Becoming Visible
The Case of Amalie Skram

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What does it take for a nineteenth-century Norwegian female author of Naturalist novels—dealing with the oppression of women, sexuality, and mental health struggles—to become one of the most renowned and widely read Scandinavian writers today? The daughter of a shopkeeper working near the fish market in Bergen, Amalie Skram (1846-1905), perhaps surprisingly, has come to be recognised as an important figure in the Modern Breakthrough. Yet, there is no doubt that Skram's struggle to establish herself as a distinguished novelist was ultimately successful—at least in her native Norway and in Denmark, where she resided while publishing her literary works.

Fig. 1. Amalie Skram Portrait of Amalie Skram. Photography, Frederik Johannes Gottfried Klem, circa 1874. Source: Nasjonalbiblioteket, Norway. <https://www.nb.no/items/c3a9547bd3cfec3152e3f9884ebb3605?page=0>.

In the history of Norwegian literature, she now occupies a prominent position as one of the most significant writers of the nineteenth century. Through her detailed, often grotesque descriptions, Skram is regarded as a leading exponent of naturalism in Norwegian literature (Engelstad et al. 1988: 197; Andersen 2012: 269). Scholars have demonstrated that many of her works can be seen as experiments in line with Émile Zola's recommendations in *Le Roman expérimental* (1881): she places her

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characters within specific social and environmental contexts, observing their behaviour as shaped by biological and social inheritance (Beyer & Beyer 1970: 217; Engelstad 1992; Hegdal 1996; Hamm 2006). Most of her novels culminate in decline and death.

In her four novels dealing with marriage, Skram offers a powerful critique of the oppression of women within bourgeois patriarchal society. These works are often described collectively as "breakdown novels,"[1] each ending with the death of one of the protagonists. In *Constance Ring* (1885), she depicts the devastating effects of marriage on a young, inexperienced, and naïve woman, who comes to see herself as the object of a financial transaction and a victim of a pervasive double moral standard. Ultimately, she is confronted with the brutal reality of male sexuality. After the death of her first husband, she briefly experiences happiness with another man but soon discovers that both he and also a lover she takes in revenge are unfaithful. Disgusted with herself and the world around her, she takes her own life.

Lucie (1888) portrays a woman of working-class origin, discovered by a lawyer while working at a Tivoli. Gerner seeks to transform her into a respectable bourgeois wife and to erase her sexual past. However, his project fails, and he is forced to witness her death after she gives birth to a child fathered, as the reader knows, by a rapist. In *Fru Inés* (1891), Skram describes a beautiful woman unable to achieve sexual fulfilment. Married to a wealthy, elderly, and impotent man, she embarks on an affair with a young lover but ultimately gives up her pursuit of passion and dies following an abortion.

In *Forrådt* [*Betrayed*] (1892), the young and inexperienced Aurora marries the much older Captain Riber. Accompanying him on a sailing voyage to the coast of America soon after their wedding, she learns of her husband's past and insists on knowing every detail. Simultaneously fascinated and repulsed, she torments Riber with her questions. Ultimately, he realises they will never find peace together as a result of their shared knowledge, and he drowns himself off the coast of Florida.

While these four novels are deeply influenced by Skram's personal experiences, her tetralogy about the people of Hellemyr (*Sjur Gabriel*, 1887; *To venner* [*Two Friends*], 1887; *S.G. Myre*, 1890; and *Afkom* [*Offspring*], 1898), is inspired by her observations during her youth in Bergen (Krane 1961: 98). Focusing on the descendants of the fictional alcoholics, Sjur Gabriel and Oline, who barely manage to survive on a small coastal farm near the city in the 1830s, Skram offers a merciless depiction of how people are determined by their social and economic conditions. The grandchild, Sivert, works as a shop assistant and attempts to climb the social ladder. His son, Severin, sent to a school for boys from more affluent backgrounds in line with his parents' ambitions, ultimately takes his own life after his father's bankruptcy. Having come to recognise

[1] The concept of "breakdown novels" was initially used in Skram-research by Irene Engelstad in 1984 (Engelstad 1992).

the hopelessness of his situation, Severin is driven to despair. Sivert, having speculated with the shop owner's money, is imprisoned, sealing Severin's fate. Sivert's daughter, Fie, is forced into marriage with an old, unattractive business associate of her father's.

Skram's two novels set in a psychiatric hospital—*Professor Hieronimus* (1895) and *På St. Jørgen* [*At St. Jørgen's*] (1895)—emerged from a profound personal crisis. Exhausted after producing seven major novels, in addition to short stories and literary reviews,[2] over less than a decade, and tormented by intense jealousy, concerns regarding her two sons and young daughter, as well as financial difficulties, Skram suffered a breakdown and was institutionalised in 1894. She was not permitted to return home for a period of two months. In these two novels, written as an account of her experience as a "prisoner," she launched a scathing critique of Knud Pontoppidan, the leading expert on mental illness at Copenhagen's municipal hospital. Skram's publications ultimately led to Pontoppidan's resignation from his post (Engelstad 1992).

Celebrated for her unflinching portrayal of the hardships endured by women, the poor, and those afflicted by ill health, Skram is today recognised as a central figure of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough of the 1880s. She is highly visible;[3] the growing interest among younger Norwegian scholars in Skram's oeuvre[4] suggests that, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, she possesses considerable symbolic capital within the literary field.[5] Writing a major thesis on her work may thus be understood as a (perhaps unconscious) strategic act, reinforcing what Bourdieu terms *doxa*.[6]

Given Skram's acknowledged status in Norway—and even in Denmark, where she resided following her marriage to Erik Skram—it is striking that she remains virtually invisible, meaning both unknown and unrecognised, in much of the rest of Europe. Numerous translations of her works exist in English, and substantial research has been conducted in this language.[7]

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[2] Among her works from this period are *Børnefortellinger* [*Stories about children*] (1890) and the theatre play *Agnete* (1893), about a divorced woman who feels forced to steel money from her friends in order to keep her style of living.

[3] I use this concept both to indicate that Skram's work today is well-known to the Norwegian public and scholars of literature. By calling her "visible," I further imply that it is hard for Norwegians to avoid the acknowledgment of her stature as a writer, since her name regularly shows up in different public spheres.

[4] For instance, Skram was recently the focus of a PhD-thesis (Ramberg 2022).

[5] Bourdieu observes that different actors in a field of cultural production struggle to gain different types of capitals and thus a position of power (Bourdieu 1993).

[6] Doxa is the assumed correct way to think and speak in a given field, established by the actors who dominate it and who struggle for legitimacy (see Moi 1999: 271).

[7] Judith Messick and Katherine Hansson have co-translated many of Skram's works while the internationally well-known scholar Elaine Showalter has written an introduction to the new edition of the hospital-novels. The British scholar Janet Garton has worked extensively on Skram, and has even written a biography.

However, translations into French, for example, have been slow to appear,[8] and one might wonder why there is so little scholarly engagement with her writings in France.

In what follows, I seek to remind readers of the conditions required for a nineteenth-century female author to attain "visibility" today. By comparing the Danish-Norwegian reception of Skram's work with that in France, I shall consider both Skram's own efforts to secure legitimacy and the role of literary scholarship in shaping her visibility in these contexts. My analysis is inspired by Toril Moi's essay on feminist appropriations of Bourdieu, as well as her detailed study of Simone de Beauvoir (Moi 1994). Moi argues that an increase in legitimacy for a female actor within a given field—here, the literary field—depends upon concomitant shifts in practices across other social spheres at the time, such as the strengthening of legal rights. Various forms of capital—social, economic, or cultural—available to a woman become effective only within the broader social context.

A thorough Bourdieuian analysis of Skram's position would, of course, require not only a precise delineation of the (various types of) literary fields as they operate in Norway, Denmark, and other countries today, but also a nuanced understanding of the historical contexts in which these fields developed. Space constraints prevent me from pursuing such an extensive analysis here. Nonetheless, I hope that my application of Bourdieu's concepts will illuminate the central issue of this article: the paradox of Skram's visibility in Norway and Denmark contrasted with her relative obscurity in continental Europe.[9]

My principal argument is that Skram was able to position herself strategically within the Danish-Norwegian literary context, skilfully deploying her social and cultural capital to advance her career and secure recognition for her work. This was possible because her writing was received during a period marked by intense debate surrounding the "woman question" and legal gender equality.[10] Later, the shift in gender politics in Scandinavia, particularly from the 1970s onwards, further facilitated Skram's emergence as a visible figure within literary studies. By contrast, France did not witness a comparable transformation within its literary field, and from the 1960s onwards, French scholars largely ignored—and at times even misinterpreted—Skram's form of feminism, thereby contributing to her continued marginalisation.

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[8] Recently translations of *Hellemyrsfolket* and *Lucie* have become available, see Skram 2003 and 2023.

[9] To perform a more in-depth study of Skram in the light of Bourdieu, one could have a look also at Pascale Casanova's book *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Casanova 1999).

[10] The intense "battle" over morality and sex is documented in Elias Bredsdorff's *Den store nordiske krig om seksualmoralen. En dokumentarisk fremstilling af sædelighedsdebatten i nordisk litteratur i 1880'erne.* (Bredsdorff 1973).

Becoming Visible: The Reception of Amalie Skram in Norway and Denmark

The success of Amalie Skram as a writer was by no means a foregone conclusion. Born on 22 August 1846 in Bergen—today Norway's second-largest city, and during Skram's childhood a vibrant international trading hub on the west coast—her early life was shaped by both opportunity and hardship. Her father operated a modest retail business but, following financial mismanagement, emigrated abruptly to America when Skram was sixteen. In light of the family's diminished economic circumstances, Amalie entered into marriage with ship captain August Müller, who was nine years her senior and possessed considerably greater worldly experience. Through Müller, she accompanied him on extended voyages, including to Mexico and Constantinople.[11]

Upon returning to Norway, Amalie gave birth to her sons, Jacob and Ludvig, and increasingly engaged with the cultural milieu of Bergen. In 1877, she suffered a mental breakdown precipitated by the revelation of her husband's infidelity. After a brief admission to Gaustad psychiatric hospital, she divorced Müller and relocated to eastern Norway with her two young sons to reside with her brothers. There, she began publishing literary criticism and corresponding with prominent left-wing intellectuals such as Vilhelmine Ullmann, Georg Brandes, and Alexander Kielland. During this period, she also formed a significant friendship with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a leading figure of the Modern Breakthrough. Invited by Bjørnson to Aulestad, she subsequently met the Danish novelist and literary critic Erik Skram. Following an intense exchange of letters and clandestine meetings, they married, and in 1884 Amalie moved to Copenhagen to embark on her career as a writer.

Following her second divorce in 1899, Amalie endured depression and declining health, resulting in a reduced literary output. She died in 1905 under circumstances that remain uncertain—whether from natural causes or an accidental or intentional overdose of medication is still debated.[12] It is widely held that at the time of her death, she felt undervalued as an author—a sentiment emphasised by all her biographers.

As this brief overview of her life demonstrates, Skram was nearly forty before publishing her debut novel *Constance Ring*. Prior to this, her literary criticism appeared anonymously, as she was reluctant to be publicly recognised as a woman writer, fearing potential loss of custody of her children and

[11] Her knowledge of the life on board a merchant's bark and the different seascapes is revealed especially in the novels *To venner* and *Forrådt*. In my contribution to the edited volume *The Sea in Scandinavian Literature* (eds. Frederike Felcht, Søren Frank and Katie Ritson), I show how the development of the marriage in *Forrådt* works as an analogy on the couple's understanding of the surrounding oceans (forthcoming, Routledge 2025).

[12] For details around her death, see Garton 2011: 373.

harbouring insecurities regarding the quality of her work.[13] Devoid of both formal education and social capital, she initially lacked confidence in her abilities as a critic and novelist. It was only through the inspiring friendship and intellectual exchanges with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and other Scandinavian writers that Skram began to regard herself as a figure with something significant to contribute.[14]

As was often the case for women closely connected to men wielding symbolic power, Skram was able to augment her literary and intellectual capital through her marriage to Erik Skram.[15] He played a crucial role in encouraging and assisting her in completing her first substantial literary work, *Constance Ring*, as well as facilitating her introduction to Hegel, editor and proprietor of the prominent Danish publishing house Gyldendal (Garton 2011: 62). More importantly, he ensured her access to key Danish intellectual circles in Copenhagen, including the esteemed critic and literary historian Georg Brandes and his brother, author and critic Edvard Brandes. Janet Garton goes so far as to underscore Erik Skram's importance as Amalie's literary mentor, emphasising the significance of her decision to marry him over other potential partners.

> There is one important reason why Erik was the one Amalie chose as her partner. He had the ability and the wish to help her professionally. She had long looked for an adviser who took her seriously as an author, and she found Erik to be a good reader and a good stylist. She knew she wanted to be a writer, and she knew she could succeed together with him.[16]

Support from Erik, however, proved insufficient to overcome all obstacles at the outset. In 1885, Hegel had already accepted *Constance Ring* for publication, and Gyldendal had even prepared the manuscript for printing. Yet, upon reading portions of the novel himself, Hegel hesitated to proceed with the final printing. He found Skram's candidness too forthright, a quality

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[13] See for instance her letter to Georg Brandes on May 31, 1882, where she complaints the lack of a competent reader to discuss her work with (Skram 2010: 89).

[14] The relationship between Skram and Bjørnson developed over many years and was not always harmonic (see Iversen 2000).

[15] For a later case, Moi writes about Simone de Beauvoir's relationship to Sartre as follows: "To my mind, then, there can be no doubt that, at least from about 1943 onwards, Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre significantly increased her social capital and thus helped her to maximize her intellectual and literary capital" (Moi 1999: 294-295).

[16] "*Det finnes en viktig grunn til at det var Erik Amalie valgte som partner: han hadde evnen og viljen til å hjelpe henne profesjonelt. Hun hadde lenge sett seg om etter en rådgiver som tok hennes forfatterskap på alvor, og i Erik hadde hun funnet en god leser og en sikker stilist. Hun visste at det var forfatter hun skulle bli, og hun visste at sammen med ham kunne hun lykkes*" (Garton 2011: 39).

he deemed unsuitable for a female author.[17] Her gender thus constituted a clear impediment to her full entry into the literary field as an agent capable of competing with her contemporaries.

Nevertheless, Amalie did not relent. After numerous letters to other editors, the novel was eventually published by the Norwegian bookseller Olaf Huseby—though financed entirely from Amalie's own resources. While this publication publicly established her as a writer, it also precipitated financial hardship even before her career as a novelist had properly begun. Over subsequent years, her work appeared under the auspices of various editors, until she was finally accepted by Gyldendal's editors around 1893.[18]

During the 1880s and 1890s, when most of her novels were published, critical reception was notably divided. For example, *Constance Ring* was criticised—and at times ridiculed—in the Danish *Dagbladet* for its perceived excesses, given that the female protagonist is betrayed not only by her first husband, but also by her second husband and subsequently her lover (Steinfeld 1994: 191). Norwegian newspapers such as *Morgenbladet* and *Dagsposten* disapproved of the explicit depictions of sexuality.[19] By contrast, *Bergensposten* commended Skram precisely for her courageous portrayal of such subjects. Edvard Brandes, writing in *Politiken*, acknowledged that the novel contained many faults but praised its "true descriptions of precise observations".[20] The fact that Amalie's work attracted Brandes's attention was likely due to his association with Erik Skram's left-wing circle of acquaintances. Moreover, Amalie formed a close friendship with Arne Garborg, a fellow Norwegian Naturalist writer and a significant literary figure, who penned a perceptive and favourable review of *Constance Ring*, likening her to major French Naturalists such as Émile Zola.[21]

While her novels addressing marriage were disparaged by conservative critics and even by some radical intellectuals of the period, most literary critics concurred that she found her distinctive voice with *Sjur Gabriel* (1887). It was widely claimed that she finally succeeded in transcending her personal troubles, thereby enabling her to engage with more consequential themes. This is an exemplary case of what Toril Moi describes as an attempt "to use the personal in order to discredit the political" when discussing the reception

[17] See his letter to Amalie Skram (Skram 2010: 44).

[18] At that time, Gyldendal's consultant Peter Nansen and Skram were discussing the publication of *Afkom*, the fourth volume of *Hellemyrsfolket,* but it turned out to be the psychiatric hospital novels that were the first to be published by Gyldendal.

[19] As Irene Iversen has pointed out, one should note specifically that *Nylænde*, a journal edited by Gina Krog with the aim to support women, did not print reviews of Skram's novels at all. According to Iversen, the reason for this was that other female literary critics were not supporting Naturalist writing (Iversen, 1983: 44).

[20] "[…] *her er blot sandru Fremstilling af omhyggelige Iagtagelser*" (Garton 2011: 67).

[21] Garborg and Skram were discussing the novel prior to his review. Skram advised him on august 11, 1985, to read *Constance Ring* as a "document humain," a French concept that at that time pointed to the debate about Zola's Naturalism (see Skram 2005: 134).

of Beauvoir (Moi 1994: 101). Similarly, the political significance of Skram's novels on marriage was frequently dismissed on the grounds that she drew on personal experience. This tendency to devalue this part of her work can even be detected in correspondence from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, for instance (Anker and Beyer 1996).

However, *Hellemyrsfolket* [*The people of Hellelmyr*] presented a number of challenges to Danish readers and critics. For instance, Skram deliberately incorporated Norwegian grammar and vocabulary into her texts, a practice she had to advocate for with each publication in Denmark—particularly when preparing *Hellemyrsfolket* for print. Thematically, the portrayal of Sjur Gabriel and Oline's life on their impoverished farm at Hellemyren, alongside their escalating struggles with alcoholism, appeared rather exotic to Danish bourgeois intellectuals, not to mention her use of varied dialectal forms. While the depiction of the descendants' efforts to improve their social standing was well received by critics and readers alike—and earned her the compliment of being able to "write like a man" (Steinfeld 1994, 191-193)—she never felt fully appreciated, especially not in Norway. Whereas contemporaries such as Alexander Kielland received government financial support, Skram's applications were consistently rejected. Her cultural capital was disregarded; her symbolic capital was not acknowledged, and her membership within the literary field was questioned on a national level, to borrow Bourdieu's terminology. Consequently, Skram insisted on having the inscription "*Dansk borger, norsk forfatter*" inscribed on her tombstone after her death. Yet the reality remained that she received no scholarships from the Danish state either (see Garton 2011: 151). Her existence between two cultures was a barrier, perhaps especially so during a period when Norwegians sought to distance themselves from their Danish heritage.

In the first decades following Skram's death, i.e., in the early twentieth century, it was predominantly *Hellemyrsfolket* that was celebrated within Norwegian literary history. A. H. Winsnes devoted an extensive chapter to her oeuvre in *Norges litteraturhistorie* (1923), asserting that *Hellemyrsfolket* represents "her life's most significant poetic work."[22] Moreover, it was *Hellemyrsfolket* that was republished between the First and Second World Wars. It was not until the advent of feminist criticism—both in Denmark and Norway—that Skram's marriage and hospital novels were re-evaluated and rediscovered. The feminist critic Irene Engelstad, serving as a consultant at the Norwegian publishing house Gyldendal (Gyldendal was split into Danish and Norwegian offices in 1925), spearheaded new individual editions of Skram's works, which garnered considerable attention during the 1970s and 1980s.[23] The Danish scholar Pil Dahlerup addressed Skram in her seminal feminist study

[22] "[…] *hennes livs store dikteriske bedrift*." (Winsnes 1937: 126)

[23] Both Gyldendal and Pax publish her works today. The 6th edition of her complete works was published in 1993 by Norwegian Gyldendal.

Det moderne gennembruds kvinder [*The Women of the Modern Breakthrough*] (Dahlerup 1983).

The first biography was published as early as 1910 by Norway's pioneering female literary scholar Antonie Tiberg (Tiberg 1910). Later, in 1992, the esteemed Norwegian author Liv Køltzow produced the much-acclaimed *Den unge Amalie Skram* [*The Young Amalie Skram*], and in 2011 the British scholar of Scandinavian literature Janet Garton published *Amalie – Et forfatterliv* [*Amalie—A Writer's Life*].[24] Skram's Naturalistic exploration of female sexuality and her critique of marriage as a bourgeois institution—where men essentially "purchased" women for pleasure—resonated strongly with the predominantly Marxist and feminist-inspired younger generation of female literary scholars during the 1970s and 1980s. Skram frequently featured in influential publications such as *Et annet språk* [*Another Language*] (Bonnevie et al., 1977), and several scholars engaged with questions of gender by writing doctoral theses on her (Engelstad [1984] 1992; Hamm, 2006). Alternative perspectives on Skram's life and oeuvre were offered by psychiatrist and author Borghild Krane in *Amalie Skram og kvinnens problem* [*Amalie Skram and the woman's problem*] (1951) and *Amalie Skrams diktning* [*Amalie Skram's literary work*] (1961), by literary critic Irene Iversen (1983), and by Engelstad herself in *Amalie Skram om seg selv* [*Amalie Skram about herself*] (1981) and *Sammenbrudd og gjennombudd* [*Breakdown and breakthrough*] (1984). Engelstad explicitly emphasised that Skram articulated issues of enduring relevance to women both in her own era and in the 1970s and 1980s.

Today, Skram's fictional works are readily accessible to the public in Scandinavia, alongside her collected letters (e.g., Skram, 2002) and various biographies. Her texts remain in print and are the subject of extensive scholarly commentary. Her works are regularly taught in schools; a statue commemorates her in her hometown of Bergen[25], and a school bears her name.[26] Moreover, both emerging students and established academics consistently demonstrate interest in her oeuvre.[27] Recently, manuscripts unpublished during Skram's lifetime have been made available to both the general public and scholars for the first time.[28] Beyond being a major nineteenth-century literary figure, she is regarded as a pertinent voice regarding contemporary debates within Norwegian public spheres, particularly on intersections of gender and class and issues surrounding mental health. Skram's novels set in psychiatric hospitals have stimulated research within the medical humanities (Ramberg,

[24] Recently, there appeared a more experimental biography placing Skram's works in a sort of history of ideas (Andersen 2018).

[25] Maja Refsum's statue of Skram was prominently placed at Klosterhaugen, Nordnes, Bergen in 1949, close to the house where Skram lived during her adolescence.

[26] Amalie Skram Senior Highschool in Bergen was founded and built in 2014.

[27] Skram was recently the focus of a PhD-thesis (Ramberg 2022).

[28] See for instance the edition of Skram's unpublished theatre plays in Skram 2015.

2022; Hovda, 2023). The renewed scholarly focus on class is evident in recent readings of *Hellemyrsfolket* (Kurseth, 2021; Haugland, 2021), while her correspondence has been examined from various perspectives (Johannesen, 2021; Hansen, 2021; Selboe, 2023). It appears that Skram's symbolic capital as a writer has gained considerable momentum since the 1970s, largely due to the fact that her texts align with currently prestigious critical frameworks in literary studies.

Still in the Shadows: Amalie Skram in France

Given her distinguished status in Norwegian public life, literary history, and Scandinavian literary scholarship, it is remarkable that Skram remains comparatively little known in most European countries today. In contrast to Norwegian authors such as Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun and Sigrid Undset, or more recently Jon Fosse, Karl Ove Knausgård and Vigdis Hjorth, Skram continues to be somewhat of an "invisible" author. She is seldom referenced in popular texts on the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, nor does she occupy a prominent position within Scandinavian departments or comparative literature programmes across Europe.[29]

Skram's relative invisibility in France, more specifically, is exemplified—and only partially explained—by the paucity of translations of her work.[30] Although none of her texts were translated into French during her lifetime, there are now *Les Gens de Hellemyr* (2003, translated by Luce Hinsch) and *Lucie*, (2023, translated by Vincent Dulac. What might account for Skram's contemporary obscurity, particularly in France? I propose at least three potential explanations. Firstly, Amalie Skram never had the opportunity to establish a presence in France, or Europe more broadly, during her lifetime. Secondly, her work was not sufficiently understood by the predominantly male scholars engaged in Norwegian literary historiography. Thirdly, there remains a conspicuous absence of French feminist scholars specialising in Skram's oeuvre.

To begin with, consider Skram's relationship with France during the 1880s and 1890s. Following her marriage to Erik Skram, she travelled far less

[29] This does not mean that Skram is never part of the curriculum. However, it looks as if few graduate students read her works in detail, and there are no scholars affiliated to larger Universities that are devoted to her work (apart from the already mentioned, now retired British scholar Janet Garton).

[30] There is no direct relation between translations and public and scholarly interest in authors. While there have been published new translations into German of most of Skram's novels over the last years, these seem so far not to have fostered renewed public interest in her texts on a larger scale. French readers would also have been able to read English translations by Katherine Hansson and Judith Messick (mentioned above), but they have not produced major research on her work.

than many of her Norwegian contemporaries, such as Henrik Ibsen, Camilla Collett, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Jonas Lie, and Hulda and Arne Garborg, all of whom undertook extensive journeys to cultural centres including Rome, Munich, and Paris. The Skrams, by contrast, lacked the financial means to reside abroad and were deeply committed to their parental responsibilities. Beyond economic constraints, Amalie Skram also lacked the requisite cultural capital to engage a broader French readership: she neither spoke nor read French. Her sole visit to France, during the autumn and winter of 1895–1896, failed to result in meaningful contact with French writers or intellectuals.[31] In correspondence with Erik Skram, she expressed feelings of loneliness and lamented her exclusion from the renowned literary salons she imagined were taking place, which she had hoped to attend. Unlike other Nordic authors, she was denied complimentary theatre tickets, caught in an ambiguous national position—deemed insufficiently Norwegian by the Norwegian embassy and insufficiently Danish by the Danish embassy. It would seem, therefore, that she lived in Paris largely unnoticed by the French intellectual circles of the time.

Moreover, the circumstances of her private life, coupled with her occasionally off-putting demeanour, hindered her capacity to cultivate new acquaintances or to secure a prominent place within the French literary establishment. After her stay in a psychiatric hospital in 1895, she sought change, first travelling to St Petersburg and subsequently, six months later, to Paris, financed by the proceeds of *Professor Hieronimus*. Yet in Paris, she experienced profound isolation, financial hardship, and declining health. Her aspirations to discover a stimulating and supportive intellectual community were ultimately unfulfilled, prompting her return to Denmark.

Her social capital evidently held little currency in Paris, particularly as she was separated from her husband during this period. It appears she was not consistently included within Norwegian expatriate circles. This exclusion is poignantly revealed in her letters from the time—for example, a note she penned on Christmas Eve, 1895, to her younger friend Hulda Garborg. In this letter, Skram's dissatisfaction is palpable as she voices numerous grievances:

> It feels like I can't bear living here any longer. The food has become almost unbearable—I can hardly eat it. I feel drained and close to collapse, walking around with nothing in my stomach. Even the first bite makes me feel like I'm going to be sick. Now my friends—Miss Aarestrup and the others—tell me I absolutely shouldn't stay at the same hotel as you. They say I'll never learn to speak French that way, and besides, it would be dreadful to have to go out for every single meal. So, I really don't know what to do. All I know is that staying

[31] Amalie stayed in Paris from the beginning of November 1895 to the beginning of February 1896.

here doesn't seem like a good idea. Ugh… the world truly feels like nothing but a valley of tears.[32]

The letter is characteristic of Skram, who frequently found travelling burdensome. She consistently encountered difficulties in securing accommodation and rarely managed to adjust to new surroundings or cultural practices.[33]

One can only speculate that her somewhat challenging personality rendered it even more difficult for her to integrate into the Norwegian circles within the unfamiliar French milieu. She was a striking presence upon entering a room—considered quite beautiful—yet she also drank alcohol, smoked cigars, and conversed excessively and loudly, all of which violated contemporary expectations of feminine decorum.[34] Jonas and Thomasine Lie, who resided in Paris for many years and whose apartment served as a hub for Norwegians in the city, notably did not invite Skram for Christmas Eve in 1895. Evidently, they preferred not to have her among their other guests.[35]

It appears that certain intellectual circles in Copenhagen were more tolerant of outspoken and extroverted women than were the acquaintances of the Lies in France. Skram's limited cultural capital, coupled with her gender, thus threatened her position within the French literary field. This, in turn, negatively affected her social capital. At this point, she lacked a male ally and protector who might have acted as a mediator, helping her understand the tacit social norms necessary for participation in cultural life. Whereas Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson had supported her and facilitated her access to intellectual circles in Kristiania in the early 1880s, and her husband Erik provided significant support in Copenhagen between 1885 and 1895, in Paris she found herself entirely alone. Her letters convey the impression of a stay marked by attempts

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[32] "*Jeg kan vist ikke holde ud at bo her, maden er bleven så rent uspiselig slem, jeg føler mig afkræftet indtil døden, fordi jeg altid går på næsten ingen ting. Ved de første mundfulde er jeg ofte nærved at brække mig. Men nu sige mine venner, frk. Aarestrup og den anden, at jeg absolut ikke må bo i hotellet sammen med Dere, fordi jeg så ikke vil lære fransk, og fordi det vil være så fælt at skulle gå ud og spise hvert eneste måltid. Så nu ved jeg ikke. Ved bare, at her er det ikke rådeligt at bli. Uf ja verden er houger af jammerdaler*!" (Skram 2005, 427).

[33] My impression is that these problems were increasing as she got older. In her youth, she could be thrilled by the colorful life in harbours and enjoyed exotic places even when finding it hard to appreciate the food. After she had moved to Copenhagen, even a trip from Denmark to Norway caused difficulties.

[34] The Norwegian writer John Paulsen had portrayed and ridiculed her twelve years earlier in a novel (Paulsen 1883).

[35] Thomasine even called Amalie hysterical and too angry in one of her letters to one of her daughters (Garton 2011: 261).

at work, which largely failed, and by profound longing for her husband and child.[36]

After Skram's death in 1905, her work received little attention from subsequent French literary scholars or critics interested in the Modern Breakthrough, feminism, or gender studies. One of the few scholars capable of reading Norwegian and who wrote extensively on Skram was Maurice Gravier, a distinguished professor of Scandinavian studies at the Faculty of Humanities in Paris. Unfortunately, in his 1968 book on Norwegian literature, Gravier's portrayal of Skram was influenced by, among others, the Norwegian realist writer John Paulsen's malicious depiction of her (Paulsen 1883), and he also made factual errors regarding her background and biography. For instance, he described Skram as a *"petite provinciale pauvre"* (Gravier 1968: 151), curiously considering Bergen—Norway's second-largest city and former capital—a provincial backwater. Gravier's intention was ostensibly to underscore her lack of cultural capital, yet the formulation evokes an image of Skram as somewhat naïve. In addition to thus misrepresenting her personality and character, Gravier's account did little to enhance her reputation in a culture where the notion of legitimacy is generally more pervasive than in Scandinavia.[37]

Amalie Skram. Photography Frederik Riise (circa 1888-1913), Det Kgl. Biblioteks billedsamling, Billedsamlingen. Danske portrætter. <https://kb-images.kb.dk/DAMJP2/DAM/Samlingsbilleder/0000/474/977/DP030079/full/full/0/native.jpg>.

In the 21st century, Éric Eydoux of the University of Caen, Normandy, has written more favourably on Skram in *Histoire de la littérature norvégienne* (2007). Nevertheless, he remains reserved in his praise. In presenting Skram's novels of marriage, he describes them as "sometimes uneven" ("*parfois inégaux*," Eydoux 2007:199), and he focuses particularly on her exploration of women unable to experience sexual pleasure ("*elle est le premier écrivain norvégien à évoquer la frigidité*," Eydoux 2007, 200). As male critics did in the Norwegian and Danish contexts a century earlier, he downplays Skram's

[36] See for instance the letter to Erik on January 20, 1896: "Paris har vært *Dig* og småen" […]. She also complaints that everything is expensive: "Franskmændene er verdens griskeste folk." (Skram 2002: 405).

[37] For differences between the functioning of the field of culture in Scandinavia and France, see Skarpenes 2007.

political engagement and foregrounds her personal experiences, considering *Hellemyrsfolket* the pinnacle of her literary achievement. [38]

Moreover, although Eydoux acknowledges her prominent position in Norway today, he distances himself from Norwegian feminist scholars, emphasising that Skram's novels on mental health *"suscitent maintenant un regain d'intérêt chez certains chercheurs qui, telle Irene Engelstad, y voient une des meilleures descriptions et analyses de la condition féminine dans la société patriarcale norvégienne du XIX^e siècle"* (2007, 200).[39] The impression given is that Eydoux, by explicitly referring to Irene Engelstad, does not really share the feminist interpretation of Skram as a highly important political author. He seems to include Skram in his literary history primarily because of her contemporary visibility. Indeed, he comes close to diminishing her status as a writer when he highlights her "difficult psyche" in discussions of her asylum novels and downplays her merits as an artist. Thus, French reception still fails to appreciate Skram's major contribution to Norwegian literary history, namely her refined Naturalist style and her penetrating depictions of patriarchal society.

It appears, however, that the principal factor contributing to Skram's relative "invisibility" in France today is the absence of feminist readings of her work by literary scholars.[40] Given the extensive examination of her oeuvre by Norwegian and Danish feminists, literary scholars, and historians, it is striking that she has not inspired comparable interest among French feminist academics. This lack of engagement may be attributed to her Naturalist outlook, which offers little encouragement to those seeking to challenge patriarchy directly. Convinced that human life is determined by heredity and environment, Skram could not portray her heroines as ultimately victorious in their struggles for happiness and justice, as certain realist writers endeavoured

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[38] Régis Boyer similarly stresses *The People of Hellemyr* to be Skram's major work, downplaying the novels of marriage as efforts to describe the fate of women who dream of love but who cannot enjoy living with experienced men. Claiming that part of her work feels somewhat dated, he does not give full credit to Skram's description of the oppression of women in patriarchal society (Boyer 1996: 199-200).

[39] "Have elicited renewed interest on the part of certain scholars such as Irene Engelstad, who see in her work the best descriptions and analyses of the feminine condition in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century Norway."(My translation)

[40] It is worth noting that Skram is included in *Le Dictionnaire universel des Créatrices*, edited by Antoinette Fouque. In a brief entry, she is presented as a feminist writer committed to challenging readers' perspectives on issues related to sexual morality and patriarchal structures. However, the article in question is authored by the Norwegian scholar Irene Iversen (Iversen 2013). In addition, to the best of my knowledge, some French students are currently engaging with Skram's work, although this has yet to result in any international publications.

to do.[41] Her exploration of sexuality and its consequences invariably leads to tragic outcomes; thus, her work is neither optimistic nor uplifting. Since she believed that individuals could not escape the dictates of character, inheritance, and milieu, her writing may appear unappealing to feminists seeking works with overt revolutionary potential.

Owing to her pessimistic worldview, Skram might simply not align with the image of Scandinavian feminism as it is commonly perceived, particularly in connection with the works of the Modern Breakthrough, as shaped by French interpretations of Ibsen's work, and most notably *Et Dukkehjem* [*A Doll's House*].[42] I found evidence for this view in Gravier's book. Significantly, he begins his chapter on Skram by stating: *"Nous hésiterons à classer Amalie Skram parmi les romanciers féministes"* (Gravier 1968:151).[43] According to him, Constance's principal problems resemble those he identifies in Emma Bovary: she is bored with married life and lacks the ideas and initiative necessary to pursue something meaningful. In fact, Gravier appears not to fully grasp Skram's novels. He presents *Constance Ring* and *Lucie* in detail, focusing on the heroines' seemingly inexplicable deaths without appreciating the deeper psychological and social forces at play. As the main characters partly hold themselves responsible for their misery, Gravier cannot discern explicit feminist messages in the novels and thus fails to situate them within a feminist framework.

It is certainly true that Amalie Skram did not consider herself a feminist, nor did she create heroines with whom she intended her readers to identify uncritically. Rather, as scholars such as Krane, Iversen, Engelstad and other Norwegian and Danish feminists have argued, her novels explore the role of sexuality in human life, revealing the profound effects of social institutions on the mind and psyche of individuals, particularly the devastating impact of the patriarchal system. Moreover, Skram depicts the challenges faced by women artists, the treatment of mental illness in her time, and the ways in which financial difficulties shape the social and psychological lives of both men and women, demonstrating remarkable insight and literary acuity. Her novels thus reveal, rather than directly state, the underlying reasons for human behaviour. Despite assertions by scholars such as Gravier, Boyer and Eydoux, the fact remains that Skram addresses numerous issues that are arguably even more pressing today than in her own time, and she does so in a Naturalist style of considerable literary merit. Unfortunately, then, Skram's novels remain largely unknown and unacknowledged by French readers today.

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[41] The feminist critics of Skram's time were likewise supporting Bjørnson's more successful and positive female figures, as Svava in *En Hanske (The Gauntlet)*, and they criticized Naturalist pictures of misery, as for instance pained by the Norwegian writer Anna Munch (see Iversen 1983, 46).

[42] *Une maison de poupée* in French.

[43] We hesitate to characterize Amalie Skram as a feminist novelist.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Amalie Skram struggled greatly to have her novels published and never felt fully recognised as an important novelist during her lifetime. For many years, literary history credited her primarily for her portrayal of the people of Hellemyr, while largely silencing her contributions on marriage and female sexuality. However, Scandinavian feminist scholars began to re-evaluate Skram's work during the 1970s and 1980s, criticising their (predominantly male) colleagues for failing to appreciate the significance of her novels on marriage and mental illness. One may hope that, in the near future, French feminist literary scholars might be inspired to undertake a similar reappraisal, thereby rendering Skram a visible and significant figure in France as well.

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