. Nevertheless, the majority of the research is available in Norwegian only. Camilla Collett is still not acknowledged sufficiently at an international level, while she should be recognized as part of the world literature and the international canon of women's writing. What this article brings to light is how the Norwegian Camilla Collett managed to stand out in a patriarchal world, asserting her realistic ideas, speaking not only to her fellow female compatriots, but to all women and ultimately to everyone, making use of skilled irony while preserving the romantic tones of poetic realism and working for the women's cause with an echoing global impact.

Although criticized in her (especially younger) days, she was a true inspiration for many women's organizations that were to be established towards the end of her life. Camilla Collett was decorated in 1884 as the first honorary member of the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (Norsk Kvinnesaksforening), and in 1893 as honorary member of the Association for the Animal Protection in Christiania (Foreningen til Dyrenes Beskyttelse i Christiania) and the Norwegian Women's Association for Animal Protection (Norsk Kvindeforening til Dyrenes Beskyttelse). Her son, Alf Collett, remembers her eightieth birthday celebration on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1893 as a

memorable and beautiful festive day for her, with her fellow feminists parading in her honour, with all Kristiania's magazines praising her in articles in dedicated poems, letters, telegrams, and with an evening party of over five hundred guests (including Henrik Ibsen). He also mentions an adjacent ironic event: the Norwegian Government was supposed to grant her Norway's highest honour, that of Commander of the Order of St. Olaf, for her meritorious activity. However, on closer inspection of the requirements, it was found that the order could only be awarded to men. She passed away before the requirements were revised. Nevertheless, the recognition that she received from her sisters, which would carry on her mission, was the best reward she could have wished for<sup>70</sup>.

Camilla Collett militated for the women's cause all her life. She became a fearless fighter, armed with a cunning weapon made of irony, humour, reason, logic, metaphors, aphorisms and poetry. She was a poetic warrior and a romantic feminist, with still valid, everlasting ideas. Her witty views on the women's cause could still save feminism and bring more balance to today's more complex topic of gender equality.

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<sup>70</sup> Alf Collett, *Camilla*, pp. 194-201. Heidi E. Sandnes, Ingrid W. Kåss, "Ville frigjøre".

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## CAMILLA COLLETT: THE WITTY IRONIC VOICE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S POETIC REALISM IN NORWAY

(Abstract)

The article presents Camilla Collett as the first distinguished Norwegian feminist writer who used irony as a critical tool. Collett is recognized as an important figure in Norway, but she is not sufficiently acknowledged worldwide, while most of the research available on the author's work is in Norwegian. The article focuses on Collett's usage of irony, interpreting the author's methods, reasoning, and impact on the emancipation of women by employing available research, and through a close reading of two selected essays, "Stricketøisbetragtninger" ["Reflections While Knitting"], marking the literary debut, and "Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["On the Status of Women"], highlighting a change in style, while also stressing Collett's significance for world literature and feminism..

*Keywords:* Camilla Collett, irony, Poetic Realism, Norwegian literature, women's writing.

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CAMILLA COLLETT: VOCEA SPIRITUALĂ ȘI IRONICĂ A REALISMULUI  
POETIC NORVEGIAN DIN SECOLUL AL XIX-LEA

(Rezumat)

Acest articol o prezintă pe Camilla Collett ca fiind prima scriitoare feministă norvegiană care a folosit ironia ca instrument critic. Collett este consacrată drept o figură canonizată pe plan național, însă nu este suficient de recunoscută la nivel mondial, în timp ce majoritatea cercetărilor disponibile despre opera sa sunt în limba norvegiană. Articolul se concentrează pe modul de utilizare a ironiei de către Collett, interpretând metodele, raționamentul și impactul autoarei asupra emancipării femeilor. Articolul face referire la studiile disponibile și propune o lectură atentă a două eseuri selectate, „Strikketøisbetragninger” („Reflecții la croșetat”), marcând debutul literar, și „Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling” („Despre statutul femeii”), care subliniază o schimbare de stil și accentuează importanța Camillei Collett pentru literatura mondială și pentru feminism.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* Camilla Collett, ironie, realism poetic, literatură norvegiană, literatură feminină.